

MUSEUM OF FOUND THINGS

Poems by Jim Bennett



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Museum of Found Things is just one of over 300 poems by Jim Bennett that have been published in magazines and small presses in 2009. This collection contains 30 of them. Some also appeared in “LARKHILL” a collection from Searle Publishing. There are hundreds of others that editors have had the good sense not to inflict on their readers – so I won’t either.

a poet responds to war
a pathology of trees
a pathology of birds
advice to a new poet
invisible graffiti
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ninety
the dove that flew from Passchendaele
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Christmas dinner
storm
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the study of nature

A poet responds to war
For Tammara

if you tell me about your war
I will tell you about mine

but I will not cry peace
or wipe up tears

I will not cleanse the land
of rusting tanks

or forgive the lies
that kill as sure as any bullet

I will not forget the
burning death

that dug out children
in their schools

or the cluster bombs
that flower across the landscape

we who are weapon-less
must fight the rhetoric of war

with close fitting words
we must speak for the innocent

if we do not
we betray them

with our silence

a pathology of trees

I have walked this lane
seen this ancient oak
thin and tired with winter
laden and snow bent
or frosted silver
I have seen it
full plump green
pregnant with fruit
and dropping golden leaves
like rain in a late-autumn breeze

this is all I saw

I did not see the signs
knew nothing of the rot
that can devour it core and root
so today it was a shock
to see it
like an upturned skittle
blown over in the first wind
of winter
its wasted roots
pulled upright
grasping at the air
clinging to soil and stones

while a farmer with a chainsaw
cuts off its branches
another cuts through the trunk
cuts again
exposes its rings
the first grown
as Nelson sailed for Trafalgar

today the lane smells of fresh
cut wood

a pathology of birds

the blackbird
lay head bent to the ground
listening to the earth

one wing spread as if in flight
its coal eyes open eaten
into staring holes

over days
bones become exposed
light and insubstantial
thin straws
filled with air
wait for the last flesh
to rot away
for the few remaining feathers
to detach themselves
to free them
so they can float away

a maggot devours
the final atoms
of the blackbird's brain
and dreams of flight

advice to a new poet

don't give your life to poetry but if you have to
read all the poets living and dead

when you have learned the skills and craft
and can fashion words into art then you begin

learn the names of all the birds the trees
the herbs and flowers bushes and weeds

learn the name of all the clouds
and what the winds are called

name all the creatures that live upon the world
learn the names of the stars and days

study religions myths legends and history
learn all the words in your language
and some in others

then when you need to write
write about the ant crawling on the patio
and make it holy with your words

for poetry is a lifetimes work
learning to cut words into shapes

that will matter to someone
other than yourself

invisible graffiti

the man stands in the road
facing a wall
a small torch in each hand
he moves them quickly
so they look like fireflies
drawing lines in the night

they flash
on off on off
a line a dot
shadowing and edging
straight and curved

as people start to gather
a policeman asks him
what he is doing
invisible graffiti he replies
he explains that
the police station tea
does not agree with him
and as graffiti is mostly
a temporary art
he has decided
to make it more so
this he says lasts
for the blink of an eye

the policeman watches
graffiti on the wall
painted from light
shadow air and darkness
the stains on bricks
join like dots
in the artist eye

the policeman turns away
no crime today he says
but don't let me catch you
doing it again.

I walked through woods today

a wild space
where birds call and trees sing
in the passing breeze
where squirrels pick
and stow away
the last nuts
of autumn
and underfoot
countless crisp seed pods
crunch as I pick my steps
over the ridges and exposed roots

sunlight found its way
through bare branches
shadows moving
like living creatures
shaped by wooden fingers
overhead

there is a smell of green
ancient deep and rich
and from somewhere
close by
a sound like children
playing

Ninety

at 90 he said
he should have been
in bed an hour ago
but no
he's in his study
just read Wordsworth's
recollection of a summer lake
and it warmed him
in the cooling night
now he plunges into a war
full of youthful scribbles
and is in hast to read
each word
in case he misses it

