

THE VICTORY WEEKEND  
MAY 1995/ MAY 1945



*Peter McDonald*

*Friday*

At six, we went to drink beer on the roof:  
we hoisted ourselves up the dusty steps  
that gave straight on to slates, and sat aloof  
from London, with its parapets and rooftops

stretching away in straight lines everywhere,  
on level terms now with the moving trees  
that stood together hugely in the square,  
then balanced tumblers gently on our knees

so that, while all around us still there rose  
the last of Friday's heat, now we would pass  
a half-hour until dusk in hunched repose,  
cold light between our fingers and cold glass

like talismans, or prizes lately won,  
tokens of lead and water turned to gold  
and turned to catch the sun, full of the sun;  
their wink and glint ours now to have and hold.

The glasses empty, we edged back again  
to switch on lights, and change, then wander down  
to streets that were still warm, with lane on lane  
of buses and hot cars all set for town

but nudging forward only by degrees,  
while we half-ran ahead, still hand in hand,  
keeping our balance with a cheeky ease,  
or flying, really, not needing to land;

we leaned into each other as we turned  
tight corners of short cuts, and rattled past

tourists in lines, the beggars that they spurned  
and we left standing, getting there at last

a minute or two early, out of breath,  
then up more staircases, against the odds  
to beat the curtain and perch just beneath  
the high roof on our cheap seats in the gods.

That night King Arthur and his Britons made  
their stand against the entire Saxon race,  
Woden and all those other gods of the shade  
who hid in woods and caves, in every dark place,

a standing army of warlocks, spirits, nymphs  
emerging naked from enchanted streams  
where they might tempt the hero with a glimpse  
of breasts in half-light, haunt him down in dreams,

then drag him to his ruin in the mere;  
the forest trees were something more than trees:  
one nick, and they might cry aloud for fear  
or anguish, one false note and they would seize

a man and send him reeling through the air;  
while music zoomed and buzzed and sang up high  
bad spirits and good, that flitted everywhere,  
parleyed and fought across a painted sky.

After his unsurprising victory  
brought the land back to Arthur mile by mile,  
from cliffs far over the delighted sea  
out came at last the Spirit of the Isle

who sang to Purcell's music Dryden's words  
that rose in measure to the planets above  
and swept on inland, to the flocks and herds  
at peace in the seat of pleasure and of love,

in time with pastoral, a new-blooded nation  
ready to stretch now into its great year  
with harmony and thunder, jubilation,  
and minds serene and calm and free from fear.

We left there, jittery with spectacle  
and full of music, at the music's speed;  
London transfigured, half a miracle,  
but half something expected, took the lead

and steered us both, in giddy loops, zig-zags,  
to the flat, to bed, and through the panoply  
of streets packed out with foreigners and flags  
in a city all dressed up for victory.

### *Saturday*

Wellington, Blenheim, Spitfire, Hurricane:  
the name for each familiar silhouette  
labouring like a model aeroplane  
up there in thin formation, was pre-set

in what I learned, like most boys of my age,  
from war-comics, from films on TV,  
when fighting men would slash the screen and page  
with blinding fire, or screams of agony

(exotic cries from Germans or Japanese  
at the extremities of pain and fear  
were more grist to the mill—we took up these  
in playgrounds where the War went on all year,

when stockpiled arms were both elaborate  
and fiercely imagined, every shell  
had its right calibre, all accurate  
as little pedants moved in for the kill.)

Knowing their names, I pored over the sky  
and, as the planes kept up their stately pace,  
I stood in close to you, watching them fly  
over us and away, until no trace

was left in clouds or the resounding air  
of shapes familiar fifty years ago,  
engines once listened out for everywhere,  
a drum and buzz distinct from the known, low

thrumming of German bombers on the nights  
when London took a pasting and took fire,  
cascades of bombs setting its heart alight  
to leave it by daytime a smouldering pyre

with figures like stick-figures in attendance  
—fire hoses and tin helmets, stretcher-men  
to bear away the dead with routine patience,  
black tons of rubble, miles of rot and ruin—

and life resuming stubbornly all around  
with boredom and endurance hedging bets  
on who would win the day, and the days drowned  
in weak beer, wrapped in smoke from cigarettes.

When I was born, the whole show had been over  
for seventeen years; a new and stilted war  
was being played behind-hand, under cover,  
with history's chessmen ready everywhere:

Castro and Kennedy, the Bay of Pigs;  
Berlin smashed and possessed and cut in two:  
prowled over by B-52s and MIGs,  
Europe was scarcely likely to pull through,

so the last War went into storybooks,  
and boys pretending to be soldiers crept  
up on each other, while jumpily in nooks  
and crannies all the stealthy missiles slept

their way through a strange peacetime, and through whole  
decades of stand-off, bluff, and false alarm,  
as I slogged out the long campaign through school  
and won at last, having come to no real harm.

