

Hannah and the Monk

JULIA BIRD grew up in Gloucestershire and now lives in London. She works for the Poetry School and is a freelance live literature producer. This is her first book.

<http://www.juliabird.wordpress.com>

Hannah and the Monk

JULIA BIRD



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for four country babies

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The lyric ‘we could nick a boat / and sneak off to this island’ is reproduced by kind permission of xxx

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Article of Faith

Et tu, Brute.

Brutus, even you.

Don't tell me it's not true,
the college city urban myth
that every breath you or I or anybody takes
contains a single molecule of air
expired with Caesar's dying words.
To me it is an article of faith
that my blood, yours and everyone's
is salt with two thousand year old oxygen
and, it follows, grains of every sneeze
or yawn or opera that there's ever been.
Steam from Stephenson's first Rocket ride,
songs that went to space and back,
each bark and war-cry, each World Cup whistle blast,
Spartacus shouting *I'm Spartacus*,
Kirk Douglas shouting *I'm Spartacus*—
particles of these are sherbet in our throats.
And this is where I make observance:
the front row seat in the stalls
for the opening speech of the final act,
at the foot of the soap-box and the busker's pitch
and in the market, where the man who sells fruit
is zesting the air with his citrus patter.
Here, my lungs are nets to catch
this glitterfall of exhalation
to keep with Caesar's sigh and Cassius's kiss.
This cloud of breath's a borrowing and lending
which links everyone, including me and you.
Do you believe it too?
Breathe, if you do.

Jim Fixed it For Me

Every child had a place on the podium
but the gold medal goes to the boy who wanted Jim
to fix to the ceiling above his bed
a full-sized antique chandelier. Which Jim did

though it swung in the room all the wrong scale
like ladies' earrings on a little girl.
The boy's mum, watching from the bedroom door,
was partly proud and partly at a loss

as, unlit, the hanging glass meant nothing more
than dusty test-tubes, foil bottle-tops.
But when the dimmer switch was spun
light, like a slowly forming thought,

started humming in the chandelier's chimes.
Its heart-cut jewels thrilled, and spawned
a rush of sparks — part shoal, part flight —
to moth and mirror-ball the bedroom walls

and bead the boy's school uniform
with sequins, shuntle, mussel pearls;
to lift dark corners of the tv studio
and drop small sunsets on the audience

till the show was over, the tv set shut down.
For a while, some charge behind the screen
kept its grey glass platinum. Light,
what's left, still pinholes through the white dot.

Time, Ladies, Please

A woman walks into a bar.
She is not followed by a belly laugh
or a playful punch line to the upper arm.
Rather, she picks a seat where she can see the door,
racks up a trayful of dead and empties—
glasses smeared with blotted kisses—
and plays her own version of beer-mat tricks,
patience and tarot, mats splayed out then stacked.
In the snug, a round of blokes gets the Guinness in,
sloppy flowers dribbled in the froth,
while the fruit machine shoots out a shrapnel jackpot
for the jukebox or Durex machine.
In the Ladies', the woman queues, while a girl
mops with bog-roll the dregs of a crying fit
brought on by jealousy or too much gin.
It's in the timing, like the telling of a joke,
the moment between early doors and chucking out
you choose to stand, or be stood, up and go.

The World's Population Visits the Isle of Wight

Belgium is worried it's left the iron on
so even though it's next in the ferry queue
it turns its busses round and heads back home
to check. Denmark is caught up in the traffic
blocking every road and sea lane heading
for the Solent. It's played out a test match
of pub sign cricket and is now sitting silent
in the backs of cars, huffing the windows,
drawing faces and curses in the steam. Japan's
not even left yet, is still in the loft, looking
for its hold-alls, wind-break mallets, beach-balls
while its taxi for the airport waits.

The man with the clipboard marks another box
on his tick-list as the coaches roll into Cowes.
Four years to plan this task, four flown years
of checking and re-checking, unfiling and filing
the flipcharts and spreadsheets which sort out this 'land,
that 'stan with whatever it is they ought to know
about passports, visas, yellow fever pills. He holds
his piles of paper, paper-clips and clipboard
close and tight. It falls on him to test
that end-of-lesson poser set by every
science teacher: all things being equal, could you get
the world's population on the Isle of Wight?

They fit. There's some doubling up in the B&Bs
but the landladies juggled the kitchen shifts
and keep all day full English on the go—
full Seychellois, full Swedish too. Well fed,
the kids of Mali and Australia
are digging on the beach at Alum Bay.
With spades and castle buckets they have built
sand cities of igloos and wigwams, striped
in gritty shades of mushroom, rose and sage

such as the locals have never seen before.
The regulars in Shanklin's pubs and bars
can talk of nothing else as they pull in their chairs

so Iceland can get past, pull them in
again for Tuvalu. Venezuela
didn't fancy beers so went to visit
Blackgang Chine; Venezuela's keen
on dinosaurs, wants to photograph
the fibreglass T-Rex's sunny grin.
In a temporary cabin on Portsmouth docks
the man with the clipboard is at his desk, his tea
untouched, tickets and receipts in heaps to his right,
red pens and Tipp-Ex on his left. A draft
of his final report will follow in a week . . .
while the world hangs hollow at his back.

The Camera Never Lies

I drew the blue background, screwed the low stool round to a better height, put two pounds twenty in the slot, thought cheese thoughts and sat for the half-pint cartoon of passport headshots which is now printing. While I am waiting

a curl in my cowlick flips over from left to right, and I wind my scarf up higher round my throat. I eat three mints, and browse a bit in the paper on a writer whose memoir casts in altered parts those characters once thought flawed or flat.

A man sneezes spots
of 'flu at me, just as
I turn my head away.
The tic tacs fizz and
sugar rushes through
my heart, while—like
a light-spill in a dark-
room—some reaction
deeper in makes one
cell split apart and
shudder, split again.

The booth coughs and
delivers a brief report:
somebody I once met
but whose ID's now in
doubt. No small wallet
gallery would hang this
portrait, and a customs
officer would stop and
search it. The instant of
an instant photograph
passes by . . . *like that*.

This Much is Almost Guaranteed

Though this time of the year the nights draw in,
they're drawn on by neon—the glowing come-ons
which flourish in the half shade of a winter city:
a bar-sign bottle's constant topping up,
the pink jingle of show-girls on a theatre wall,
their pendulum legs in lights.

Remember, you'll have seen how rain,
if it comes, will nourish this display,
will bring it on to mirrored double blooms.
It rains. A gutter floods its puddles,
the green cross of a pharmacy becomes
a water lily flickering on the spill.

And these lights will rise the same time of the day
tomorrow. That much is almost guaranteed.

Short Film

Finally they let him have a go, from the garage as far as the pavement. Checking the mirror twice, he lowered the handbrake then freewheeled the twelve foot slope. Through the windscreen's frame he could see the porch step, his mother from the waist down, milk bottles full of air.