

Selected Poems

FIONA PITT-KETHLEY was born in 1954. She studied at the Chelsea School of Art where she obtained a BA (hons) before going on to become a full-time writer. As a student she ushered at the Old Vic and National Theatre. While writing, she sometimes worked as a film extra. She married the chess grandmaster and former British chess champion, James Plaskett, in 1995. They have a son, Alexander. In 2002 they moved to Spain. At first they lived in an ex-pat area until driven out by tyre-slashing English and Irish pensioners. They are now much happier living amongst the Spanish in Cartagena where they have adopted seven feral cats.

Since moving to Spain, Fiona has acquired new hobbies: she practices Kyokushin karate and goes rock-hunting and hill-walking in the Sierra Minera, an area she is currently writing a book on. She also enjoys fishing for her dinner, listening to local Flamenco concerts and snorkels for several months of the year.

Also by Fiona Pitt-Kethley

SELECTED POETRY COLLECTIONS

Sky Ray Lolly (1986)
Private Parts (1987)
The Perfect Man (1989)
Dogs (1993)
Double Act (1996)
Memo From a Muse (1997)

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Literary Companion to Low Life (1995)

Selected Poems

FIONA PITT-KETHLEY



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For James and Alexander

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Sky Ray Lolly

A toddler on a day out in Herne Bay,
on seeing an ancient, civil-servant-type,
I held my Sky Ray lolly—red, yellow
and green striped, pointed, dripping down between
my legs and walked bandy. My Ma and Pa
(old-fashioned innocents like Rupert Bear's)
just didn't notice this and ambled on,
that is, until they saw the old man's face,
jaw dislocated in surprise. They grabbed
that Martian's willy from my little hand.

The world still sees me as a nasty kid
usurping maleness. A foul brat to be
smacked down by figures of authority.
All things most natural in men, in me
are vice—having no urge to cook or clean,
lacking maternal instincts.

And they would take my pride, my rocket
of ambition, amputate my fun and geld
my laughter, depriving me of colour.
And smirk to see my little lolly melt,
me left with a stick.

Baby Doll

My cousin sent a baby doll for me—
hairless and clammy, waxen yellowish-grey
with sunken pale blue eyes and a mouth pursed
for pouring water in so it came out
through a small aperture between its legs.

I called it Peter, though it had no prick.
It looked too ugly for a girl, I thought.
I used to fill it up and souse my lap.
Sometimes I'd press its squashy latex head
to force the liquid out at higher speed,
yellowing the pee by adding mustard in,
or making diarrhoea with chocolate milk.
Sometimes it vomited and pissed at once.

At last, my mother took my toy away,
afraid I'd show it to some visitor.
Several days later, it was back again,
seated amongst my other dolls and bears.
She'd used half an old shoe dye on his face,
giving him hair and beard, and togged him out
with a sharp suit of black and white checked tweed.
'Peter's grown up,' she said.
'Adults don't wet themselves.'

His lips looked red against his blue-black beard.
You can do anything at any age, I thought.
I filled him up again. He peed,
marking his breeches with a yellow stain.

Pigeons

I used to love to watch their delicate
shades of grey as they swaggered on the lawn,
jostling for bits of bread I'd left for them.
I'd lean on the chipped chocolate brown sill
and name them to myself as Arthur's knights—
the same set came there every day—Gawain,
Lancelot, Perceval and Galahad,
a white one—Guinevere.

I made my parents tell me bird stories—
'Belinda the demon pigeon of Acton
lived above a gargoyle in a graveyard . . .'
reassured by repetition before
reading widened my choice. I searched upstairs,
(my father used to coo realistically
and thought of bringing a clay pigeon home
to plant on the mahogany wardrobes,
just peeping down, but out of reach.) One day,
in the way that stories sometimes come true,
a grounded pigeon hobbled through the door.
We kept her in a box in a back room.
Close up, I decided, birds weren't so nice.
She pecked our hands for food and glared at us
with her red eyes. I never liked her much.
The room began to smell of feathers and shit.
She took a lover too—a ponce of a pigeon—
we nicknamed him Albert, I don't know why.
He would puff out his petrol-shaded chest,
come in through the open window, rape her,
knock her about a bit, then steal her seed.
That was if the cat didn't tumble her first.

The vet just broke her neck. 'The best way,' he said,
standing there, the limp bird in his hands.
'She wouldn't have flown again.' My father
came home angry, buried her box and all,
calling him a wretched amateur.

If I pass the dirty-grey wallowing mass
in Trafalgar Square and hear the rattle
of seed in tins I remember Lucy
and feel disgust, some fear perhaps—not quite
a phobia—disgust at her cold end
before my father's eyes, fear at her role
of victim, a lot which could be anyone's.

Thoughts After a Burglary

For my father

In a recent break-in, some tapes of mine were stolen, one of which contained the last and only record of my father's voice.

