

VARIOUS LIVES

by

Courtenay Young

An extended poem

Stanza 1

I have spent many lives
and more than a million years of drought
evolving slowly on the sea shore
under an endless burning sun.
There I learnt to keep cool
and to eat many kinds of strange things.
That was where I spent much of my time
immersed to my neck in the water
with our babies sporting around us
like small pink dolphins.
And that was where
I slowly learnt language -
to speak above the crashing of the waves.

Supported by the waves, I learnt to stand upright
and to cope with wind and sea and rocks and sand.
And so much was I in the warm salt water
that I gradually lost the hair on my body
Over the course of many lives
and I grew a layer of fatty tissue under my skin
that makes me shapely now.
That was where my tears grew salty
and the new foods did clever things to my brain.

Unlike my sisters, the seals, and my cousins, the dolphins,
Eventually I turned my back on the sea,
and turned back to the land.
Maybe I missed the trees.
I became instead a naked ape
walking upright along the river banks
and so I laid the foundations for becoming a man.

Stanza 2

In later lives I walked many times on African plains
under African skies
where the colours are incredibly rich
and the wind is dry and keen
and the air is sharp and scented.
I have seen many strange and wonderful things here
on the plains & in the forests
and besides the muddy rivers.
Here, on the plains, I've killed and been killed many
times
and my blood has mingled with the red earth
which has once again born me & fed me
and then received my body.
We have to live out these endless cycles of life and
death:
born with blood, died with blood; blood to earth;
and so it was here
that I first learnt how to be killed
and how to kill.

The rich red earth has often drunk my blood,
and it is richer and redder for it,
I have drunk its blood and the blood of its animals.
At times I have been born as an animal again
So as to know what it is like to be hunted.
This has helped me to be a hunter again.
And so the cycle goes ever on.

I learnt to respect the life that I took
and gradually to see that all Life is One.
This is a lesson that I forgot later, many times.

It is good to remember
many of my experiences as various animals.
These make the stuff of good stories too.

I have also walked tall and straight as a woman
with a pot on my head or a pack on my back
I have often picked up a leafy branch to use as a broom
or an antelope's bone to use as a club
or as a scraper for skins or a stick to poke at things
Always with an eye on wayside plants
and roots for the pot.

Often times I have lent, propped on a leaf-bladed spear,
watching the sun set red behind the hills.
I have seen many things come and go
and have learnt to watch these
and the passing of the seasons
in silence and in awe.
I need these moments of remembering.

I really began to appreciate the land
the shape of the rocks, the outstanding pillars,
the different energies of the valleys
the dangers of the heights.
How not ? It was my home,
my life, my survival.
It surrounded and supported me.
I worshipped it
And sometimes it killed me.

We used red ochre then to symbolise the earth,
and our blood, and with this
we painted pictures on the cave walls.

Stanza 3

We learnt the lore of the plants
and the lure of the hunt.

We learnt to work together
and formed groups and tribes,
close but not too close.

We also learnt to kill - animals, of course,
st first for their meat, their hides,
their horns & sinews,
for their bone marrow,
- and their beauty.

We also learn to kill the Others
The Old Ones
who were not Us.

They were different – and we feared Them
They looked different – ugly – and so we hated Them
because we did not understand Them –
so we killed them
not always, but enough.

We were faster and more aggressive
And – in some ways - smarter
and so we killed Them
gradually killed them all.

I regret that now.
They are all long gone.

There was a long long time
when the North became all frozen
and on a clear day you could see
the gleaming cliffs of ice
and the winds brought
the sounds of the grinding and the ice falls
and the bitter winds

The vibrations too we felt
in our more temperate climes.

We learnt to use skins in those cold times
animal skins to keep us warm
skins from the animals we killed
And so we went on killing them.

Some people didn't have skins
We had skins
They had stones that could be sharpened
Or fish from the rivers
Or special plants

So we learnt to swop and trade
Some began to acquire more things,
'rich' things – wealth

Others without 'rich' things –
who didn't have things to trade
began to want those things
to get them by stealth

And so we learnt envy, greed
And how to steal.

Stanza 4

Then – after a long time - the ice melted. Why ?
We not realize. We did not understand.
And we feared things that we did not understand.
The ice had been there so long
and now it was going - going fast.
We lived on the earth then in lands
now far under the seas
Yes ! the seas rose. So fast.
Our fields, our cities -
for we had cities then -
our towns were all swamped
and then all covered.
The Earth heaved
then the flooding came
And the seas poured in.
We feared these tumultuous happenings
And the thunder and the lightening.
They were so much bigger than us
So they must be different – they must be gods.
There must be Gods! Or a God!

In some places, the land flooded suddenly
as with a tidal wave.
It broke through the gap between the seas
and poured
vastly, never-ending,
mind-bogglingly
into the lower lands.
One man had built a boat – told to by God?
and loading in his sons
and everything else he could find

he survived.
They told stories of him later
But he wasn't as wise,
or as lucky, as they made out..

