

22 Facets of my Father



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Fool

The present you conceived for my mum
one deliberate-drunk new year's eve came
early morning, scorning your breakfast
routine. Women draped the dining room
in clean white sheets
to welcome me home.

When more neighbouring wives came
to take control, you barked
- but slipped back into your manly role,
your concern no more than labourer's sweat,
soon wiped away.

Your mum said it would be quick: she was right.
The screams breached barriers and I arrived, slimed
and quiet. You took me later, held nine pounds
of chaos in your grip. Only then,
mum tells me,
did I cry.

Showman

I am wonderstruck by the way
two people live within your eyes.

Neighbours adore you. Take your face
for its value. Welcome your smile.

I keep my face guarded, my fear
of your limits sharpened by years.

I learn to read you, your rages
foretold by the level of blue

pills in your bottle - one taken
each day to take the edge from you.

Priestess

A friend of the family had a donkey
whose stone coat would change hue
to measure the weather. He said
the tail would part from her arse to mark
the start of an earthquake.

A blue-vein, wet, windstrap day
takes me walking broad Dymchurch Wall.
The wave chopped sea ebbs, exposes the renovated
sands and shingles where cousins once exercised
donkeys on winter days like this. I'd run, too,
with my dog. Watch as she chased seagulls
through the gusts. You never chased me here:

this beach was my beach. Renewed
each day by the grey Channel tide. Bright
shells to collect, rank kelps to kick. A time
for thoughts to tick in my head. Navigate
between sand and silt, land in water quick
to suck a foot deep. But today

I keep to the wall, walk away from the village,
balance between brown fields below the tide line
and the salt foams beyond my yellow strand. I balanced
too long. Settled, like the wall, between you and the wife
strapped in your coastcarving, shapeshift battle.
Waiting for the brush of a donkey's tail,
detached.

Empress

The night your mum died I slunk
after you to watch you cry, hiding
from family, bolted in your shed
at the end of the yard. Your head backlit
by the bare bulb picking out tears
and saltflats matched on each side
of your screwed, stubbled face.

I cried, dad. Sobs surprised me as school
gathered for lunch the day you disposed
of gran. I sat, breath pressed
in a chest coopered in unseen hoops.
Tears shunted across my kid skin. Mates
stared at my face shading red. Laughed at me,
fingers pointed, and I laughed at me, too.

Emperor

You bought the first calculator
the village had seen. A brick
of a machine with hard plastic
buttons and American batteries.
All the way from Texas. We
took turns to test the new toy:
magic arithmetic at the clack
of a click.

The smallest telly money could buy
was yours. Four inches of screen
packed between radio and tape deck.
We lined up to view the almost
picture, guess at the grey-grain shapes
flattering within.

Your eight track tape cassettes still saw
good use, even after the fashion passed.
You liked the music, the shape,
the selection switch.

You left us too soon:
computers are constructed
with you in mind.

Hierophant

This morning we work together: I need school books, you want beerchange. As we enter the stables to fork horse dung into corners I listen to the way you speak, flat vowels flagging statements in the flow: must have a wife, then sons come. Work for a wage to pay the rent, a roof overhead. Food on plates - yes, I nod, hungry to finish the job, straw stalk between my teeth.

Moving to the next job you string up more thoughts. I look to where you point: a pond hedged in yellow iris, puckered out of the marsh by bombs that failed to rocket London. We hang hay for the horses on the fence by the train tracks and I ask you, why? You sigh, remind me of familiar facts: place makes money, money makes status. Your brothers fighting out of England for fuck-knows-what and you digging roots for farmers.

You try to explain, how for a while it worked, the world worked but then it stopped, a man rocketed to the moon yet no-one would tell you why, or how to fix the world, except to take the pills that raked out your feelings, made you sweet like rotting hay and horse shit - clipping your sentences now to bare clause, word on word, repetitive like the piston chudder of the little train rushing past us to Dymchurch station. The smoke stings your eyes to tears and haychaff makes your lungs heave.

Lovers

Your habits are a comfort. Tonight, Tuesday,
I watch you drink your six o'clock tea, slurp it
from the side of your mouth. The teardrop snot
dangling from your nose tip hypnotises me,
a translucent pendulum, a gamble to guess
where it will fall: the carpet, the cup.

The other curve of your maw clamps on
a hand rolled splinter of tobacco,
sucked every minute or so. Ash drops
onto the pools coupon you complete,
the same each week, regular ranks of crosses
bet to bag a million quid. Stockport County,
Manchester City. York.