He took me as a child to the sights of London, obvious and minor, churches of every sect, strange shops and restaurants, tutoring me in feats of endurance— eating the hottest Madras curries at a tender age, swallowing a quart of pop without taking my mouth off the bottle, bagpipe impersonations in subways, writing things on graffiti-proof tiling, tearing tin cans in half and lobbing them into the passing goods trains, and so on.

The memories are all blurred now, but there's just enough to leave me with a strange sense of *déjà vu* in any part of London.

There were once yearly parties too, where he'd clown as Charlie Chaplin before the little beasts from my snob school— walking in suddenly, tripping over a raped and ruptured, Egyptian leather pouffé (with pictures of camels and pyramids and people all turned sideways for the tourists) he'd somersault, all sixteen stone of him, the laughter of the kids enough payment as they sat, venomous in nylon frills.

In time, he lost his journalist's job. He'd lived in the shadow of his successful father— self-made, writer of ripping yarns, fifty years editor of *The Wide World*.

And we got poorer in a time when dole
was not the norm. Later—a short term job—
educational précis, took him to
London’s technical libraries. I went
with him in the holidays, quietly
reading odd manuals, dictionaries,
whatever was available, staring
in a trance at Adam ceilings, or out
through high windows at warehouses with doors
opening, four storeys up, on to nothing.

Then followed years, a phrenetic period of
letter-writing for jobs, the sending of
curricula vitae, getting up at
dawn, endless endless letters, and at night,
putting a slop-pail of vast and bloody lights
(bought for our cats dirt-cheap from a friendly
butcher who enjoyed Dad’s filthy jokes)
against the back-door to stop the burglars.

My father, a pensioner, at last, turned
cat-herd with some twelve furry apostles.
My parents moved out of London then,
while I was away at Art School. The thieves
my father dreaded hit in the new place—
not clean like London ones—these scattered papers,
tore and destroyed, dumped books out in the rain.
They took almost every little thing he owned:
his bits and bobs of militaria,
all the pomposity of the Army
vanishing into a thief’s pocket.

After a slow and gradual depression,
a month before my twenty-first birthday,
his heart gave out. Sensing something
I had come home a day early. We found him
lying on the lavatory floor, a livid cut
where he had struck his face in falling,
in shirt and pullover a size too small.
The undertaker took him in a pushchair
like a baby.

Some cats outlasted him and I became
their gravedigger—a new role thrust on me.
The last, a lame, alcoholic she-cat
who'd lacerated his back into
a Grünewald Crucifixion, lingered for years,
and ran to meet me every time I sang
in imitation of my father's voice.

The thieves contributed to rob me
of my ally, silencing him twice over.
What's left? A strong enduring influence—
a part of my voice that's his.

The Fox

My father took a walk one autumn day
In leafy woods in Bucks, down Amersham way.
And while he answered Nature's Call, he saw
A limping vixen with a wounded paw.
She crossed a muddy stream and went to earth
Down in the den where she had given birth.
Her cubs were there, crying and cowering in fear—
They heard the baying of the hounds draw near.
And as my father stood and buttoned his fly,
The Master of the Hunt came coursing by.
He reined his mare in by my father's side:
'Seen 'im?' he yelled. 'Seen who?' my Dad replied.
'The fox, you fool!' he stormed (not being local,
He'd taken my father for some dim-wit yokel).
A truthful bloke, for once, Dad lied like Nixon,
And sent him to the right to save the vixen.
And soon there followed on a motley crew
On borrowed nags, all shouting: 'View Halloo!' —
Yuppy developers, hoping to look posh,
No breeding, balls or brains, just loads of dosh.
 Foxes, are rascals, stealing where they can,
 But, on the whole, they do less harm than Man.

The Mask

After my grandpa's death, my father found
a Chinese cardboard mask and copy
of Krafft-Ebbing locked in Newnes's office safe.

Respectably alcoholic, 'Old Vic'
read his 'review copies' though *The Wide World*
never did reviews, drank champagne solo
and indulged in japes of an Edwardian
character—painting extra figures
in a convincing style on Christmas cards
to freak the guests. Not content with editing,
he'd talk of writing other books. (His first,
written under other names—The Captain,
Sidney York, Rupert Chesterton
and Singleton Carew—were ripping yarns
where villains smuggled saccharin, or tales
of lands where the heroes always cried
'Caramba!', Incas or derring-do at sea.)

Twice weekly he would take the train to work,
passing his friend, a retired editor,
rearing rhubarb at Rickmansworth with young
and pretty 'Nursie' at his side (his heart
was bad). As the train slowed Vic would rise, wave
in some new disguise, his George-Burns-face screwed
up as Nelson, a penny at one eye,
arm in a sling and a paper cocked hat.
Then he'd put the lot away and sit back.
Tailored and toupéed—he was the perfect
image of the City gent, till sickness
took him on that journey where there are
no masks—no Fu Manchu or Charlie Chan
to hide behind.