We felt abandoned by our Gods
abandoned by good fortune
abandoned by the seasons
abandoned by the very order
of the Universe.
We must have done something very wrong.
There must be somethig very wrong with us.

Days disappeared.
Night ruled
The air tasted bad.
And the waters kept on rising.

The gardens of those lower lands
were so sweet,
like a paradise,
but they are salty now.
Lost to us for ever.

We were 'cast out' of our gardens – because we had done
something 'wrong'.
For eons past
nothing
but wind-capped waves
creep over the black sea
where fields and cities once were.
And once again, we scrabbled for food

Stanza 5

In later times, much later, but still long ago,
there were lives that I spent
when I laboured long
to erect Great Stones.

Times were fair then, in the North-Western Isles
and, even though
we could only just spare the effort,
the massive effort of cutting
shaping and moving
then erecting
those Great Stones,
we judged it more than worthwhile
to create a temple for our people there,
a place of worship for all time.

We chose the site well
and chose the stones with care,
erect and rough
and intricately patterned.

We erected them in their proper alignment
according to the Energies
and the stars
and where the stones told us
that they wanted to go.

We chose them carefully
to echo the upright pillars of rock
that we found in a natural Sanctuary
a short distance away over the sea

on a bigger island
where the hills touch the sky itself.

Why we chose to place
these tall standing stones
in the shape of a cross
with a circle at the centre,
erected for our 'pagan' purposes
seems, now, looking back,
quite prophetic.

But maybe the early Celts,
and the Christians
coming so much later,
chose that symbol
because we did.

Mysteries are strange weird and wonderful things
and time has very little meaning.

At the time it helped us
to focus our feelings and thoughts
on the power of the Land
and on the power of the Light
and to align ourself
with That which is more than ourselves.

I cannot remember now
the name we called 'That' then
- the Greater Mystery.

But it was here I first really learnt
to align myself with
the subtle forces of the earth
and with the changes in the sun & moon

Stanza 6

& the moving stars
and later to shape them and us
according to the Harmonies.
I had done all that naturally before
now I learnt the rules.

It was to feel the song of those Harmonies,
the songs of the stars
and the singing stones
echoing in our minds
as we watched them dance.

The Northern Lights played
their radiant music
across the night skies
and we danced.

It was to feel these things
that we did that work
and it was good work.
And even now when I revisit those Western Isles
I can feel the deeper energies
stirring these memories
slowly and powerfully within me.

Those Mysteries have not gone away,
they are ever-present
though we - as a people - are far
so far out of alignment now
that they are lost to us.
And I grieve that loss
another form of abandonment
though it is us who have abandoned Them.

I lived for a while, some time ago,
by the big river, in Egypt
and helped to build
their huge edifices of stone:
the temples and pyramids there.
Same work,
different rock, different climate,
different Gods even.
I have a memory of a boat,
built of papyrus, banana-shaped,
floating gently with its high pointed bow & stern,
and wooden oars up a wide, wide river,
And a sail made of rough flax or cotton,
being wafted by the warm wet winds.

The land was rich and the climate was fair
and life would have been very good indeed
had it not been for the tyranny
of the priests.

Much was recorded of those times
in paintings on the temple walls
- and in the tombs -

We - for many times I was also a priest -
They were obsessed with Death
and the After Life;
at least those
who had the leisure for it were.

The rest of us got what pleasure we could,
though not much of it,
from this Life.

Times were good for those with plenty,
and all right for most of the rest.
Our animals, and our children,
lived or died,
and sometimes they didn't
which was worse
for then they suffered.

People lived and died -
and eat and shat and sat around,
much the same as today.

Mostly we suffered.

Sometimes we transgressed,
and then we got punished -
usually pretty severely.

We then learnt pretty quickly
as I did
to hide what you think
and hide what you do
and then we died.

I don't remember exactly what I did,
as that memory blessedly
has been taken away from me,
but the crime must have been considered
as pretty heinous.

For a simple death was not good enough
And I am now quite familiar with Death.

After torture, I ended up being left,
walled up alive in a tomb,
and I remember the rage and anger that I felt
for I thought,
as one usually does in these circumstances,

that I was relatively innocent
or that it was undeserved.

An interesting concept.

I can still easily feel that rage
especially whenever I am abandoned now,
or confined

So - maybe I need to learn
that transgressions don't always lead
to being alone and to death.

Maybe it is all right to make mistakes -
As long as you are not a priest
in the Lower Kingdom of Egypt.

I learnt more about the beginnings
of the Greater Mysteries there
which have stayed with me, on and off,
throughout many lives.

For they are the Mysteries of Life
and they are written
in the secret language of the soul
so you won't find them scrawled
in the hieroglyphics on the wall.
Being Mysteries, they were kept secret
perhaps too secret
and for too long,
and I may be risking further retribution
by even talking about them now.

I also learnt the beginnings of agriculture there
and bits of mathematics
and some accountancy and logic
which have all stayed with me

pretty much, oddly enough,
throughout many various lives.

