

Words of Mercury

Also by Alasdair Paterson

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The Floating World: Selected Poems 1973–1982

Brief Lives

On the Governing of Empires

Brumaire

in arcadia

Elsewhere or Thereabouts

Silent Years

My My My Life

Alasdair Paterson

WORDS OF MERCURY

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(*this address not for correspondence*)

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For my family, as ever

Somewhat in the dark

Sing me a song of a lad that is gone.

Say, could that lad be I?

—Robert Louis Stevenson

Jaundice, October 1947

This is what I began with:
a pallid sun wrapped up
in cumulus and struggling
towards its bonfire transfusions,
an afternoon of street lamps
already lit, leaves petering out
on cobbled wynds where
tyres and horseshoes slid.

Down the road
books foxed stealthily
on antiquarian shelves
and a damp lion rampant
dreamed of better days.

Down the road
sunflower husks clung to
next year's colour promise
and austere kitchens shone
with the idea of lemons.

Well, now or never:
I opened my mouth
for the first time
and breathed in yellow.

Memory game

1950, bomb sites and coal fires;
and Granny's doing it again, reading
nasty wall in our special book when
even pre-alphabetic me knows fine
it's not. She's tricky but I'm able for her:
nasty well, Granny, *nasty well*.
Then off I totter on a long road
to all the smirky prizegivings.

Wall/well: I'd learn what a difference
a single letter makes in the world
and how some words sit closer than
they look: like taxi/hearse, engines idling,
big and black, just a heartbeat apart.
For a year or two I thought Granny
put down our book and took a taxi
to her own funeral. Hadn't I seen her
beyond the gate, waving, bending low
to give a driver soft instructions?

Now I wonder: was it really *nasty wall*
all the time? I'll never know, but
grannies and words and memories:
you'd put nothing past them.

Lochend

Our terraced avenue is a Ryehill.
I don't know what that is,
or what's a Hermitage the school
gets called just round the corner.
We've walked further; Lochend Road
makes sense at least, since there's
water that sails bread and ducks,
where dogs take their cold baths.

Mum's friend lives up a dark stair
and gives me lemonade and biscuits,
a grown-up book with pictures.
Their quiet talk's not for my ears.

When daylight goes it's time for home.
On the way Mum asks what did I think.
I say her friend was nice and the biscuits
were nice and I liked the old lady too.

This seems to be a wrong answer.
The friend's mother had not long since
died. I still try not to think about it.

Another Granny

1961 or so. Father reports
his mother is very likely
not long for this world
and we're away West to see her.
Surprising news, considering
I'd thought she was dead
and had been all my life.
I don't remember questions;
I maybe suspected this was just
another thing I should have known
if I'd been paying attention.

Sunday. I'm in my new black blazer
badged with a castle on a crag
and a Latin motto that means
the view's better from up here, pal.
And here's the other granny,
Flora Paterson, née Robertson,
at large and good for another
few years, or so she says:
grey hair, spectacles, that's it,
sitting back in a red armchair
that might well have been green.
She's what – weary, wary,
graciously unimpressed ?
She's not short of grandsons
or sons - or the family obduracy
that still walks the earth
in me and mine. I'll never know
what the quarrel was about.

We're not to meet again, but later
Father says, not for the last time:
if I have a flaw, Aly – I know enough
by then to smile – *it's that I bear a grudge.*

Loch(end)

Lochend Road.

Lochend Park.

Lochend Loch.

Something not right
at all about a loch
at the end of itself,
about water the sun
never seemed able
to turn to gold or blue,
just pewter, always pewter
as I remember it,
with its grudged reflections:
father, mother, me.

One day the headline
in our paper let us know
how deep it had been all
the days I'd gazed into it
and played around it
and that was when I thought:
yes, something wrong
with Lochend Loch,
that began at the end of itself,
that hid itself in itself,
that had been in no great hurry
giving up the missing schoolboy.