The Ecumenical Movement

My first years were haunted by foreign names,
phrases like ‘apostolical succession’
and strange invasions of dressed-up prelates.
After a quick ordination, blessing
or what have you in the chapel, they’d go
out the back to take their photographs.
(I liked the geometry of our garden —
first, the square washing-line that wouldn’t spin,
then the two apple trees set in the lawn
forming a triangle with the pear outside
the circle of a fairy ring.) They’d stand
there more or less, say ‘cheese’ in their mitres,
copes and glasses, then troop inside for tea.

I was usually bored so I’d put on
a kind of cabaret—lick out the jam
from tarts, striptease, bring in a brimming pot,
sexually harass the better-looking men
except when some Ukrainian Count was due
and I was sent to Margate with my Mum.

My father’s hobby was the marrying
of sect to sect, patching up old schisms
to make a whole and undivided church.
(He even asked Ian Paisley to join
in a wonderful stroke of naivety
or taking the piss—(I’ve never quite known which.)

He held vast correspondences with priests,
archbishops, curés and archimandrites,
all of the smallest denominations.

The American ones gave him degrees,
the Russians, magazines he couldn’t read,

the Italians, titles. Duc de Deauville
was the prettiest.

Our chapel was in the slope of the roof
with tatty repro-icons spaced around,
a pale oak-veneered altar touched by worm,
bottled holy water, rose oil chrysm
and souvenir crosses on the mantelpiece
above a small gas fire, and a huge loop
of light-cord trailing from a naked bulb.

My mother rarely liked my father's friends.
One of them brought his 'favourite choirboy'
to see the London sights. 'We always sleep
in separate beds,' he said defensively.
He sat there with his leg wagging
and left a little damp spot on the chair.
(We kept that seat solely for visitors
like a Siege Perilous. Eventually
we sold the dining-room set to knockers.)
Another, a most frequent visitor,
we heard had got married to a black girl
and was ashamed of her and kept her down
the basement of his Fulham house—her
and their two children. To his friends he was still
a hapless bachelor scrounging free meals.
(I spoil that though by forging Christmas cards
to all those friends from him 'and family'.)
The last I heard he was selling hair oil
through ads on the back of a literary mag.
One man decided to christen my Dad
Mar Rupertus—'Mar' he said, was Persian
for Lord. (He called his cat Mar Pluto too.)

I always liked my father's weird parcels—
strange stamps and seals and semi-papal bulls,
the family trees of those descended from
Avignon popes (all covered in gold-leaf),
an altar-cloth depicting all Christ's wounds
to be embroidered in red silken thread—

a sort of kit that came with a small bone
from St Eutychius. I have it still.
I hardly like to throw the thing away.
(How hard to deal with the small useless bits
that people leave behind them when they go!
I have a superstition about waste
so bunged a contraceptive pack and odd
cigars in handbags at some jumble sale
to give their purchasers a nice surprise.)

Sometimes it was like living on the edge
of a thriller. One Frenchman wrote about
his long campaign to convert Lucifer
and told us he was getting near his aim.
Next thing we read he'd been knocked down and killed
upon some Paris street. And Mum received
a shaky note from nice old Doctor Crowe—
it must have been the last he wrote—saying
he'd give me 'lessons in magic'.

And there was the 'autonic eye' we kept
stashed in the coal cellar for years. Seemed much
the size and shape of a well-wrapped severed head,
I thought. (I used to read a lot of Poe.)
A bishop from South Africa had asked
if we would mind the thing, bribing us first
with a big box of grapes and a large tin
of chocolate fingers.

Bums

My Head, Miss Harold, five foot square in grey,
was deeply disappointed that the shrink
she had me sent to certified me sane.
(At seven, I'd written 'BUM' upon my desk,
and that, in Old Harry's view meant madness.)
'They pluck these words' she said, 'out of the air!'
(That was the only time she didn't use
'If however . . .' her Johnsonian catchphrase.)
'Perhaps,' my mother said, 'she got it from
A Midsummer Night's Dream?' The Head just blinked.
What had she missed? The school editions were
all bowdlerised. My mother was quite wrong.
I'd only read Hamlet—no comedies—
and that play does not, as I remember,
have a bum, or even the ghost of one.
Like any normal child, I'd plucked, (Miss H.
was right), that word out of the air while I
was playing Bums—a game where little girls
(or boys) compare size, shape and texture bared.
Ma should have known—she once caught three of us,
standing, minus our navy knickers
in a front-room window, near the piano.
(I don't remember if we planned to play.)
Startled we saw a white face staring in
between the pink hydrangeas and the road.

