

The Men from Praga

ANNE BERKELEY was born in Ludlow and grew up in Lincolnshire. Her pamphlet *The buoyancy aid and other poems* was published by Flarestack in 1997, and a selection of her work appeared in *Oxford Poets 2002* (Carcenet). She won the *TLS* prize in 2000 and was a prizewinner in the Arvon competition in 2004. She edited Rebecca Elson's acclaimed posthumous collection *A Responsibility to Awe* (Carcenet, 2001) and is currently editor of the poetry journal *Seam*. She is one of the poetry group Joy of Six, with whom she has performed across the UK and in New York.

The Men from Praga

ANNE BERKELEY



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I Co-ordinates

We have got to have this thing over here, whatever it costs . . .
we have got to have a bloody Union Jack on top of it . . .

ERNEST BEVIN, *Foreign Secretary*, 1946

Hold-all (*Aircrew*)

You served to carry my father's civvies,
spare flying rations, pressure-suit, presents.
You brought us tangerines fresh from the tree.

After each tour of duty, you suffered
being flung on the floor, skidding on metal feet,
and slumped there, heavy as a body.

If you ever glimpsed the Vulcan's purpose
above the clouds as you rode in the bomb-bay,
you held your peace.

From the childhood of your ID tag
you reproach me with mute loyalty,
your two handles like ears, waiting for orders.

Forgive me, you were always too heavy
with dirty laundry and official secrets.
I was never allowed to touch you.

Let me take some weight from you now.
Let me listen to the long yawn of your zip
as you spill out your puzzling odours

and I will try not to resent your shared journeys,
the long absences and whispers, the crises.
Unpack for me again the doll from Malta,

panpipes from Nicosia and tangerines from Tripoli,
still with their leaves, still cold from 50,000 feet.
Even empty, I doubt I can carry you.

Vapour Trail

Lincolnshire's in shadow. My father leaves the plain
in screams of light. He navigates
high over maps and mountains with names
I can't pronounce. Gold a micron thick laminates the glass.

His slide rule shuttles on his knees.
He's gone beyond a point of light. There's only noise.

Through rose-tinted glass the pilot shadows mountains,
cities, a great river winding through the plain.
The navigator with his slide-rule can't see out
but crouches at the radar-sweep within arm's reach of the light.

Yellow Sun, Green Grass

When I lived in my father's house
The Bomb was mighty and ruled over the earth
And the Bomb was a mystery
And my father was its servant
And the names of the Bomb were secret and unspoken

The Bomb was in the sky and came down to earth
To bring peace to the world

And these were some of the names of the Bomb in those days:

Blue Danube, Green Grass, Yellow Sun, Red Snow

And they were forbidden to be spoken
And the Bomb was hidden

The Government praised the Bomb
And the people made sacrifices
For the Bomb gave us strength
For the Bomb kept us safe

And those who cursed the Bomb gave succour to our enemies
And we despised them

When the Bomb went forth the earth trembled and the
heavens were rent
And the heavens wept
And the Bomb would come again

I lived in fear of the Bomb
I dreamed I lived and looked on the terrible face of the Bomb

Flat 9

When I googled it, I was afraid
to disturb my carefully-tended myth
that dozed in court, gazebo, balustrade,
labyrinths that nothing real compares with.

Back when we knew it, the house appeared to us
from fragments of someone else's dream
we trod, but didn't understand because
we were small and thought only children dreamed,

so we rampaged through it, having other uses
for things we loved but didn't recognise—
patchy, mossed, forgotten grown-up stuff

like the brambly garden with stone muses,
dry fountains catching nothing from blue skies,
and a broken sundial with time enough.

Revesby

The ballroom is kept shuttered. No one has the key.
Roll-eyed carvings guard the stairs—what's the password?—
mirrors echo in the hall, mahogany and vast.
No Ballgames on the Parterre. I told on them, so I'm a spy.

When the gang's coming after me, I scramble
into the straggly box hedge, and watch them searching.
The knot-garden's tangled, a cat's-cradle gone wrong.
My parents say you must learn to make new friends.

Stone ladies in the garden bare their breasts and bottoms
through the bones of a pergola like a broken tomb.
They show off hooks from elbows, orange scabs.
I need a cap-gun, I said, to defend myself.

Once, I hid inside an empty fountain,
staring at the green thing in the middle and willing it to gush.
Dried moss scratched my arms. A Vulcan screamed, so low
it made the twisted chimneys faint. I could have touched it.