The dove that flew from Passchendaele

she cradled the dove
said it was the one that flew
from Passchendaele

she gazed at
its red eye stare
its white plumage
its wings pinned to its side
by her hands
head moving rotating
it looks so intelligent
she said

she closed it into the
dovecot to rest

it died
that night fell
amongst the
waste in the litter-well

next morning she
took out a dove
said she would recognise
this dove anywhere
it had sad memories
behind its eyes

this is the one that
flew from Passchendaele
she said
I am sure of it

click

a fading flower
casts a Shadow
like a face on a
folding leaf
click

a starling chases crumbs
between pavement
pounding feet
click

an oak seedling
lives rooted in a gutter
click

a child plays at pretend
driving a park bench
click

trees across the city
looking like a lost forest
click

the setting sun
paints the rooftops red
click

She looked at him
“do you have to make it so obvious?”
that pen is so noisy
do you have to write everything down?
click

The tree

as he walked across the grass
towards the library
it suddenly went dark
he looked up
high overhead the canopy
of a huge tree
blotted out the sun
“I could live in that” he said
and there and then
he decided that he would

with ropes and pulleys
heaves and grunts
he pulled up planks and boards
nailed them into place
made a platform
covered it with a roof
that hung
between three branches
then nailed ramshackle walls
in place to finish it

he called it home
and there high above the park
in the canopy of the biggest tree
for miles around
he sat and read his library books

he had been living in the tree
for some time
when he realised that
other people were also living there
some were higher up
toward the sun lit crown
but they got wet
when it rained

others were further out
where the branches thin
and everything sways gently
but their homes rocked
when the wind blew
but where he was
in the centre
was safe from wind and rain
and he could read
his books to his hearts content

(cont)

there were animals living there
one branch led to a flat bed of leaves
where cows grazed
and milk was plentiful

on other branches
close to the side where the sun rose
you had to watch and listen for
the wild horses that galloped
along them at sunrise
for all of them
and for each and every living thing
that lived there
the tree was home
and they were happy

for what must have been years
the man lived happily in the tree
picking red and blue berries
from tangling vines
drinking water from folded leaves
and through all this time
the tree continued to grow

and every few days he would hear the sound
of someone else coming to live there
grunts and groans
heaves and moans
as they brought up what they wanted
and set about building their home

even though more people came
little changed
there was always room for more
until one day after many years
the man looked round and saw
a leaf starting to change colour
and then he realised
that autumn was not far away

downstream

the rainwater from last nights storm
swells the river
and brings the blood brown topsoil
to mud the water

a fisherman watches from the bank
his eyes fixed on a float
nestling in the quieter shallows
its rise and fall hidden
in cracked light
and breeze blown ripples

here on the common path
we stand and talk about
butterflies and summer
watch the clambering clouds
in their rush to the North
and debate our futile opposition
to the fisherman's barbed hooks

further along the rising path
the river left below
we can see the water stain
slick like oil spread out
across the bay
until finally diluted
it disappears into
the sky mirror surface
of the sea
to make new land below
where the next world
is being built

there is a word for it

the past
lies like rags
on a paupers back
climbing to the mountain top
walking on clouds
and seeing the elephants
in the shifting mist

and hiding in the corner
the world swimming below
in a river
its bed a grand canyon
cut through
with the sharp edge of water

like
you have lost everything
but then hear breathing
and know that there are
more important things
there are - and there is
a word for it

the smell of texts

all the books
kept for years
gone in the flames
that destroyed the flat

down the stairs
the wall striped with black stains
like ink
the blood of books

lying in the detritus
a page of Melville
the cover of a Hemmingway
the ash of Orwell

and hanging in beams of daylight
entering like spotlights through
the burned shutters
the dust of Shakespeare

the smell of burnt texts
hangs on the air
like a Nazi bonfire

Clutching Leaves

in the library there is a picture
a librarian standing with his arms wide
clutching the leaves of destroyed books
in his outstretched hands

his face looking upwards
his feet rooted forever on the Earth
the barrel of a rifle pointing
straight at him

there is no second photograph
showing the dead librarian
no note to say what happened
no way to know what the book was

just a man clutching pages
it must have meant something to him
it must have been important
to die for a metaphor

later I found out that it was
a scene from a film
that the man was an actor
not a librarian

he would have dropped the pages
into the pile around him
and gone home after filming ended
but maybe that didn't matter

