

## Dreaming of Still Water

CLIFF ASHCROFT was born in Blackpool, England in 1963, he studied at the University of Sheffield and completed a research degree on the poetry of Peter Redgrove. He has written one previous collection of poems, *Faithful* (1996). He lives in Hertfordshire.



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CLIFF ASHCROFT



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*For Mum, Dad, and Mike*



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## 1. Lost



## Pioneers

The lead party had moved on  
to lands of adventure and purpose.  
Each evening we gathered to watch the horizon.

The frontier had swallowed our headstrong friends  
and we raised our hollow cups to them  
wherever they were, forgetting us,

thinking us dead on this arid plain.  
No omen was clear enough to tell  
if the sought for treasure was found,

so we turned to our circle of winter fires,  
built stone foundations for the temporary cabins,  
raised the children who must continue

our long and patient wait.

## Wants

*'and ministered unto him.'* (Mark 15:41)

As soon as I received your message  
I came to your house and the room you maintained  
for our conversations and sleep.  
Your greeting was warm, our embrace long.  
I knew that something was wrong.

You said your home was now to be mine,  
all rare items of expense to be sold,  
the servants informed of a new authority.  
These clothes must all be given away  
and the land returned to its deserving tenants.

I did not know what had happened to you.  
Poverty, I said, is banal and bitter,  
you will callous the palms of the hands I treasure,  
you will waste the turn of your skilful feet.  
But I was speaking now to a foreign ear.

You wrapped your arms in a travelling cloak,  
gave up the provisions I had carefully stocked.  
You left me for company I could not join.  
And I was at loss and slept on your pillow  
for the scent of you about my dream,

and I washed my hands and feet in your bowls,  
put on your gowns, your shoes and rings,  
wanting to slip inside your ghost,  
at rest upon your familiar chair,  
waiting for news like a mourner.

## Two Men

*(after Cavafy)*

I wait for my friend through a dull evening  
of coffee, twisted stubs and beer,  
counting the dark spots of grease  
that spoil my faded suit.

As ship lights flit in the dark bay  
my little pool of coins diminishes,  
and still there is no arrival.

He is a gentle man and good in heart  
but sadly unreliable.

At any hour of the dry day  
I do not know of his whereabouts,  
in night activity, unhealthy, shameful,  
with no time for the sensibilities  
I learned at work so earnestly,  
the warm and helpful training sessions  
delivered by sober, searching people  
whose concern I like to praise.

He arrives as my head begins to nod  
smiling with the great news  
his flush of notes explains.

Of course I do not gamble  
but with only faked resistance  
he pulls me to the bars  
to pick and choose the invitations  
for drinks, a room, a wide bed  
where I refuse to come.

Instead I imagine her sure delight  
as she removes his poor clothes  
and discovers him just like me  
beside the pools of our careless travel —  
minding the luggage, learning the pleasantries  
of custom and culture, the language, the art;

imagining her discovering him  
beneath the clothes I carefully bought,  
the fine and beautiful limbs stretched out,  
his eyes half-closed, the tanned skin.

When dawn spots the grey bay  
I pull my legs from the creased divan  
and twist my stubs on a saucer.  
I pick up my suit and check for coins,  
pace the stairs and morning alleys  
for my familiar waiting table.

## Lost

I could not find you,  
met by the same bland eyes,  
the clutched children, a spitting fire  
in the sunk hearth. My brave spirit  
you laughed at the map of your sure destinations,  
planned in your sleep, already among  
the plank bridges and banded hills  
dripping the slush of spring.  
Nine months later no word received.  
The embassy packed your torn red scarf  
while I smoothed an airport postcard  
sent before your errant step  
into bleak and faceless scree.

So I came to these walnut orchards  
exhausted from unfamiliar boots,  
frightened of the barefoot kids  
demanding pens and pennies.  
Staggering about the tea-chest stalls  
I mimed your dress, your reticent smile.  
I passed your rose-garden photo  
about the smeared and stubby thumbs.  
They recognised nothing.  
They wondered alone at the snow of your hair.

The resigned nomads gathered at crossroads  
and slowly counted their possessions.  
I attached myself to them because  
one possessed your slender hands.  
I slept out my hours on oil-stained floors  
and dreamt I lifted a latch on your bunker.  
Your thin tongue moved over my lips  
hard and taut like a stone.

You tugged me about to your rest's end,  
and turned my head as you passed your arm  
above your final discovery,  
glittering there beneath my hands,  
slim, incomprehensible.

Next morning I clasped my tickets,  
stepped out to the tyre-striped track.  
A man was passing in road-stained clothes,  
his loose beard laced with straw.  
He walked slowly, chanting gently  
and offered me sweets, a familiar postcard—  
the cellophane windmills, the acid roses  
of our home's floral promenade.  
Over his shoulder he carried a rifle  
made from bits of discarded exhaust.  
It was lashed into shape with strips of red rag.  
Your rags in fact, as I remembered  
those naked arms inside my dream,  
those stony kisses, pale hands,  
your terrible spark of discovery.

## The Drive

Three hours out from the twisted sheets  
I can feel the hook unsnag.

I get out by an empty field and sit by the road  
for ten minutes hearing only the beat of the wind.  
I could abandon the car here and clog my shoes  
in the mud, turn up in some dung-strewn yard  
filthy and vacant with some livid bruise

burning my face and not recalling how I got it  
or whose keys these are or these ripped-up  
mangled clothes. I could wash in a trough  
and follow the wire of the pylons  
away from a town to some graveyard

where the headstones look like pummelled dough  
and the names rubbed off and the church locked  
and eat windfalls and make my bed  
in a weekender's shed before moving on  
my stupid tell-tale name forgotten.

But I get back in the car and drive 80 miles  
and run-out of petrol. The men in the garage  
laugh out loud while I stand at the pump.  
Something in me turns for the shade,  
kicks stones in the dust, out of sight.

I wear these middle-aged hands like gloves.  
I've been gone six hours now.  
I can feel the tug at my throat.  
So I turn the wheel, compose my story,  
head back to my waiting name.

## Sea Weed

I was in a field crossed by cracked paths,  
burger boxes, and splintered cassettes.  
There was a broad road choked with cars,  
and then the debris of the speechless sea.

I didn't expect to arrive here;  
miles and miles of purposeful walking,  
staring out the bad attention,  
grinning under the tug of my luggage

to arrive at a room stuffed with brown furniture  
and the reek of bleach from a spartan loo.

I wanted the grasses, the lunch-time snackers,  
the serpent talk of the headphones,  
that crazy dash across the paths  
to the wide, glittering water.

Here I sit to my boxed sandwich  
and six square feet of ragged lawn.  
Someone has emptied long ribbons of tape  
all over the dismal beds,

piles of it glistening  
like damp brown weed.