Besides these wisdoms
and glimpses of Universal Truths,
I also learnt a fair bit of arrogance,
pride and deviousness.
One goes with the other and
it is all a matter of how you handle them.
That is one of the Mysteries.
So read on ! - and beware !
There is always a price for knowledge.

I learnt that a flood is not always a disaster
when you need rich mud
spread over your fields pretty quickly
And it is sometimes a disaster
when it doesn't come.
I learnt despair when the sky grew black
with flying locusts every 40 years
for they stripped off
and eat every living shoot,
every blade of grass,
every leaf off every tree,
and every living shrub.
And then the locusts left,
leaving nothing
but dust and bare branches;
famine and death.
Another abandonment ?

I learnt to store food
in strong warehouses

for just such times,
- extracting a generous tithe, of course,
off each farmer
and off each householder.

Here I also learnt the power of wealth,
the power of possessiveness
& the dubious benefits of taxation.
We learnt a lot in those days,
and we made many mistakes;
usually from arrogance.
We had been around for an awfully long time,
relatively speaking.
The peoples to the north of us,
across the Middle Sea
were barbarians,
nomadic peasants,
who knew less than we had forgotten.
But there were lots of them
and their hardships made them strong
and very nasty - and we had gotten soft
and very proud.
And so we fell - to the youthful Alexander
to the Scythians and Persians
and later to the arrogant Romans
how we fell - on our knees
on our bellies - eating dirt.
We learnt well what follows pride.

Stanza 7

In my mind's eye, as I view these various lives,
the brassy skies of Egypt
give way to the softer skies of the Middle Sea.

The steady lives of staid farming folk
change to the restless movement
of the military Roman folk.

There were times then as a soldier,
that I walked for many miles
along hard straight roads,
roads of stone.

Roads that I had built and fought for, and
roads that I had died for
that have carried my blood in their dust.

I remember the smell of sweat
from the cohorts around me
and the rhythmical clash of our armour
and the weight of the shields
across our backs.

The endless miles of hard white dusty road as we,
the legions of Rome, came and went.

These were my first experiences as a soldier
though I had been a warrior
many times before
and often a very brave one.

Soldiers are a different breed however.

There is a hard learnt cruelty
bred out of ruthless discipline
that has nothing to do with bravery.

We subjugated the land
with our steel and our will
and with our hard straight roads.

Here, in the legions, I learnt how to march,
how to obey orders blindly
how to kill without feeling
and not just other soldiers.

I learnt how to see the Others as barbarians
Worthy of nothing
I learnt Pride

I also learnt how to rape innocent women
and kill babies
burn villages and enslave children

Here, in the dust, of the Roman roads
I learnt the power of discipline
the power of determined force
and hard-eyed, stone-faced cruelty.

I also learnt much more
about pride and arrogance here.
By the Gods!
We ruled the Known World !

We spread our brand of 'civilisation'
across the whole of Europe.

Unlike Alexander's brilliance,
it was based on power
and the force of arms
and the efficient killing machine
of the Roman Army.

Stanza 8

When we relaxed into
our pride and arrogance,
our civilisation fell
and created a Dark Age,
much darker yet
than the darkness we had spread
when the sun was shining bright
on our swords
and on our shields and breast-plates.

So I also learned that even 500 years
of civilised power and ordered rule
and pride – so much pride -
and brutal efficient killing
is not really enough to make things last forever.

This is a different form of abandonment.

As things turn and turn about,
in the way that things do.
I was also many times
on the pointed end of the sword.
The recipient of such enforced civilisations
of such persuasive power.
Soldiers kill and rape.
Women get raped and babies get killed,
especially when there are enemy soldiers around.
To really understand, you have to see
(and experience) both sides of the coin.

So, there were times, I remember,
when I was abandoned
by my husband
and the father of my children
when he went off to war in some foreign country,
Sometimes never to return,
and even if he did,
always scarred and never rich.

There were times also when I was caught
by foreign soldiers
who then raped me
and raped my daughters
and killed or drove off our cows and pigs
and burnt our crops
and carried off my children into slavery.
Never to be seen again.
I killed myself that time
Another form of abandonment.

Stanza 9

I was also, many times, a slave
taken in war
a prisoner of war.

I learnt the other side
of arrogance and pride
and the agony of impotence.

I learnt how to bite my tongue,
never to say a word
not even to think of action
against my masters.

Once I even had my tongue cut out
to teach me silence.

There was one time – no!
- the memory of that is still too raw !

Let me say instead that,
despite these salutary lessons,

I did not yet abandon war
anger, aggression, dominance or rage
against others

For I still had an awful lot to learn.

The naked bloody power of the sword
is not the only form of power.

I have experienced the power
of religion and wealth
and I have tried to understand
the gentle power of creation

- oh, yes, I have given birth many times
But have usually only ended up suffering
- or so it seemed

The joys of one's children are fleeting
before they abandon one for their own lives.