Harvest Moon

the footpath around Whitewell common
smells of morning and dew wet grass
it even has the look of fresh sunlight
the sort that is cool and stretches shadows
into the west and makes giants of us all
that's how the day starts
a walk with Charley
then the drive up to the Lakes
for our snatched late season break

in the afternoon we stopped at
Wordsworth's house
saw the couch he would lie on
In vacant or in pensive mood
the guide claimed it was the actual one
mentioned in the poem

at our holiday home
not far from Ruskin's view
we eat outside
as afternoon fades into evening
then as night falls
we watch the moon rise as the sun sets

although it is far away
we can hear someone playing
a Neil Young album
and Harvest Moon echoes
across the night

later in bed I thought about the day
made these notes
and understood some things
I had not understood before

holding leaves

the sycamore held on to its leaves
long after autumn and the
first squalls of winter

now golden
they catch the sunlight
a gold leaf shining
on a tree of possibilities

the wedding poem

I wonder if you remember
the poem I wrote for you
the one I read on our wedding day
when guests sniggered
and eyebrows were raised over
its revelations
on how I called you “snuggly bunny”
and said you are as lovely
as a Californian sunrise
and how you called me Big Boy
and said I was better than Elvis

I think that was when
the eyebrows were raised

well you are no more my “snuggly bunny”
or my “cupcake”
and as for being as pure
as a crystal spring
flowing from Ingleton
down to the Ribble
well that spring ran dry

now I could no longer say
you are like the golden cornfield
stroked into waves by the breeze
or a caress as gentle as the sway
of a Mersey Ferry
for you are none of these anymore

and despite the fact
that the veil has slipped
revealing you as dark as a trip
into the White Scar Caves
when the guide turns out the lights
to show how dark
dark can be
despite this and the fact
that I hope never to see
or speak to you again
I am of course
still
“Big Boy”

a rubbish snap

I noticed there was a beer can
crushed on the pavement outside my home
a foot shaped flattening
crushing the air and beer from it
the drinker like the beer long gone

usually the old lady from along the road
walks along here and picks up
the stuff people drop
on bin days she picks up
and drops in the bins
other days she carries a plastic bag
and fills it
takes it off somewhere

people complained at her once
thought she was dumping
dirty rubbish into their bins
didn't realise she was a
performing a service to the community

today though
I noticed there was a beer can
crushed on the pavement outside my home
it was there yesterday
and I wonder if I should
send her a stern letter of complaint

Theft

I stole your morning
because no matter where you are
a cold night or a sunlit day is the same

you look out see the ground
frosted white
or sit with the sun warming you

see mountains covered in cloud
or hear the distant sound of trains
the longing is the same

and I have written it
captured it
and made it mine

even though when you read it
you might think
that it really is yours

you are just
stealing it
right back

centurion

I'm sitting at the bistro table
just outside the back door
reading Centurion

Cato's troops
fight the Parthians
as sunlight
paints the pages gold

mixing with the traffic sounds
and bird songs
the crisp echo of eighty
Roman legionnaires
locking shields

Friday

the moon is full tonight
daubing the damp roofs
with second hand sunlight

Charlie wanders
down by the wall
while I sit in the wet seats
on the decking
draw lines between the stars
imagine shapes and stories

in another garden an argument
full of noise its words lost

a bustling wind
is driving in the clouds
and from somewhere far away
Friday creeps a little closer

Dreaming of Larkhill

I dreamed of
a sunrise at Larkhill

it is always the same
the light lying in warm shafts
across the table

outside the hungry road
beckons and the stories
about the docks and work
wait to be told and heard

it must have been a fine morning
to be so memorable

for now though
in this dream
as the sunrise lights the empty room
casts long shadows across the garden
it hides the scent of mildew
and the sweet decay of rot

down draft

on the horizon
shining bright in sunlight
growing out of the cornfields
beyond Arrow Park
and Landican
the cathedrals and
the new towers of Liverpool
prick at the sky

above a field
a helicopter hovers
its downdraft making a circle
in the corn

museum of found things

she lifted a tea tray down from the sideboard
placed it on the coffee table in front of him