I leave to eat in the lounge, switched to BBC.
You settle where you sit, clamp headphones
to your ears and zone out to ABBA, Queen:
disco dazzlers who shimmer across the carpet,
hips loose and hands held high. By seven your head
slumps: a doze before you tour the pubs.

Chariot

In grey overalls, you are the greatest car
mechanic of all, fingers lubed in oil
as you tweak and tinker, fix and fine tune
village engines to precision in our yard.
Neighbours watch in awe as you restore the roar
and the purr to aged, upholstered frames.

Early morning sees you leave your devotion
in the yard and choke your way to work,
moving fuel to garages across the county, road lord
in your yellow, six axle articulation, daring
the men of Kent to compete with you
in the only race that counts.

Strength

Evening arrives with a clear sky and a hard frost
to etch white glass scabbards on each grass blade.

Horses graze in their stables, too cold to start
at my dog, running her rheumatic hip to warm ease.

Your caravan is warm - chilblains itch when I enter. You force
your bones to stand, to greet me: our backslaps hug us tight.

We speak easily this evening: records and radios,
school, work, food and fodder. Other men's wives.

You mention doctors, a bladder infection. No fright
in your voice, a rare acceptance of your current state.

An odour vents from under the sink. A commode of piss
and clotting blood. No worry, you say: herbs will clean the air.

Hedgeman

We wake before dawn, a welcome-mat frost laid
across the floor. We dress quietly. Break
shotguns and shells from their safe place.
Leave home with the dogs and drive
winding marsh lanes to a farm.

Beside the bullock pens you meet friends,
discuss the hunt. When talk is done we shiver
away, trek across ploughed fields to find
a hide deep in a reed bed or willow thicket:
you reject several as the wide skies flush red.

We settle in a wet ditch, mostly silent. Your whisper
points me to an owl, a bat. Fish waking to feed
between the reed roots. Your hand signs teach me
the rules of this, your real world: baptising me
in the mists of Romney Marsh.

I stuff my hands deep into dog fur, her warm head
resting on my knee as I listen to your litany. Above us,
ducks honk their formations seaward: a few fall
to shots in the distance. You miss. I sit still,
dreaming of food, a fire. My bed.

Fortune

I cracked the foundation of mum's love. Ten weeks after you smashed her face, I stopped running. I told her, with my teenage certainty, no more sofa beds, guest rooms, launderettes. She didn't cry.

You said: the sun shines on the righteous, when I asked to come back. That you had won. Mum negotiated her return two days later, her conditions set out in a quiet, even tone.

This isn't home anymore. It's like the house has grown a new front door. I check each knock and redirect visitors to you hiding in headphones in the dining room, or to Mum chat-polishing friends in our lounge.

I go out more: meet friends each evening by the storm-worn shelter on the seawall, no longer the big prize, nor your referee.

Justice

On the carpet court I place the players. First you.
Starting with your fist, sinews bunched across your arm,
shoulders driving you to the centre of the scene. Your face
is slack. Your eyes, white rimmed, say all: you know it ends here.

Others square up the room: brothers bursting from the sides,
heroes caught standing, adrenaline barely pumped through veins.
The dogs are quicker. I hang them carefully, mid-leap now,
teeth tearing the air, not caring what they attack.

Mum is mid-tumble towards the table that will break her fall.
She doesn't scream. Her mouth slits in a grin of shock. She sees
nothing, her vision blocked already by your act, the cut brow
flushing red, her broken lenses hinged away from her ear.

I am here, too. High behind the stairwell bannisters,
a fifteen year face around a stretched, silent mouth.
Eyes caught stranded between "watch" and "know",
trapping a tableau where two decades of seeping rage
end, when the purpose of my birth fails, my family
shatters, the maelstrom stops.

Hangman

I'm hunting you down - drafting a list
of events and evaluating you
in my memory of them. To verify
my truths I turn to independent proofs.
Super eight cine film was the craze
when I was six. You filmed everything:
edited and spliced. Directed. Topped
and tailed the evidence with credits. Dates.
I squirm as I watch again my fat legs trot
through the safari park. Here, we are a family.
Mum smiles, I giggle. You laugh. We feed
ostriches with sandwiches, dodge their preening beaks.
We watch elephants bathe, wallabies graze,
peacocks display. We tame each other.

As a finale you film me pissing
on the trunk of a sycamore tree
in Windsor Great Park. In the film I watch,
your thumb is shadowed in the lens,
hiding my naked quarters. Perhaps that
was planned. Perhaps I remember you
wrong.