So, by contrast, I occasionally studied
the Mysteries of Life
and of Occult Power,
and have sometimes seen
further into those Mysteries
than most,

For, after learning the rudiments in Egypt,
I spent several more lifetimes
studying them in different ways
deeply as a Druidic priest,
And, in other ways as well.

The knowledge from old Atlantis
(for lack of a better name)
but I haven't spoken about that time – yet
and probably never will

Though actually it came from a lot of places
no-one has ever heard of now
was very fragmented.

We kept a lot of that lost knowledge alive,
or at least those parts
which we judged were safe
for others to know,
For they too, we too, those Ancients,
destroyed themselves / ourselves
when they – and we – forgot to maintain
the basic Harmonies
and the delicate balance
of powers and energies.

We abandoned the Mysteries
and themselves
and ourselves
for lesser powers.

We forgot the universe is double
- and that every act
is reciprocated exactly
somewhere else.

A fatal mistake.

So, you think you know it all -
and then
you know that you don't.

Anyway we forgot and they forgot.
and they got blinded by their power
and we ended up being destroyed.

But once properly learnt,
this stuff is really quite hard to forget.

So there were many long hours spent
learning things by rote
for nothing was ever written down.
All the teachings, the rituals,
the incantations, the lost names,
And the whole of the bard's repertoire
of at least 100,000 lines
had to be committed to memory.
Word perfect. The lot!

I have also been a Greek actor
and learnt the whole of Homer once
so it wasn't too hard.

That's how we learnt.
and still mistakes were made.
A hurried journey,
an emotional involvement
would have a devastating effect.

Why is it that these things take so long to learn ?

The knowledge that every action
and even every thought
sends out significant ripples,
like on the surface of a pond,
throughout the Pattern and the Web
touching All Life.

I suppose it is all a matter of practice.
after all, it took me quite a long time
to learn to walk a tightrope -
but I digress.

That was in another lifetime.

Stanza 10

We, who have walked
the Path of Death & Rebirth
along the boundary between these worlds,
maintaining the borders;
helping those who're stuck in their lives;
re-arranging a little;
changing very little;
allowing what exchanges
feel beneficial to the whole;
We are also human. We too can fail.
And I know this only too well.

The intimacy & the seductive pull
of the Other World is ever present.
The intrigues of Power
and power of Intrigue
can all combine
into an irresistible yielding
away from what we know,
away from that we have learnt
is properly Right and True.

And when we succumb,
the lessons are harder
and much more painful,
once one has penetrated the Veil
between the Worlds.
There is no going back then.
One cannot undo lifetimes of work.
The price gets higher also -
and a lot more painful
when we abandon the Way.

So I spent one lifetime around then
reflecting on these things
whilst herding mountain sheep and goats.
There is a simple pleasure in doing nothing very much
other than keeping an eye out
for the odd wild thing
or a storm coming up fast
or a marauding band of soldiers.

There were some peaceful times back then
just checking every so often
that the animals were all there.
The mountain air was good
and the view was pretty good as well
and the lifestyle was very healthy
and I lived in peaceful times
which has been rare for me.

I grew quite gentle then,
contemplative even,
philosophical
perhaps even peaceful.

It was a good life,
and I gave the woman that I lived with,
that I loved then
a necklace of blue beads.
And a child or two
We had good times
Together – for a while.

Stanza 11

But after a while,
even though I learnt not to mind it,
I learnt that I couldn't really stand
the smell of goats.
That's still with me now.

I also needed to put
some of these reflections into practice.
So once more unto the
Fray ?
Trade or travel ?
Rich or poor ?
Knowledge
... or war ?

I sailed across many seas
many times, as a Viking
with my strong house carls
for boon companions.

Moustached and bearded
and anticipating the rape and plunder
of this island's shores
and the reek of blood;
the shrieks of surprise from our stealth,
as I rejoiced in our overwhelming strength.
The prow of our longship knifed
through the rolling grey waves
and whetted our appetites for adventure
and we sang
as we sharpened our swords & axes
and thought of the gold we would take
to make torques for our necks
& shining arm rings.

These things we did mainly
for the lust for power and for wealth
and a little bit for the glorious sagas & songs
that gave us the feelings of immortality
similar to the Gods we imagined in Asgaard.

I learnt the blind rage of the berserk
and the blindness of greed.
I learnt the blindness of the strong
in their power
over the weak & frightened.

Stanza 12

I learnt only too well:

No wonder I am only just recovering my sight.
And I still have a problem with my anger -
it manifests itself
nowadays mostly
in high blood pressure
and certain other self-destructive tendencies.

All those bloody killings !

So I am also working on forgiveness
mainly of myself.
And that is the hardest of all.

Times changed

and I learnt the power of trade.
There is a fascination in the exchange of goods,
in tithes and dues,
in bartering and in markets,
and in accumulating wealth
and enjoying the riches thereof.

I found I could wield power

through the power of gold
and in filling other people's needs
for a price.

I could even make a profit being honest,
which didn't mean
being very nice as well.

Merchants are as ruthless as soldiers.