on the tray, stones, dried things and
small bones, shuffled round and settled

she picked up a red pebble
this is from the Silly Isles she said

she held it up to catch the light
from a holiday with my parents she added

she gazed back through the years
remembering the sand between her toes

but to him it was just another pebble

and this - she picked up a tiny skull - I think
is Bertrum my hamster he died forty years ago

he was buried in the garden
until I dug him up by accident

she stroked his head could feel his fur
warm against her hand again

while the bleached white skull meant nothing to him

anyway this is what I wanted you to see
this is my museum of found things she said

and this is the important stuff
she moved her finger around the tray

pointed at an acorn a sycamore seed and
a small branch of hawthorn

where things grow so do we
when seasons change so do we

he looked at the hawthorn and the acorn
remembered playing amongst them as a child

she could feel summer against her skin
and smell the woods

and so did he

pale geranium lake

he replaced the tube
marked pale geranium lake
in the rack

he could see the lake
reflecting the bank side geraniums
on its quiet surface

it was a distraction
he knew if he bought it
that was what
he would always see

its just your OCD
his wife told him
-- she had scraped off labels
and stuck her own in place
while he got on with life

now she was gone
he preferred his paints without
backstory or names
that shook with images

gold ochre
burnt ochre
Venetian red

all had connotations
but their familiarity
rescued them for use

burnt sienna
magenta
ultra marine
sepia
emerald
vermillion
sanguine
meadow green

(cont)

he turned each on in his hand
the meadow green went back

then a tube of potter's pink
was in front of the counter
and all he could see was
the unknown potter's hands
and a colour of sunset
in wet clay

he looked at it
weighed it
sighed
then put it back on the shelf

Christmas dinner

you cleaned and sliced the veg
made sure everything was ready
folded paper under table legs
to ensure that they stayed steady
you dressed it with the centre piece
Christmas crackers by each plate
hung up the Father Christmas
that your mother used to hate

you start making Christmas dinner
at the first light of the day
with steamers, pans and mixing bowls
all coming into play
a break to open presents
while you still come and go
to check the bubbling pots and pans
and see everything's just so

then after Christmas dinner
Christmas pud and Christmas Cake
bun loaf and a Yule log
and those mince pies that you bake
you settle down upon the couch
paper hat still on your head
to watch the film while I clean up
but you fall asleep instead

storm

a storm has broken from the north
and rain is turning the lanes to mud
running in rivers along the tarmac
collecting at low points
spiking pools flooding road
and pavement

turning everything into an incoherent
muddled jam of noise
and running water
the umbrella twists itself
in the wind
and turns its dome up

it is shoved into a waste bin
and I stand under a shop awning
watching as a man in a suit
retrieves it and stands
pushing and pulling at mechanism
trying to force it into use

that was the last I saw of him
as I made my way between islands
finding dry points to stand
until I reached home

dazzled

the half cut moon
sways thorough the clouds
avoids the star three seats to its left

me though well that is different
I am more like the solitary star
and you the moon

you dazzle me
your words dress themselves
in pictures of another place
time and life

dazzled and wondering
the moon and I share a taxi home

spider

you looked like a piece of fluff at first
scurrying across the floor driven by a draft
but then I realised no draft would last
or blow that hard and then I saw your legs

eight thick legs that could cover my palm
and move so fast they propelled you
over mat and parquet onto skirting board
then back down and off across the floor again

where you went then I am not too sure
into the fireplace to warm places in the wall
or up into the couch to nest or to make a web
in a shadowed corner or behind the books

I know you are in here somewhere
looking out through your eight eyes
stretching leg joints and flexing abdomen
staying still and waiting to run again

just waiting to run again

the study of nature

I stand in the field
and measure clouds
between thumb and finger
while dark and threatening cumulus
stretch to anvil head

I am listening to Billie Holiday
sing "strange fruit"
about people strung up strangled
hanging like dolls
from the stripped branches

here trees like the ghosts
of Christian fathers
are shadows in the mist
that oozes from the woods
and monastic stones
show where walls stood
their surface worn by frost
and rain to a milky chalk
like the bones of the dead
left hanging in the Alabama trees

like summer
it is all long gone

a woodpecker flashes by
two magpies bent like monks
pick their way
between the stones
oblivious to history

and in the air
the first signs of rain
as Billie starts to sing
"stormy weather"