Death

I wake to find a ladybird trundling
across my arm. Another trots the length
of a finger laid straight on the blanket,
hunting greenfly. More cascade from my hair
when I shake my head, a red hail bouncing
onto the hard, tan lawn. Beetles
are everywhere, blood-glazed shells
spotting yellow piss on mum's laundered
white bedsheets hanging on the line.
This everlasting summer is baking change

into every leaf and crack. You've changed.
As if planting gran in the ground last spring
has set new sap seeping through your veins:
hair creeping past your collar, sideburns spreading
across your cheeks. You work on a friend's car
wearing a string vest and fresh gold chains.
I turn the volume down on anarchy - punk rockers
spitting through my radio, and see you've grown
four inches: another pair of wedge soles, cream
against grey overalls dotted with oiled, dying bugs.

I relax back on my front, arse to the sky, tanning
a line for fashion. I don't want to move. New
uniform for a new school. New music, shouting
into my blood: kick it up, smash it out. Fuck, I've
got down tufts sprouting where yours are bleached,
like a fungus erupting over my puckered skin. Soon
I'll be bald like you, wrinkled like you. Cooked
by this bastard summer into you and I hate it.
Toss you! Burn my hide red, with black hair swirls
and piss the sheets yellow in a dream.

Temperance

Winter Sundays are the best time. I rise
out of bed with the smell of burning bacon
and twitch my passage through the day by smells.

Music floods the house. Mum tunes her ears to easy listening
radio, sets her hands to dicing carrots, peeling taters.
Dressed, I hide in books, chasing bookworms

across the pages of fantasies and monsters. Gusts of iced
air alert my back to the open and close of the front door,
tracking your departure to set England right with friends in pubs

and the arrival of neighbours who pop by for the gossip,
sharing mugs of tea with mum as she stuffs the chicken
with sage and onion, crumbles the stock cube into oil,

rips cabbages into pots. They soon steam, heating
the atmosphere, gauzing the windows in a fine mist:
I break from picture books to finger-sketch

on the panes: stick models, happy families. In time
the cooking is completed. Plates are heaped with meat
and greens, fed back into the oven to keep warm.

The family arrives back in drabs, to be sat at the table
for the weekly ritual. My brothers joke, make bets
on your behaviour. You will soon be back home,

determined to sit at the head of the feast, act
the part of Dad when the blue pills balance your brain.
Or dangerous entertainer, if the kilter is bad.

Devil

Wally's World is a wonder of the art,
its ingenuity held together with scaffold
and cable, pins and paint. We can erect this show
in fifteen minutes: homecrafted lightboxes,
secondhand strobes, the decks, the great front
board, with Wally's World written in red
across its length. And we are set.

Afternoon or evening, birthday or wedding
we pack halls across East Kent with our rhythm,
entertaining spruced, scented hordes with disco
and soul, with two-tone and motown. You start
on the light and bitter, to oil your joints.
I start with a shandy and a shaking fit,
knowing the hall will watch me play, waiting
until the alcohol kicks in and the chat gears up.

You work the front: kiss bride or birthday girl.
Assess your audience, drink, then dance. Snake
your neck chains across your chest. Whip
your hips tight in their jeans. Swing. Pick
the lady. Pounce. I play. Professional
in my intros, my dedications. Master
of the microphone. Devil of the decks.

Tower

The martello gun points to France, a long
sleek defiance, and I astride its breech.
Nothing in this ribbon village can top
its crumbling guard: from this roof I can see
the curving line of dressed wall, built to deny
a tide whose storm blown high mark would bury
my own birthspot in four feet of cold brine.
Dymchurch straggles alongside, a heavy
traffic clotting the High Street. I ignore
it all. Fix instead on your home, a van
in a field past which the toytown trains roar.
I want to turn this cannon to the land.
Aim at the road, the shops, fairgrounds and fire:
level and clear. Heal. I have you in my sights.

Star

Blackmanstone: your first home, a tumbled house
at the crossroads where the tracks march flat
by miles, sketching their courses around ditches
and boundaries long forgotten like the churchland
mansions that once gloried beneath this rounded sky.

Orgarswick, where I was conceived, carried,
birthed into a land grand in its narrow time. A street
named for a farm that was once a village, living
by the tides and mists and the endless breeze. Bricks
in fields break ploughshares, prove the land has changed.

Churches pucker the Marsh into spires, their arches
wide to span the leagues of life and death
that litter our once and sometime world. Weeds
grow high within the boneyards. Colour spotting
between the factory fields of sulphur rape.

In the ruins of Blackmanstone, I can stand
at the centre of the galaxy, watch the earth
change. I asked you once, here: why do villages
die? You smiled, said nothing. Let the Marsh
echo her misty gusts through my head.