There was an excitement in foreseeing
a demand for this there
and for that over there
and by shifting this to there
and that to here
(adding a little onto the costs)
and by holding on to the other

I could turn a profit

three ways over
and then some

I could also

abandon honesty
and steal people blind.

These were good times and I saw the world,
as it was then,
which was opening up
amazingly
We were a new type of God
Bearing incredible riches
... and having incredible Pride.

I learnt about new countries
and trade routes
and caravans and caravels.

I learnt about new commodities
and where they were wanted
and how to transport them
and how much to charge for them.

I learnt to enjoy the luxury of wealth
and I learnt a lot about greed and avarice,
about wheeling and dealing
and double-dealing - and then some.

I also learnt there is more to life than money
- but not then.

For I exploited people for their labour,
artists for their work,
crops for their storage
people for their needs
- and lost my heart to my pocket.

I exploited animals for their skins,
mines for their gold and jewels,
rivers and seas for their fish,
forests for their timber

and my partners, and my friends,
and my wives, and my families.

I also exploited people for their honesty
for their naivety, their goodness
and their stupidity.

Times were good - mainly -
I grew fat and wealthy
and died, that time, of gout.

It was almost as painful
as some of the other deaths,
but the living had seemed better.

And then the lessons changed again.

Stanza 13

I spent many lives,
long years being exploited
as a woman,

With my arms in the sink,
or labouring long hours in the fields,
tacking the sheaves,
and then more long hours at home,
washing, cooking, and cleaning.

I spent many long years bearing children
seeing them grow
and sometimes burying them:

I still ache as their fair faces
pass before my eyes
so many of them
so sweet, so brief

Like fallen leaves from a tree !

I have spent years of listening
and never being listened to:
keeping the peace by keeping silent:
Suffering silently
whilst looking after others' hurts and pain.
Things a woman has to do.

Gathering, hoarding, collecting,
nurturing, caring, cleaning,
and slowly, oh so slowly,
trying to better our lives.

Then only to have it wasted in a moment,
by madness,

or thoughtlessness,
or cruelty,
or extravagance,
or drink,
or war.

It is then I have shed bitter, bitter tears,
only to be forced
by necessity
to start all over again.

I have loved the few quiet soft moments
when we two were just together
in the evening by the fire;
the gentle moments of laughter,
or of sunlight
on newly washed hair;
or the sound of rain;
or of the feelings of wealth
coming out from a full larder,
And of generosity & kindness
from neighbours at times of need.

I have thrown these away as well
and I have walked away
and abandoned them all.

I have learnt from many bitter lessons
that one cannot do it all alone
I need others, the curve of their neck
the warmth of their body
their strengths.

I have learnt not to just give to men,
however much I may enjoy that giving

- and it can be very sweet
For they also use me,
abuse me,
and drain me
and then they leave.
It's been another form of abandonment.
One of the worst.

So I need the help & presence of others
who will support me, love me
and want the best for me,
rather than just to take from me.

I have learnt to survive this form of rejection
even though I felt totally devastated,
and alone,
and worth nothing at all
in the scheme of things,
I have learnt self-hatred,
the corrosive cancer
of low self-esteem
and even to feel guilty
and bitter - oh, so bitter -
even after I gave so much.

I have learnt to survive
mainly through the support of my friends.
These were usually other women,
though there was an occasional man
who could give a little
unconditionally, that is.

It is not easy being a woman.

So I have not chosen that path that often.
the lessons were too painful
and I got hurt too much
And abandoned too often.

Stanza 14

I reverted between times to many other lives;
the restless, the irresponsible,
amongst travellers and vagabonds,
acrobats and gypsies,
as a tinker, or travelling salesmen,
and often as a camp follower.

Those who loved the open road.
Those who had dreams and followed them.
and those who did not
- and followed them anyway.
I learnt to escape by travelling.

I also have walked many a pilgrimage
hoping to redeem my sins
by outward journeys
and contemplating the inward journey.
I enjoyed them - the journeys I mean -
maybe the sins as well;
sometimes even
the inner contemplation.

I wandered long as a friar to the rural villages.
The heaviness of a wet cloak and hood
and the damp smell of wool
surrounding me
and chapping my legs.

I know these villages well
I had plundered them in other lives
and now try to bring
a bit of peace and healing

with bare sandelled feet
and a staff to help me along
and the pleasure & the freedom
of no material possessions.
Only a small bag and a wooden cross around my neck
- possessions of the spirit
sometimes weigh heavier.

The sight of a light shining through darkened trees
is almost irresistible,
Even today.

I imagine now those warm places
by the fire,
good food,
hospitality,
wonderful stories
and a never empty flask.

All in exchange for a prayer in the morning
and hearing a litany of petty sins.
(I do much the same work today)

It was a good life
and I brought hope to some
and comfort to a few
and an occasional healing.

I had a few adventures as well
I could tell you;
But I abandoned this form
- for various other lives.

Stanza 15

As a new immigrant in a new world
I died once
at the hands of one
who loved the woods,
for I did not - then.