Now you and I watched ribbons dip and swag  
where fast jets smashed and screamed over the Mall,  
spreading the colours of the Union Flag  
behind them in a single billowy trail

that seemed to be taken up all through the crowd —  
those hats and t-shirts in red, white, and blue,  
the streamers and the shell-suits, those pale, proud  
faces of a belated, happy few

in thousands upon thousands, in one place,  
as if the War was ending for the first time  
here and today, as if the closest race  
was won, and peace was novel and sublime

as food or beer or sunshine or deep sleep  
to men starved and exhausted and worked dumb  
who know for now the prize is theirs to keep,  
the day of execution will not come.

All fantasy: their fantasies; my own;  
the show an exercise in make-believe  
disguised as memory; all the overblown  
music and glitter of a coarse, naive

history-carnival with its royalty  
and TV cameras, but no catch of pain;  
cheap victory; boozy fellowship; a free  
people forgetting everything again

in a rush, as flags wave and the songs are sung  
just like before, but nothing like before:  
something was wrong, or I was in the wrong  
place, but I needed to hear and see no more,

I don't know why. That day, we walked for miles  
out through the celebrations and away  
to an empty City, the Barbican, St Giles  
dwarfed there in Cripplegate, its stones awry

and built over with brick, since the bombs burst  
everything open, scattering the bones  
of Milton and John Foxe with fire and tempest  
where now only the blind sunlight bore down.

We walked up Moorgate then to Bunhill Fields,  
alone with a hundred thousand of the dead  
jumbled beneath our feet, where old ground yields  
nothing—not an inch—to the heaviest tread,

the same hard earth where, packed away, the crazed  
bones of William Blake are lying deep  
and sightless in oblivion, unraised  
for ever in unmarked and boundless sleep,

so steady they were not shaken by the bombs  
those years ago, so set and straitly laid  
that they will be secure, whatever comes  
to blast or blitz the city where they hide

in the long nonsense of futurity  
when memory will forget itself, let go,  
and leave the dead to their conspiracy  
of quietness, mute echo, afterglow.

Tired out, we dawdled back towards the crowds  
on holiday, like us, while the May sun  
cast from behind a pinkish stream of clouds  
its sharp, indifferent light on everyone.

### *Sunday*

The narrow and wide streets were trodden grass  
between marquees and stages in Hyde Park  
as you and I edged slowly through the mass  
of trippers who had chosen to embark,

like us, for the improvised and busy town  
islanded here in green, where stalls and tents  
stood in straight ranks, good servants of the Crown,  
for veterans in their different regiments

who gathered like so many new recruits,  
waiting for something—for unlikely showers,  
with their umbrellas, blazers and lounge-suits  
slightly too large; for tea at all hours,

or for a known face to approach and speak  
in a familiar language some good word  
to make sense in the hubbub, however weak  
that voice, or however poorly it was heard.

Their Sunday glances searched and drew a blank,  
for we were on our way home, by midday,  
and hurried on, giving neither name nor rank,  
against the crowd's flow, two specks in its way,

to find ourselves on time for the train back  
to Bristol, riding westward on our own  
(or nearly) down the miles of Brunel's track  
away from the weekend, away from London,

and landed before long in the attic space  
that looked straight into clouds over the Downs,  
where we and the great elms sat face to face  
with ringdoves, finches, rooks in their black gowns,

where a purlin squeaked and scraked in gusts of wind  
and rooftiles thrummed through days and nights of rain,  
but where now only thin shadows inclined  
across the carpet, as every windowpane

fielded a sky full of the sun, a glare  
in which the birds were tiny shadows, strafed  
with light, while through that blanket fire, the blare  
of high coarse voices as they chased and chafed

—seagulls in raiding-parties from the coast—  
haunted the air, became the daylight's sound,  
but an all-clear too, a sign we had not lost,  
sharp and intact, re-echoing all around.

Wrapped up in peace, I was nearly twelve years old,  
waiting for school to finish for the day:  
rain in the light, the weather turning cold,  
traffic outside with traffic in its way

not moving, locked on the Stranmillis Road,  
on the Malone and Lisburn Roads, stacked down  
to Shaftesbury Square, or where some episode  
or other must have closed the heart of town,

and taking it for granted, thinking past  
diversions and stopped buses, through road-blocks  
and windows strapped with tape against the blast  
of bombs not yet exploded, or the shocks

that glass was heir to; I would sit and wait  
for twenty to four, the bell, and day-release,  
the slow trek across town to be home late,  
through desolation with the name of peace,

a burst map of the past, claims and admissions,  
abstracted history cracked up, falling in  
with the blown brick and concrete, dull attritions  
of a war I didn't start and couldn't win.

The burn of sunset now, two decades on,  
lit miles of sky in coral and louder red:  
I was safe; the past was over; the sun shone  
pitilessly on me and on all the dead,

for this was pastoral; I could almost see  
the dead together in a wall of light,  
closing their hearts, climbing away from me,  
into a ghost-glare early in the night,

in march-past, in a simple, strict parade,  
until the fireworks split up in the dark,  
each flash and blur, each crack and sudden fade  
of colour an after-image, a faint mark

coming and going in the uncurtained room  
where we both sat it out, up in the air,  
in the rush and rustle, click and smack and boom  
of lights as they sprayed and scattered everywhere.