Moon

You share a little secret with me, a monstrous gift, padded sweethearts holding hands under a nylon moon. You show me inside its front door, where you've painted a question mark, then spelt out below: with love from Wally. Allowed by your rules, you say.

Two days before the big dart date you task me to deliver the gift, sheathed in its lilac box. Edgeways, the card is taller than me: two rubber boots and a bobbly hat pushing the wall d'amour against a bucking wind to the post office squat centred in Dymchurch High Street, in front of the turfed sea wall.

Inside the office, a duffel-coat queue of old women and gossiping men nudge me as I wait for the counter, test me: who's the card for, lad? Who's it from? But I won't answer, hide the address tighter to my chest. Wish I was walking on the moon, like a secret.

Sun

You made me in the end. You found
a key, tuned it to my lock and then,
without knowing why, I opened for you.
Chatting music and snapping exotica
we learned to talk together. There,
in the zoo on the hill, perched over the Marsh,
we fed peacocks and flashed cassowaries.
Together we discovered the restored house,
its history and gardens. We rebuilt our past
during that summer as we touched the tame
elephants, when I stopped hiding from
your eyes, accepted your story in me.

Judgement

This was not the way for a man to die,
tied to your cot in a room away from sight,
tubes trickling relief from pain into your veins,
guiding your mind deeper into morphine dreams.
I tried to listen to your wandering conversation,
but all I could focus on was your tongue, bitten blue
as you chewed your words, your fears, scabbing
around your mouth, tipping truths and lies past
yellowing teeth - a reptilian rogue in your head.

Six weeks it took, from father to corpse.
Forty five days for that new life to spring
from obscurity to attention, to feed on
your blood, squeeze your bowels, stretch
your stomach tight and round to flatten
even your navel at the end.

That last night you regained your youth. Visioned
the abbatoir in which you once worked. You woke
the ward with your terror: convinced the bed opposite
was a bullock bought to the cull, and you to drag it
shitting and baying to the stall to shatter its head. Its
carcass to fall, hooves clattering the gutters
and you left to shovel gore from the floor.

Doctors would not let me witness your final fight.
Instead you were tied tight to your cot and wheeled
to a solitary room, to let the morphine drip evenly
into your arm, to let your scabfucked tongue slip still,
to let nature take its paced time to ease you
from life.

Worlds

A long while later I found
your sixties-style wetsuit, rubber
disintegrating as quick as I touched it:
an aged, grey skin of yours.

You told me you did it for the peace.
Diving was your release from the noise
of the world. You took me with you,
sometimes, to the flooded gravel quarries
at Hythe, or Lydd, with your friends.
Land-safe, I would watch you
skin-up, strap bottles to your back
and a mask to your face, wave,
and then sink. Gone from sight,
your bubble stream diminishing
until no sign remained
of your place
in that lake.

I'm gay, Dad.

There. Said it now. I bet you're spinning
in your plastic ash pot. You, who made it
your life's remit to refurbish the female half
of East Kent: no wife safe from your guile.

I'm gay, and I can't swim, and I've never
had a driving lesson in my life. I live
in the biggest city I can find and still
it's your exact face that stares back
from the mirror - except for my mother's
eyes. Like I'm bound within your skin,
no escape, none sought now. I am your legacy,
you my history. Done and dusted.
Stored with love.

One day I will drive back to Romney Marsh, dive
deep into that pit. Check for myself our depths.
Watch my bubbles heave towards the surface,
perhaps to leave a trace, perhaps not.
But not yet. London calls me:
no man is safe
from our smile.

22 Facets of my Father is a poetry installation developed during 2000 and 2001, and implemented on the kalieda.org website in May 2001. The installation includes the sequence of 22 poems, each with a sound file which can be downloaded and played as you read the poem, and a downloadable pdf file (which you are reading at the moment).

There is no correct sequence in which these poems should be read. The poems are ordered by Tarot card number in this document, but this has no special relevance to the understanding or enjoyment in the poems. You are strongly advised to seek your own route through the sequence.

I first had the idea for the facets series of poems in January 2000, produced first drafts fit for criticism in March 2000, and continued to revise and review over the following months. Final drafts started to be produced late in 2000, with the last poem completed (if these things can ever be "completed") in May 2001.

I could not have honed these poems without the helpful advice and critiques of a large group of regulars (you know who you are!) over the past year and a bit, in particular from the rec.arts.poems and alt.arts.poetry.comments newsgroups, and from the p.f.f.a (at everypoet.org) and gazebo (at alsopreview.com) discussion boards - thanks, people, for putting up with me and my old man for sooo long!

All of these poems - with many others by the same author - can be found online at www.kalieda.org. Pop in for a visit, when you have a moment to spare.