In the greed of exploitation
and the fear of being attacked
and the need for clear fields
for crops for my family,
I had forgotten my earlier love for trees.
So I needed to be reminded
of this abandonment
rather painfully
and at length.

Then & there I was one who came
to an untouched virgin land
and desecrated it.

We thought we were superior
as we had the conviction
of religion. What arrogance !

I helped clear the immense forests
and also feared them,
being a stranger
in this strange new land.

So I did not really learn to love them
or learn to learn from them.

I only savaged them
and ravaged them
and despised them
and those who lived in them

and those who loved them,
and so I died
at the hands of a "savage" Indian
who lived in the forests
that he loved.

Ironically, we had first met in friendship
he, coming hesitantly, yet proud
me, coming boldly, yet fearfully
and our children
eventually playing together
for a while.

But my wife didn't like them
I abandoned the tenets of friendship
and so the visits stopped
and we grew separate.

Fatally so !

My body lay there in the woods
and was devoured
by the animals of the forest,
the very ones I had hunted,
wanting to eat them !

My flesh and bones soon joined with the soil
and was absorbed
into the very earth.

I became one with the woods
and trees and animals
and so I learned again
to love them properly.

Strangely I was 'conscious' of watching my former body
for all that time - another life?

Stanza 16

I have also spent lives at sea
having the hoary hands of a fisherman;
an old man who spent long years
fishing from a small blue-painted dory
and heaving at the long lines
heavy with the weight of the sea;
praying & hoping for the feel
of the heavy weight of heaving fish.

My eyes always searching
for the sight of birds
preying on a shoal
where the big fish
will be preying
deep underneath.

I can still feel the dark sea
burrowing under the keel
and the pitiless sun
burning high overhead
and the occasional rumbling storm or squall.

I have gradually learned patience
and a deep respect for the sea
and how to sense
the subtle shifting forces in the Deep.

It was a hard life, that one,
and quite lonely;
And I lost it to the sea,
in a storm,
in a moment of impatience

or thoughtlessness:
tumbled into the waves.

The tears and the weeping
of loved ones left on shore
are the only sure things about a life at sea.
Another abandonment !

Those and the scars on ones hands.
I never made much money,
however many fish I caught;
But strangely nowadays
I am often happiest when at sea.

Stanza 17

I have also hewed coal
in the coal-black dark,
pressed by a narrow seam
a few inches wide
and squeezed by the Company
that used my sweaty labour
owned my body
and tried to own my soul.

The Company also owned my house
which had no sewers
or running water,
yet they charged a high rent for it.

The Company willingly took
my children into the pit
at the age of five
to help lug coal

We were like condemned slaves
or those born to servitude
and blind-dark drudgery
to guide blind ponies
in the choking dark.

The Company eagerly took my wife back
into the slavery of service
just a few days
after her last childbirth.

It killed her.

They killed her

The Company killed her.

It grudgingly paid me in base-metal tokens
which I could only spend
in the highly priced Company store.

And it all too easily
cut my wages
at a single stroke
if I wasn't making enough profits
for the absent owners,
and the fat merchants
living the high life in London,
or in the Colonies.

The Company sacked me
if I ever complained
or even talked to others
about the possibility
of better conditions;
And it gave me the basic choice
between servitude or starvation.

Yes, I learnt well.

I learnt to live in hell.

I learnt the price of power
and the cost of raw energy
and the punishing price of progress.

I also learned to enjoy good food,
when it was on the table
in the few times of plenty,

And any food at all,
even the meanest broth,
for most of the rest of the time.

Stanza 18

I learned to enjoy good company,
when my friends & neighbours
had a free moment,
which wasn't very often,
And the company of myself, mostly,
which was often
the best company of all..

I learned to enjoy the independence
of my mind,
for that was all that I had that was free.

I learned the pleasure of my strength,
whilst I had it still;
the power of my body
- which was my only power -
and for which I was paid,
sometimes well, mostly poorly;
And the power of our voices,
when raised in song together -
for that was all that was allowed us.

I can't sing nowadays
for the memory is too bitter-sweet..

When we raised our voices
together in protest,
they sent in soldiers
Then sent us away
to the prisons,
or to the fever-ridden Colonies,
ruled by the Company owners
- or simply out to starve.

At some time I did all of these.

I learnt well and so now
this is my only song.

I also lived once as a fairly rich courtesan.
It's a nicer word than a whore.

My mother was a woman
stuck in rows of tenements
of those Company houses

And my father (I think)
was a Company man (so he said)
wanting a bit of extra
on the side
and not willing to pay for it..

So I was condemned from the start,
conceived on the wrong side of the blanket
brought up on the wrong side of the tracks.

There was an endless round
of scrimping and saving,
washing and scrubbing and polishing,
which I decided at the age of twelve,
was not the life for me. No, sir!

So - being blessed of a beautiful body,
and a good mind
(for my mother had polished that as well),
a will of iron
and a level of ruthlessness
that surprises me still,

I sold my body, and then myself,
then again, and again,
and eventually
I got a very good price for it.