Evolution

'Some men are very wicked!' my Gran said
while looking at a monkey in the zoo.
His spectacles of flesh and blue behind
reminded her of someone she once knew.

Apples

Where are the old apples,
the conical, uneven apples, obscurely ribbed,
ripening to deeper yellow, the crimson-cheeked apples,
marbled and washed with clear red,
the deep lively green apples,
strewed with silvery scales,
dark-spotted, speckled like hens,
brownish, orange-tinged against the sun,
veined in grey russet, angular, smooth-skinned,
the transparent apples grown on sand,
the Bantam's-egg-sized apples,
the child's-head-sized apples,
the red-fleshed Sops-in-Wine,
anise-flavoured New Rock Pippin,
fennel Ross Nonpareil,
Pitmaston Pine Apple, balsamic Sack and Sugar,
the strawberry and violet flavoured Calville apples,
the waxen-yellow aromatic Gravenstein,
transparent as porcelain,
pine-flavoured Lord Burghley, musky Reinette Franche,
homely Costard, Catshead, Hoary Morning,
Nanny, Cockpit, Hall Door, Bedfordshire Foundling?

On the shelves are our apples—the apples we deserve,
thin-stalked, unctuous, even green, polished to an inconsistency,
flesh sub-acid, cardboard-pipped, eyes stamenless,
sweating under the lights like a crowd of nervous actors.

Giant Hogweed

My teacher, wholemeal-faced and nature-crazed
brought wings into our fish-tank classroom just
to show their workings—she'd no sense of smell.
A friend had sent them her by parcel post:
a pigeon's, sparrows' and a kingfisher's.
(It seemed all wrong that halcyon feathers
should stink just as much as any city bird's.)

I tried to look for things to brighten up
the school and put my weekend's fungi in
our bath. (I thought to keep them fresh.)
Broad Dryad's Saddle, Cep with its bun top,
the mealy-warted Blusher bruising pink,
a Shaggy Ink-Cap like a lawyer's wig,
Tawny Grisettes and Beef-Steak Fungus from
an oak, all turned to slime by Monday's light.

Later, a Giant Hogweed caught my eye—
at eight, I loathed the catkins good kids brought.
Miss Davies, too never believed my tales:
the bullfinch was a chaffinch on my tree,
the raven but a carrion crow. As for
the carpet-wetting wallaby I saw
at Christmas in the Lyric Theatre—
'Well, really!'

My sci-fi weed had a cool reception.
I'd lugged it on the 207 bus,
its seven-foot stalk trailing across the seats,
my father held the end, I had the flower.)
A show-off's bloom, too tall, too poisonous,
no fit companion for the sensible
contents of the nature table. They stood
it in the corner by itself.

A Sunday Afternoon

Seeking adventures one church-free Sunday,
I crossed the Dives-Lazarus divide
from Ealing into Acton on the bike
I had for winning a free place at ten,
and chained it up to Springfield Gardens' gate.
It was your average London park, complete
with flasher, park-keeper, geraniums,
a bum-splintering see-saw and baby swings.
I soon got talking, and a girl of seven
was pointed out, who always dressed in pink
and used to suck men's willies in the Gents.
I thought it seemed a funny thing to do.

The boys didn't use the swings or see-saw,
but stood a little way off, watching us,
hands in pockets. An Indian twelve-year-old
crossed the gulf sniggering and asked
if he could 'plant his carrot in my turnip field'.

Soon, we were rescued from moral danger;
the 'Firebrands' evangelists descended
asking the question 'Are you saved?' We weren't
too sure, and so they kidnapped and bussed us
to Acton's Co-op Hall for Sunday School.
A gaggle of children, matted or plaited,
our hands reeking of the metal swing-chains,
we were ready to try anything once
and sang 'I will make you fishers of men',
even the little cocksucker in pink.

Taking Off

Sometimes, spontaneously, a group of girls gathered in the playground. Half a dozen or more pairs stood, grasping each others' wrists. No-one ever really suggested it and we never knew the name of the game.

When your turn came round you'd take off and dive, landing on a mattress of arms to be tossed several times before their holds slackened and you slid down twisting on to the grass. With your eyes shut you felt you were flying. I could never understand why Tom Brown didn't enjoy being tossed in a blanket, except, tastes differ.

That game was considered too physical. Like leapfrog and friendships with older girls the teachers always put a stop to it.

The Staff Room had a squarish bay-window which looked out on the grass where we played. Daily one hot summer, two girls lay there in each others' arms, kissing, mouths open, a button or two of their turquoise blouses left casually undone, their hands straying occasionally inside—blatant—you'd think they'd have saved it for some empty classroom separating quickly if a prefect came through the door.

The grass they always lay on parched yellow. Daily we waited for the skies to fall. The Head would delegate the job, we thought, and send a minion to prise them apart.