

## Stations of the Heart

RAYMOND FRIEL was born in Greenock in 1963. After graduating from Glasgow University he moved to England and qualified as a teacher. His poems have been widely published in reviews and magazines. His collections include *Bel-Air* (1993), *Seeing the River* (1995), *Renfrewshire in Old Photographs* (2000) and *A World Fit to Live In* (2005). He co-edited the review *Southfields* and ran Southfields Press for a number of years. He lives with his wife and three sons in Somerset. He is the headteacher of a secondary school in Bath.

Also by Raymond Friel

POETRY

*Bel-Air* (1993)

*Seeing the River* (1995)

*Renfrewshire in Old Photographs* (2000)

*A World Fit to Live In* (2005)

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RAYMOND FRIEL



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*for Janet, Jamie, Callum and Euan, wherever we find ourselves . . .*



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'What one place remains/Home as darkness quickens'

— W.S. GRAHAM

'I can only stay true/to the stupendous monotony of the mystery'

— PIER PAOLO PASOLINI



# Under the White Horse

## I

You cajoled our reluctant, girny boys  
into the garden's shallow depth of field—  
(trying in vain to comb hair and hide toys).  
I judged a space for father and husband,  
set the Olympus and hurried to join you  
as seconds buzzed at my back (*O days, years . . .*)  
and captured us, removed from all we knew,  
before the restless screen of conifers.

## II

What do we bring to this, our latest place?  
Our public sector hearts, our deference—  
so we'll buy the folklore, a book of birds,  
learn which songbird invests our firs with sound,  
how the white horse came to its eminence.  
Give thanks, of course, for what we've known of grace.

## A World Fit to Live In

*July 1945*

With his 'shopping list', my son makes us stop  
at choice hedges, a particular weed.  
He does not share my anticipation.  
In the long shadows, a man tends a grave  
with brisk affection, his shirt sleeves folded  
to the elbow, specs propped on his balding head.

The white horse, behind us on its hillside,  
is summoning the nerve for a great leap.  
Outside the parish hall, party workers  
in panamas and printed frocks sit round  
with iced lemonade, clipboards on the grass.  
Masses of bruised clouds move in from the east.

MAY 1997

# Unplugged

'The first colony of Empire was in fact England'  
— DICK GAUGHAN

The commons  
will be ploughed and planted  
with clover

St George's Hill  
sown  
with parsnips

for the earth  
is a common treasury  
Christ scorns the rich

Christ the chief leveller  
is coming  
in this age

and then we'll see  
levelling  
the hills

the valleys  
the monuments  
of the mighty

He will be here  
in us  
naked as Adam

not in the king  
or his army  
or his flunkeys

damn the king  
and his progeny  
to hell

the fires of perdition  
will lick  
at their feet

in us man & woman  
our bodies  
in common

sparks  
of a great glory  
under these ashes

We have dreamt  
a new heaven  
& a new shining earth

we have dreamt  
a new England

## The Halt

A cedar-scented bothy; a bronze plaque  
to the poet who saved it from the axe.  
A platform of ghosts, shifting in the mist—  
this morning muttering at the lateness  
of the only service this side of midday.  
Does it still exist? Is it late enough  
to risk a common ground with weary quips  
regarding leaves on the line, or failed points?

The train that finally sulks round the bend  
is new-liveried, owned by a hedge fund—  
the portly driver leaning out to shrug  
not looking forward to the downsizing.  
We're sealed in with fiddly laptops,  
a Walkman's hard hiss too close for comfort.

## The Show

Cars biddably trundled in lower gears.  
Red-faced cadets in yellow bibs hinted  
at vacant space with awkward semaphore.  
Shining ranks filed off down the sloping field.  
Some dallied: the whole rigmarole of home  
spilling out around a wide open boot;  
beer poured from cans into angled glasses,  
bread rolls in pods of foil, cold cuts of meat.

But most made their way on trampled-down paths  
to the canvas mirage, risen again  
from the soft brown clay like ancestral myths,  
drawn to the same horizon of flags  
flinching over marquees storied with crafts  
(this year over the blood-smeared haunted house).

## Cley Hill

*for those who marched for peace*

A field of stubble tapers off to the south  
like the fallen arrow-showers at Agincourt,  
bodies long since carted off or picked clean.  
Above us, the terraced slopes of Cley Hill.

