

TWO POEMS



Fergus Allen

PALMERSTON PARK

As it comes back to me, the fountain
Had the form of an upturned fir-cone,
The scales gaping, the seed expelled.
Children ran around it and screamed,
But it had never been known to play—
Or not since the Diamond Jubilee.
It stood dead centre in the pond
And there was always a little water
Dribbling out of its rusty holes.
This was colonialism in decay.

Not that we knew it. Michael Collins
Was only a few years dead
And ourselves a few years alive.
Mr Brady was our tyrant;
He raged out of the gardeners' lair
To rule us with corporation by-laws.
In Bath chairs beside his barbered lawn
And beds of geranium and alyssum
Sat the men with trembling hands
Who somebody said had been "shell-shocked".

With their weak eyes and waxy faces
They made us shy, we wished them elsewhere.
What was all this about a war?
A story from the olden days.
But beyond the Corsican pines
A perfect ball flew upwards, paused
Against the summer blue and fell
Down to the voices of the pack,
Unworried by transubstantiation
Or prohibitory signs.

Some drank out of the iron cup
That was chained to the iron pillar,
While others held their hollowed hands
Under the gush from the lion's mouth.
The latter were mothers' boys,
Conscious of national anthems,
Flags and contagion. And reports
Of slap-bangs and percussion caps
Were not enough to undermine
A passing seagull's equipoise.

There are snakes below the gutter,
Said my friend Desmond, crossing his heart.
He pointed to a hard-faced house
That held up its turret as a threat
Among monkey puzzles and calp.
A madman lives there, he assured me,
Listen and you can hear him roar.
But when the wind dropped all I heard
Was a protestant dog, and trickling
Of rain-water into a shore.

Palmerston, Kenilworth and Grosvenor—
All those taken-for-granted names.
Was this an Indian cantonment,
Lee Enfields stacked and at the ready?
Five, and the bell for closing time
Rang like an untrue mawkish symbol.
At nine tomorrow Mr Brady,
After a drag, would grasp his stick
And ready himself to counter
The rising generation's crime.

THE FERRY

It was more of a whaler than a ferry,
Wide and heavily built, with such high gunwales
I'm sure you could have drifted out to sea in it
And come to no harm from waves or God.
The two gruff ferrymen were built to match,
Each with an oar a good fifteen foot long.

When the tide was running out they aimed
Obliquely up-river to the grain silos,
But on the flood they pointed the bows
Nearly east, more or less towards Faithlegg.
Either way they always managed to land us
By the concrete steps, slippery with silt.

It was a penny for a ten-minute crossing—
A hard pull on a diet of fried bread.
If either were taken bad we could be swept
On to the piers of the bridge a mile up
Or be carried off seawards in the rain
And whirled round in the eddies off Cheek Point.

They rowed the twelve of us across to Christendom,
Against whom we played cricket once a year.
Christendom were older but less well coached.
It was there I saw the man with a rook rifle,
Whose oily gleam and undecorated stock
Showed it to be a serious firearm.

As we passed him by with our cricket-bags
He summed us up with a look, and taking
A copying pencil from behind his ear
Made some kind of note on a cigarette packet.
With his olive face and derisive smile
He was the kind of man some women like.

Minutes later we heard a shot and, turning,
Saw black feathers falling out of a tree,
Then Saturday silence and the crunch
Of cricketing boots on the limestone dust.
Near the end of that match I took a wicket
When I tried out my unreliable leg break.

Going back to school we passed Clover Meats
And its sausage factory, running with blood;
Then the ferry again, before a storm
Wetted us through and had us dreaming forward
To the baths and Lifebuoy soap and, later,
The calm white coverlets of the dormitory.