

*Joie de vivre*



PAUL BAILEY

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For David Perry and Tim Dee  
*inquisitive spirits*

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It was one of those bleak days when you just wonder what you're on earth for in the first place and why you're going to so much trouble to stay here.

– Georges Simenon, *Maigret at Picratt's*,  
translated by William Hobson

I have passed all my days in London . . . the innumerable trades, tradesmen, coaches, wagons, playhouses, all the bustle and wickedness round about Covent Garden, the very women of the Town, the Watchmen, drunken scenes, rattles – life awake, if you awake, at all hours of the night. I often shed tears in the motley Strand from fullness of joy at so much Life.

– Charles Lamb in a letter to William Wordsworth,  
declining an offer to visit Cumberland, 1801

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## For J.

Our love's defined by laughter now.  
 The sound of it warms us.  
 It fills the house on our happiest days.  
 You'd never guess, if you chanced upon us,  
 that once we had sorrowing grief in common.

November 28, 2020

## Joie de vivre

I have a battery that keeps me ticking.  
I think I take at least twenty pills a day.  
I laugh when I can and weep when I must.  
I love and am loved. Oh, it ought to become a psalm,  
this catalogue I'm setting down  
with measured sorrow and delight  
in the very first hour of an April morning.

It's All Fools' Day right now.  
I listen to my waste making its way  
into the stoma that I've had to wear  
for ten confusing months  
and almost marvel at the sound it's making.

My body's not what it was.  
It's been opened up and put back together  
too many discomfoting times.  
It seems a stranger to me when I need to look at it.

There are hyacinths and tulips in the garden  
and a few distraught daffodils  
and the untrustworthy camellia's about to blossom.

April 1, 2020

## Dawning

I awoke this morning curled like a foetus.

It was as if I'd been encased again –  
dependent upon my mother's breath  
on some invisible winter's day  
before I was hauled out into a world  
of startling light  
I was hesitant to enter

but which now, many seasons later,  
I am reluctant to leave.

## The Wanderer

At first, I thought he was setting off for work each morning, but as the years went by I came to realise that the man who was customarily dressed in black and never without a cigarette had no job to go to. He was walking with a purpose to nowhere in particular.

It continues to be his destination, although his stride remains purposeful. There's determination in his features as he marches forward, stabbing at his mouth with the cigarette he has recently lit from the glow of its predecessor. On he goes, up and down the streets of the neighbourhood, before returning to the house five doors from mine where he rents a flat or a furnished room, perhaps.

I have often wondered where and how he acquires his money, because smoking to excess is a costly habit. It could be that he was left a substantial sum by a parent or relative which he has invested wisely and that his stark manner of living belies his wealth. I have met shabbily dressed rich people, but none of them seemed as self-contained as he is. It's as if the world around him is a mere backdrop to his overriding concern of walking with fortitude in a series of circles.

Or so I imagined, or persuaded myself to believe, until last July, when I saw him in what, for me, was a surprising situation. The strange individual I had been observing for over a decade from the vantage of my writing table by the window had stopped in the street and was talking to someone. I was returning from the dentist, I remember, and had not anticipated what was happening. I began to walk at a slower pace as I approached the man with the perpetual cigarette and the chic young woman, whose work involves meetings with gentlemen callers during the course of the day, and discovered that they were speaking Polish, he with conspicuous animation. She was holding her pampered toy dog to her generous bosom and was laughing loudly at something he'd

said. He was laughing, too, between puffs, and his eyes, usually so indifferent to the passing scene, were glittering. I was startled, I admit, by this sudden, spontaneous display of happiness. I was tempted for a second to greet them in their language and add something inconsequential about the lovely weather, but caution prevailed and I walked on, their laughter continuing behind me.

It's October now, and the steadfast walker is as he always was before that hot summer afternoon. He looks like Raskolnikov again. The constant rain of the past few days hasn't deterred him. He has a hooded black jacket and even an umbrella. There's no hint of subdued or forthcoming laughter in his haggard face. He is himself once more, or so I care to imagine – the solitary mystic with the absurd ambition to walk onwards and ever onwards towards something on the horizon only he can see.

## Snapshot

*For Georgina Hammick*

Someone has taken a photograph of them  
on a Sunday afternoon, I imagine,  
in a London park.

She's wearing a cloche hat.  
He's in his shirtsleeves, looking almost happy,  
sitting beside her on the summer grass.

Who took the picture?  
A friend, or an obliging stranger,  
nearly a century ago?

The woman's my mother and the almost-happy man,  
smiling rather against his will,  
is her husband-to-be.

She would learn, in their twenty years of marriage,  
that almost-happiness  
was the best they could ever bargain for.



## Wartime

There were six sardines in the tin  
and five of us at the kitchen table.  
Mother mashed up the fishes with margarine  
and portioned them out on toast.

This was our special treat –  
the last we enjoyed in the house  
that would be rubble in the morning.

## Rejuvenation

I never dreamed that I'd grow old.  
An early death was on the cards  
or in the stars, for me.

There are days now when I wish  
I'd given up the ghost  
or met my Maker –  
whoever that is –  
with someone weeping at my bedside  
long years ago.

But, what the fuck, I'm here –  
sustained by medicine and metal –  
and writing the poetry  
I knew I'd write, but didn't,  
before I evaporated  
at the age of thirty,  
or thirty-one at the latest  
at a gasping pinch.

Ah, the dulcet clichés  
of the Romantic imagination.

Death's a vivid acquaintance.  
He, she or they is creeping up on me.

I think that I've become a master of evasion.