

An archbishop, long past his youth,
Denied having wooed Rabbi Ruth,
Still, the look on his face
Said His Grace was a trace
Ecumenical, here, with the truth.

Mike Greenhough (Angela Weaver)

In Havana the one thing to fear is
A driver on double Daiquiris
From the look on his face
You'll know it's a race
And he'll never be sure where the gear is.

David Brancher (Abercan)

In the sweltering desert the Sphinx,
Despite sand and sun never blinks.
From the look on her face
She's quite bored with the place
And just prays someone's bringing the drinks.

Mike Greenhough (Angela Weaver)

Homers

Five hundred miles on a fistful of millet,
arrowing homeward, following sun or stars,
lodestone or ley lines,
who can say?

In a recent documentary
fiendish avian psychologists,
seeking to pinpoint the trick of it,
appended a series of handicaps and hindrances.

Off flapped the little chaps, maplessly,
bearing frosted contact lenses, nostril plugs,
magnets like millstones, but no ill will, it seemed,
towards their tormentors, whom they beat, repeatedly,
back to the loft.

You have to take your hat off to a creature
balloted so often on living conditions,
voting with its wings, *YES, YES, YES!*
Put your *spouse* in a wicker basket

on the night train to Huddersfield,
and you will scan the horizon in vain.

Mike Greenhough (Angela Weaver)

Birds

Found dead in a nest of leaves, how strange!
But no, Miss Robinson was always strange.
Black feathery hair hiding white-powdered face
Thin bird-like legs, clumpy shoes, soiled skirt.
Not what you'd expect in a headmistress.
Nestled in her chair, fat, feathered hen,
She did not love her chicks - she hated us.
We laughed at her behind her back.
To us young carefree students she was old,
A reject left upon the shelf, we never thought she'd marry
Until one day we heard she'd found a mate:
Ex-Navy, bespectacled and bald, he shared her interest in birds.
We stifled our mirth as we pictured them
Canoodling on the Essex Marshes, clinging together in a secret hide.
But it was not meant to be. The Groom, ex-navy, you recall?
Viewed other birds and went off with a WREN,
Left Miss Robinson afluttering at the altar.
She did not want our pity.
She chose to live and die among the birds,
Recapturing her short-lived passion, happy in her nest of leaves.

Eileen Michalik (Anne East)

THE BIRDS

I have scaled the lofty heights,
Watched condors soar, majestic,
Among the Andean peaks.
Gyrating ever higher

Towards a cloudless sky; into infinity.

I have crouched beneath the baobab tree,
Watched vultures, rapacious,
Ripping apart their prey
As jackals, waiting, prowl
Under the searing sun of Africa.

I've clutched the rail with frozen hands
Transfixed by the albatross, gliding,
With movement imperceptible
Besides the ship, through ice flows
Into the Antarctic wastes.

We exalted in our freedom
Those birds and I together.
And now I sit, my world a chair,
Watching a captive imprisoned in a cage
Stare at his reflection in a mirrored glass.

Katie Simpson

Leaving

We had a great day today, Jill and me. We built a log house, well not really a log house but it was made from branches my dad had cut from the chestnut tree. We

stood them up like those houses the Red Indians have in the America. It smelled lovely, just like the trees in the park when it's been raining. We could see through the leaves cus they were still on and we could see when my mom was coming and we kept very quiet so she wouldn't know we were there. But she did! And she came and made me come in for my tea. I didn't really want to but Jill said she thought she should go home too as her mom would be wondering where she was. I had to have a bath after tea because I was very dirty from the dried grass and stuff we had used on the ground inside the log house. I thought my knees were just dark but when I rubbed the one with the flannel, there was skin underneath, all white and the scar from last week showed up again. That was a good game too. We were tracking the other Red Indian tribe but I was the lead tracker and I crawled over a piece of glass or something and it took a piece out of my knee and blood came out and my mom put on a plaster.

If I climb out of the bathroom window and slide down the tile roof of the kitchen, I could be in the back garden, through our back gate, along the path through the field, out onto the road at the bottom and away. I am a good runner. I always do good on sports day at school. I came second in the running race and got a yellow ribbon. It would only take me about five minutes to get down to the bottom of the field and I would be away.

At teatime I put a piece of bread and butter in the pocket of my frock and no-one saw me do it. I could eat that later when I was far away – maybe even in France or America. The roof has got thirteen rows of tiles before you get to the gutter over the kitchen. I know because I have counted them before. That's not much. I could slide down, then jump the rest, onto the terrace and away. No-one would even see me leaving. They wouldn't hear me because my pumps are here by the bath. I would land like a Red Indian leaping from the rocks in the canyon onto the horses

below. Oh, there is a horse in a field about three roads away. I could go and borrow it. The horse wouldn't mind and he would be glad of a gallop. We would go very fast and we would jump over the hedge and be away... I think there's someone in the kitchen. I can hear dishes being washed or something. I had better wait a bit longer before I go or they might hear me. Is it my mom down there? I'm not bothered really. She shouldn't have made me have a bath. She knows I don't like water. I shall only get mucky again tomorrow, so why bother?