It was hard work, mind,

though of a different sort.

Stanza 19

The sex thing was fairly easy,
if one hardened one's heart
But the class system was
the hard nut to crack,

The fine clothes were fine,
the parties all right.
The worst was
having to look interested
all the time!
Oh, these mindless boors
who only wanted one thing !
And in having to stay alert
for the next chance, the next trick.

I learnt a lot of very uncomplimentary things
about men
and that there are easier ways to make a living
than lying on your back.
It was a form of torture,
but it paid well,
though I had to abandon
all thoughts of self-esteem
as it *was* a form of torture.

I have also suffered and died
at the hands of a torturer,
many times, for different reasons,
many forms, with different results,
and in many various lives.

With sadism & brutality
my fragile frame
has been burnt & broken.
My heart has been pierced
and torn out, once even eaten
at the hands of a loved one,
so I thought..

My limbs have been stretched on the rack
so that they tore apart
and heavy stones were once
used to break my bones
or crush the breath from my body.
My nails have been pulled out
by red-hot pincers.
Maybe, as I bite them still today,
I am reliving that a bit.
I have also been branded and scarred,
blinded, crippled and flayed.
In more recent times,
more subtle means have been used,
like disorientating drugs.
I almost prefer the physical pain.
As it is more real.
I have been connected to live wires,

crucified in the snow,
and shot, falling into a grave
that I have had to dig myself.
I've seen my wife and children
- no matter what -
all in front of my very eyes.

And at such times I have prayed
that such men who did such things
should slowly, oh so very slowly,
burn in everlasting hell..

Over time I have also learned
to love - or at least feel some compassion for
such men who do such things:
They are not lovable,
but they are perhaps more in need of love
and tender recognition
than most of the rest of humanity.

Hatred, power & abuse
have made them what they are:
and they too have wounds
- and they won't heal them -
so they use them well
to hurt others where it hurts the most.

Thus I have tried to learn to love them;
for I have also been there too -
on their side
A torturer of other poor innocents
How not ?
We always play these cycles out.

If you have been tortured,
you have been a torturer.
If you torture others, it is because
you have been tortured.
And I so have done those things
as well to others.
Probably so have you
- almost certainly.
Forgiveness comes into it again,
somewhere,
but only after a lot of understanding.

Stanza 20

It hasn't all been bloody and terrible.
When I read some time ago
 'The Dairy of a Farmer's Wife'
 that was written in the 1750's
 "t'was as if Oi had wrytten it mysel".

For I know the cycle of the season's
 that she describes so well,
The rhythms and concerns of the farm
 and the house and family
 and the pride
 in a well-stocked larder.

The recipes or 'receits'
 for cakes and pies
 were so familiar
 that I could plot the little changes
 that I had used
 to make them special and mine
 and that I also took great pride in.

I remember the sense of well-being,
 the pleasure and comfort
 that comes with over-seeing
 a bustling farm yard
 and being able to afford
 something new
 for the house,
 the kitchen
 or the linen press.

The joy of heavy curtains !
The satisfaction of a new dress;
 bought by the money
 from the eggs
 collected each day,
 the endless nurturing of the hens
 and the slow accumulation of the pennies.
What richness !

I recollect that I had been the teacher
 in the village school
 from which I had graduated
 at the age of twelve
 for a short time
 before I married - aged fifteen.
There was some little regret
 at giving up
 the independence
 and the status of intellect,
 which was, in time,
 overtaken
 by a sense of wealth
 and well-being
 with my husband on the farm.
Until he died that is.

Over the years
 some of my youthful enthusiasm
 about marriage
 and the status of being a wife
 diminished a bit.
How not !

Stanza 21

It isn't the best outcome
for an intelligent person
to be condemned
for not having a piece of codskin
dangling between one's legs.

However I have learnt
the power of fertility and growth,
and the slow and steady
accumulation of virtue.

For it is not just material things that satisfy
but that deeper satisfaction
that comes from living well.

Well, with the seasons,
not abandoning the old ways,
and in harmony with those
and that which is all around us.
That is what makes things grow !

I have lived homeless as a refugee,
if you can call it living;
separated from my family
by many miles and several seas
and mountain chains
and barbed wire
and death itself.

Separated from my country
by border guards
and regimes of power
and racial hatred.

Separated from the rest of humanity
by having no home, no food,
no rights, no family,
no nationality,
no country - and no life !

Separated from myself
by no sense of self
by pain and abandonment
(that word again)
and by the aching, bone-wearied apathy
that allows me only to watch wide-eyed
as the rest of life goes by.

Separated from everything I hold dear.

The only thing that really matters now
is the next meal - if it comes -
and whether these tatters of clothing
will keep me warm enough.

Stanza 22

So I have learnt patience, humility
and the victim's side of war;
The illusion of material possessions
and the well-being of a home,
a farm and a family
which can so easily disappear
in a moment.

And the futility of wealth
which can never buy
health or security.
I have also learnt
the bitter taste of charity
and total dependency.
Maybe I can now learn
how to give properly.