The summit is flat under tons of sky.  
A sparrowhawk stills itself for the kill,  
then drops out of the blue like a stone.  
A tractor snarls across its muddy hump.

No signs or wonders are vouchsafed to us,  
nothing to show for the years of ascent.  
From my tartan rug I scan the shires  
to get the measure of a new refrain.

## Songs of the Plough

for Richard Price

Received out of darkness  
into beery hubbub,  
we dunted pint glasses,  
looked round for a plum seat.  
Work behind us, we'd do  
whatever we liked now  
(if what we *ought* to do  
didn't come and join us,  
like a difficult friend).  
Snug there in Bloomsbury,  
we sipped our good fortune—  
in the homes we hirpled  
back to (never *that* late),  
in the poets we knew,  
in our friendship that sprung  
from nice-but-no letters  
from *Gairfish*, to poring  
over tumbler-circled  
poems which winced under  
your quick, critical eye;  
in all that we loved from  
Vermeer to the Blue Nile,  
to the Soho restaurants  
like Ming's in Greek Street,  
where you boozily launched  
*Second Cities*—Donny's  
juiced Chicago postcards.

The high-stooled regulars  
flirted with the barmaids  
who were 'doing the UK'.  
The quiz machine scrolled up  
its pop culture teasers,

bleeping with smugness  
at its store of knowledge.  
What bothered us—our drunk  
who wanted to talk—was  
being ‘a Scot’ in England,  
émigrés, not exiles,  
in England’s crucible  
of the *un*privileged.  
Some nights we improvised  
a music hall routine,  
cranking it up at ‘time’  
as Donald and Donald,  
hamming up the accents  
and off-the-trainisms,  
daring soft southerners  
to boo us off the stage.

Other nights, over tired—  
peevied at reputations,  
New Gen and their ad men,  
rehearsing fantasies  
of more quality time  
in the public sector  
circus we performed in  
(or, gorged on house red  
and Veneziana  
in next door’s pizza place,  
indulging the baser  
fantasies that waken  
beneath blue-veined marble . . .).  
On good nights, though, most nights,  
after your sharp blether  
the kind of poetry

I wanted (He bevvied  
in this very howf,  
all fizzy with genius . . . )  
had raised its eyes beyond  
the jist of what went on.

#### POSTSCRIPT

For Katie's fifth birthday  
you drove down to see us  
in our Somerset nest.  
After a pell-mell lunch  
of weans and too much wine  
we angled for an hour  
for lit business, smuggled  
neat drams with the bundles  
of others' work to be  
scrutinised for the mag  
we laboured at awhile . . .  
Belle and Sebastian  
was your mellowing choice  
of disc; mine *A Handful  
Of Earth*—(we need voices  
we can actually *trust* . . .).

We were a decade on  
from the spic-and-span boys  
who worried over who  
we were away from home.  
Children, and work, and time,  
had loosened those concerns  
(cranked up plenty new ones . . .).

Years practising the art  
on the side may have made us  
better artists, but not  
necessarily  
better people—Auden  
got that one about right.  
So we're left with the cost—  
and that's our business.

## Southfields

*for my boys*

We share a makeshift room—  
boys running a fever,  
burning through the stations  
of the longest night; me  
in the corner of books,  
slumped in a tent of light  
with my notes on exile—  
*Barbarus hic ego sum . . .*  
The manners they'll put on  
will be Southern English  
but not without some trace,  
I'm sure, of England's charm—  
a quizzical half-smile  
in the face of extremes—  
my RC upbringing, say,  
a father who ignored  
'all that stuff about girls'  
a soap-smelling, too-close  
priest spiritualising  
the ink-drawings of sex,  
another to damn those  
who spilled the seed of life!  
(Let me be more at ease  
than those dogmatic souls . . .)  
Let God, if they choose one,  
be Barth's towards the end—  
not irreparable gulf  
between splendour and dirt,  
but impoverished, self-  
emptied, transfigured;  
and 'country' no more  
than a round at the bar  
for World Cup or Test Match—  
the aggro pantomime.

The nights will not always  
be as long, or fervent.  
You'll grow up, boys, despite  
my anxious fatherhood.  
Where doesn't much matter.  
What does, between ourselves,  
is where your heart is, not  
the land or language  
in which this narrative  
is enacted or dreamt . . .

Sleep tight, my darling boys,  
in the folds of England.  
For now, for aye, your home.