No, I never hear *The Blue Danube*, the carriages at dawn.
There's no such thing as ghosts. The others will be waiting
on the backstairs with their skipping-ropes and helmets
to escort me to the basement, where the rats run free.

The Boasts of Jim McKay

Wyatt Earp
longest burp
furthest hitter
best spitter
worst chickenpox
biggest, strongest, oldest, boss

Tonto the white rat
proper Davy Crockett hat
calls his mother *Mum* not *Mummy*
one whole shilling pocket money

a kilt, which isn't sissy if you're Scottish
fifty pounds in the Post Office
a real working watch
Hogmanay, St Andrew's Day
knife in his sock

a gang and a den
Jim McKay and his Merry Men
box of matches and a cigarette
Scalextric set

never cries
cut off your tongue and boil your eyes
till they burst
see up your skirt

a six inch scar
when he'd crashed his uncle's racing-car
at two hundred miles an hour

been up the Eiffel Tower
eats fried brains

needs stitches again
none of your business
will get a bike for Christmas

the boss of you the boss of this school the boss of the whole world
a boy is always better than a girl

The Old Arboretum

There were strange cones in the woods, and pale leaves
that smelt of medicine. Bushes with red berries
they told us not to pick. There were bamboos
we made bows and arrows with, or spears.

We shot at pigeons in the chestnuts, but never got one.
We made fires and cooked apples in a billycan.
We always covered up our poo with leaves.

We played conkers and Jim McKay threw sticks to get them
down.

One hit me on the lip—I needed stitches.
Once he threw me in the nettles—that was worse.

Jim McKay owned a treehouse, in the biggest cedar.
They just took it—my favourite tree.
And they cheated and put in footholds.
It isn't proper climbing if you use nails.
I told him, it's not a proper treehouse if your father builds it.
Even with stepladder and trapdoor.
I could climb any tree I wanted, higher than him.

Then there was the time he chased me
up the tree that only I could climb.
He was older and heavier, so only got half way,
shouting. He tried to shake me off. I shinned
to where the trunk was thinner than my wrist—
however much he shook, I would not let go.
Better than a fairground ride, I said.
Then laughed. He didn't like that. I wasn't *really* scared.
He couldn't kill me, because he'd get into trouble.

He said he'd say it was an accident.

His mother called him in for tea.

I watched him go, ginger hair bobbing as he ran.

I leaned against the branch. I didn't cry.

A clear shot from my perch, if I had an arrow.

My Mother's Migraines

I'm running up and down the landing till the noise
bounces off the panelling behind the statues
even when I've stopped sometimes on wet days
Diana rides her bike here you're not supposed to say bike
it's bicycle it's one of those long words like
telephone and television which we haven't got
and refrigerator it's just arrived I keep
opening the door to see the light and you can make
ice-cream which is jolly good because next week
it's my birthday my present's a surprise
I want a gun but I won't get a bike
until I'm ten and that is years and years and years away

Small Arms

Two fingers, bang bang, don't make a gun
when everyone's got rolls of caps
and a tree-house to defend. You run
whooping with a pigeon feather
to loose flaming arrows at Wyatt Earps
but they're playing a different game,
where they shoot you dead and you can't shoot back.
They stamp on your fingers when you attack
the ladder of their fort. It isn't fair. It hurts.
You only wanted to join in. You run away.

Next day, you're one year older.
Doc Birthday. Your gun's brand new.
It's silver and mother o'pearl,
so heavy, it takes both hands to aim.
Too big for your pocket or the holster
you don't have. Too long to twirl
but there's a hundred caps, blood blisters
in a waxed box, bang and smoke
and air that rings and blurs and tastes of blue.

The shoot-out leaves you light-headed,
exhausted, penniless,
an empty barrel's click.
Dead eye. Ha-ha, missed.

This gun's useless now. Fling it down.
It was a real gun you wanted most,
a real gun to shoot them dead
so now you resurrect yourself, tear through
their haze of bullets, unharmed, like a ghost.

Russkis

I am a spy
creeping about the landing
behind the statues
disguised as a Mexican
listening at doors

Morse code's tapping
along the gutter

Mrs McKay's hoover
could be a cover
for a hidden telephone

Words can shrink
and fly through wires

The Americans
have blocked up their keyhole
to guard their music
They're not speaking English

I saw the postman on the stairs
the letters for No 11
had foreign stamps

By the pantry door
was a cast of mud
from the gunman's boot

When the weather clears
I will look for letters
in the hollow
of the old conker tree

Sputnik will track me
so I wear a big hat
to hide my face
from the man-made moon