Someone once said;
"It's nothing to do with Charity!
You can only ever give
To someone else
your Clarity."

Maybe I am trying to give you
something of my truth
in these lines,
as well as giving it to myself.

I have, of course, been
the cruel warlord.
One goes with the other,
since this world seems a duality.
(though we need to find the way out of that trap).

He who cares nothing
for anything other
than his own ambition and power
is the person who creates
refugees
and victims and widows.

But I have spoken of that elsewhere
and do not wish to repeat myself here.
It was just a reminder
another life inserted
into the panoply of threads
as a simple reminder.
Hah ! There is nothing simple
about any of this.

Yes, I have known the greed
of the petty warlord
out for what he can get
and getting more cruel
by the minute
measuring power in guns
and wanting more
- always more !

Stanza 23

I remember also walking the plains of Asia
with Persian armies
chasing Alexander
or running from him,
(I can't remember which)
But I remember the set of his helmet well
- the tungstan flash
seen through the dust..
Nothing petty about him !

There was cruelty there too
in his ambition
born of cruelty, of course,
and ambition
And a lust for power
measured in cities
conquered or built ...

But I am learning to know that well.

I have learnt lots too -
over the years -
from having children.
They are great teachers -
they reflect yourself straight back;
better than any mirror.
I have learnt a lot
from having to stay, and be patient,
endlessly patient.
until they leave home
to whatever fate
abandoning us.
Better that
than having to bury them.

It's been quite hard being a dad
this time round,
in this life, now
being faced with myself,
again and again,
as I have been
an absent father
and continually having to leave.
Another form of abandonment !

I have also learnt something from other men.
Not the hard lessons
I have described,
but more recently
as times have changed
- something softer.

Stanza 24

When we've dared to share
something of our lives
whilst sitting around in a circle,
or around a fire,
or walking across the hills together
There has been companionship.

The moments were rare,
but very precious.
I learnt about gentle brotherhood
and that I was not alone
in my pain.

I've also learnt well
especially in the last few months
and years of this life
how to reach down
into the pain
of my present wounds;
and the pain of past ones;
into the fire and the anger;
into the despair - and -
into the passion that also lies there.

I have had to face
the reality of wounds
that will not heal,
like a crippled hand
and a wounded finger.

I have learned how to go
through the dark tunnel,
the valley of shadows,
and through the long hours of night
the dark night of the soul
of being alone - abandoned.

And how to go through
the fire of pain
that seems never-ending
and the pain of the fire
that eventually purifies,
and how to go
through the barrier of fear.

I have had to learn
how to draw on these strengths;
how to cry alone
and to touch the healing there
and not to try to hide
in the soft bosoms of others.

The Wounded Healer who heals,
not through touch,
but through touching the energy
that is locked up in wounds
And that that is what helps it to heal.
But it hurts !

This is the fire that burns and purifies.
It clears and cleans.
It consumes the dross in every cell.
It becomes our Pain.
I've had to learn this well.

I have also learnt to accept the Wound
that will never heal.
For this connects me
o the greater pain
The Pain of the World
and, God knows, we need that too !

So this is my Path;
my Life; my little Death,
which connects in me,
and connects me with ...
Whatever - Everything.

I vibrate and shake
with every breath.
What else can I do ?
We have to have the pain
to learn and change.
We have to feel.
Sometimes we have to be made to feel.
We can't defend ourselves
against the pain,
for that cuts us off
from the Source.
So when I feel this pain,
these old wounds
from previous lives,
then I begin to heal
the pain in this life too.
When I go in deep and touch
The source of pain
I can reach up too
and ever on & out
to connect up with the stars
I feel their fine vibrations in my soul.
Then I feel at one with God
or whatever the Mystery is
- or isn't. !
And then I can be
like the Gods
and link with
the music of the spheres.
The Songs of the Sirens
were beautiful
because they were
of this music.

But this can lead you
just as easily
to Destruction
or to Ecstasy !
How not ?
They can be different sides
of the same coin
My paen rings out -
my poem.
My passion flows
into creative ways
a vision mingled with the pain
with learning
with the cycles
of Life and Death.
And it flows out
changed again.
And the world changes
a little bit as well.

What else can I do ?
After all, this is just my Life
and the total of my days
and the total of my lives.
The wounded finger stirs
and moves the pen
to write a poem or two.
It helps me to survive
as it connects me
to myself
Through these images
in space & time
And many Various Lives.

This extended poem was written over several years, added to, changed, and revised at many different times mainly between 1993 and 2005.

It has also been added to and revised more later – a little, just a little, a final polish – but then nothing is ever final.

There are also some other later poems, that can be seen as a form of an addenda, that cover other aspects of these various lives.

‘Waterloo’, ‘Agora Agony’ and the Marathon poems fall into this category.

However they also stand alone. And they are in a different rhyme. I have therefore kept them separate.

I hope that now I give thanks for every lesson.

© Courtenay Young
Findhorn & Edinburgh, 2005-2012