If I put my left foot on the side of the bath and then my right foot on the window ledge I could just about sit and dangle my legs over the edge. I still can't go. She's still washing up and the light has come on and its shining right down the garden and I can see the tree house. It does look good! I can't wait for tomorrow when Jill and I can play inside it and we thought we could make it even bigger because Dad is going to lop the top out of the other sycamore tree and we could use the smaller branches to weave them in and out of the big ones to make a sort of fence round our tree house, to keep out the Red Indians from over the hill. They are making smoke signals at the moment to each other and making plans for tomorrow.

Gosh it's gone dark and the garden is looking a bit spooky! I'd better not go now. Perhaps I'll leave tomorrow. I'd better get down and go to bed or I'll never be up early to get started on the tree house in the morning. I'm so excited! Oh bother! I've squashed the bread and butter and it's all over my frock. My Mom'll kill me.

Jeana Hall (PaleFace)

Leavings

The train slowly slid past Newport Castle and across the Usk. I am free, liberated, he thought. But the yawning void in his stomach said otherwise. Sometimes you just have to act, he told himself, even if it hurts.

Behind him, a woman was talking, her voice too low to understand. It irritated him. What had been the last straw? Was it Sam telling him he should get his hair cut? So trivial. It had building up for a long time.

'I know what you mean, Em.' Another voice from behind arrested him, this one unavoidably loud and clear. *'My friend Jackie's old man was just like that. She said he never finished anything. She reckoned it was congenial or something. He always had to leave a bit on the side. You know, a corner of toast, a few beans. Drove her wild. He said in China if you finish everything off they think you're still hungry so they give you more and more even if it means their own family has to starve.'*

The first voice, Em, said something he couldn't hear.

'Smarten yourself up,' Sam had snapped at him. *'Look at your hair. I'm embarrassed to go out with you.'* *'You're not my bloody mother,'* he'd screamed back. *'Then stop expecting to do everything for you, bring in the money, cook, clean. Get off your backside and find a job.'* A man can only take so much of that kind of thing.

'Well, I think Jackie said it was China. Anyway, it pissed her off big time, all this leaving food. And he kept not finishing other things as well.'

The first voice said something.

'Em, that's naughty,' the second woman said. *'No, Jackie put everything he left, all his leavings, in a bowl in the fridge for a month, then she shoved them under his nose—they was pretty high, some of them—and said, either you finish your food or we're finished.'*

He could hear Em was speaking. He looked out of the window and thought how Sam's nagging had got him down. Eroded his self-respect. Did he have any irritating ways? Of course he had, everyone does. You have to learn to live with them. If Sam couldn't, that was her problem. No, he'd done the right thing. He had had to get out.

'I don't know if he ate them, she never said. But Em, listen to this. The very next day he ended up in hospital—no, nothing to do with that; he'd been hit by a car, terrible injuries, coma and all. Jackie said there was only a spark of life left in him. He always had to leave something. They had him in inventive care for weeks.'

'I've had it up to here,' he'd said to Sam. *'I'm out. For good.'* She'd said *'Good riddance. You won't last five minutes. If I hadn't looked after you like your precious mother for the last four years, you'd be on the streets anyway.'*

'Yeah, but they did, Em.' The woman's voice stopped his thoughts again. *'They pulled him back from the brink, snatched him from the jaws of death, Jackie said. But they said if he ever came round, he'd probably have brain damage, be like a vegetable. Anyway, eventually he came off the ingenious drip and they started feeding him normal. They said why didn't she have a go, with a spoon like, even though he was still in a sort of coma sort of thing. They showed her how. Press the spoon on his lips and he'd open his mouth and take it. Sort of reflex action. And she got it down him, and it came to the last spoonful, and she said, last one, Geoff, open wide for England, and he ate it. Finished it off! First time! And then, do you know what?'*

He had a vision of himself being spoon-fed by Sam, the dribbling, the embarrassment, the indignity. Then he looked closer, and saw that she'd been doing just that for the past four years. He'd been too up himself to notice.

'Remember he's been in a coma at death's door for weeks. Well, Jackie said after he'd taken that last spoonful, all of a sudden, he opened his eyes and winked at her.'

Em probably said she was surprised.

'You may well say bloody hell, Em,' the woman continued. *'Jackie said, at that moment, when he winked at her, she knew he was going to be OK.'*

He realised he'd made another decision. At Bristol, he was going to get out and catch the next train back to Newport.

'He was in hospital a few months after that, operations and physios and rehabilitation and that, but they got him up and running, so to speak. And do you know, as soon as he got home, Jackie says he started leaving bits on his plate again, like nothing ever happened. "Them Chinese never give up," he says to her. So why should I? And anyway, you'd only find something worse about me to moan about.' How's your corns, Em, by the way? You're like a martyr to them feet.'

Somehow, he thought, I'm going to earn respect from Sam, even if it means having my hair cut and getting a job. Sometimes, he told himself, feeling very grown-up, when you think leaving is the big dynamic thing to do, it's really only running away. Sometimes you've got to swallow your pride and finish what you've started.

Oliver Barton (Temple Meads)