

by the same author

AT THE JERUSALEM
TRESPASSES
A DISTANT LIKENESS
PETER SMART'S CONFESSIONS
OLD SOLDIERS
GABRIEL'S LAMENT
SUGAR CANE
KITTY AND VIRGIL
UNCLE RUDOLF
CHAPMAN'S ODYSSEY
THE PRINCE'S BOY

AN ENGLISH MADAM
THREE QUEER LIVES
AN IMMACULATE MISTAKE
A DOG'S LIFE

PAUL BAILEY

Inheritance

© editions

For Jeremy

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'Inheritance' is dedicated to a long-suffering and exceptional human being.

There is nothing fine about being a child; it is fine, when we are old, to look back to when we were children.

– Cesare Pavese, *This Business of Living*

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For J.

This coming-together, this sweetness,
this stopping-of-clocks for unwatched hours
might be the gift of grief:
a blessing from two ghosts.

Such a warm union of eyes and hands –
now focused, now attached –
might be their benison:
our somewhere from their nowhere.

Your hair looks startled after sleep.
My morning's task's to calm it.
This is a gesture that might not have been
without their absence.

Inheritance

Despair's a curious thing to give a child.
It was my father's gift to me
times beyond numbering.

He gave it casually, in frowns and sighs,
with never any cause for decoration
or fancy wrapping.

His silences were like fugues to me,
their resonance composed of other silences
too terrible for voicing.

That was his way with his youngest son
who had battled for life at the age of four
and was still surviving.

He'd earned his gloom in Flanders, in the mud.
This much I learned on his last night alive
when he couldn't stop talking.

Lullaby

An illness took my voice away.
I listened and I listened and I listened
to catch each precious word I couldn't speak.

The nurses spoke to me and sang to me
welcoming me back with gentleness
to where I was before the stone lodged in my throat.

'This little boy deserves a lullaby,' the matron said.
'See that he gets one every night.'
The nurses, Joan and Mabel, honoured her command.

My voice returned to me, making a purer sound.
I was released into the world of speech once more,
hoping to hear a lullaby again.

Gaiety

Some people are sustained by sorrow.
I think I'm one of them.
That's why I laugh so much.
That's why I'm called a clown.
And that's the deep dark reason why
I am accounted frivolous.

I came back from the dead when I was four
with a brand-new voice to mark my resurrection.
It had a mocking sound to it, my mother said,
when it wasn't being miserable.
I was a funny little so-and-so, in her opinion.

I've never lost that sound, though often I have wanted to.
It was extinction's gift to me.
It camouflages every sorrow I've survived.

The Prelude

Poets were sissies when I was a kid.
They had nancy-boy feelings. They weren't like men.
It stood to reason.

Poets were scroungers when I was a kid.
They were poor as church mice. They lived off others.
You couldn't trust them.

Poets were layabouts when I was a kid.
They were born bone idle. They were less than useless.
Just heed the warning.

Poets were this and poets were that when I was a kid.
They weren't good people. They were not like us.
That was for certain.

Poets were worse than tarts when I was a kid.
They didn't have morals. They knew no shame.
They spread diseases.

The things I was told about poets when I was a kid
made them sound heavenly. I craved their strangeness,
their wilful disorder. I wanted to be like them
if it were possible.

I think I was told these things about poets when I was a kid
because the tellers loved me and cared for me
after their fashion.

Soap and Water

Imagine a shrimp of a boy encased in a skinny frame.
'His head's seldom out of a book,' he hears people say of him.
'He won't grow up to be big and strong if he carries on like that.'

He has a granny who never looks really clean to him,
not in the really clean way his mother looks really clean
or scrubbed to a shine like all but one of the nurses
who helped him to fight for his life when he was four years old.

It's a sunshiny day in the summer of 1944
and his dirty granny is telling him to put his skates on
and get out of bed, for there is serious work to be done.
She has a gentleman's body to wash.

Imagine a boy of seven puzzling over these words.
He washes himself, after all, as he's been taught to, over and over,
by his really clean mother, so why can't a gentleman do the same?
He asks his granny that question and she mumbles back
that curiosity killed the cat and beggars can't be choosers.

He's in the dark now with her talk of cats and beggars.
He'll ask the gentleman himself,
who'll tell him.

Or so he hopes as his granny takes him by the hand
to the very grand house at the top of the hilly street
which belongs, she says, to a family called Southampton.

'We're expecting you, Emily,' says the man who opens the door.
He's wearing a black suit and a black tie
which strikes the boy as a little bit funny
considering how hot it is already.
'Mr George is as ready, Emily, as he'll ever be
and waiting for your kind attention on the table.'

The boy is flustered. Why is this gentleman,
this Mr George, waiting on a table for a dirty old woman
to wash him? His granny smells of the snuff
she sniffs up her nose. It's given her a yellow moustache
that scrubbing can't get rid of.

'We've put him in the dining room, his favourite in the house.'
The man in black is smiling as he speaks.
'He loved his food and drink, did Mr George,'
says Emily. 'I waited on him many times.'

Imagine what the skinny shrimp sees next.
The dining room's enormous. So's the table, too,
that seems to stretch for miles. In its centre,
under a clean white sheet or tablecloth,
lies something bulky.

The man in black whisks off the sheet or cloth,
saying 'Hey presto, Emily!'

Imagine, if you can, the boy's surprise
the moment the gentleman's revealed. He wonders why
this Mr George forgot to dress that morning,
what made him settle for his birthday suit.

A maid brings in a bowl of water.
She puts it on the endless table.
Another carries towels, a flannel, and a slab of reddish soap
that's known as Lifebuoy.

The gentleman who liked his food and drink
does not even move when the dirty granny
starts washing his very fat and purple body.
'There's a lot of him to clean,' she says.
'God rest his soul.'

She cleans and wipes his chest and tummy,
his arms and legs and feet. It's time to turn him over,
she tells the man in black. A second man appears,
out of the shadows, to offer his assistance.
They have a struggle. 'Heave ho!' they say,
and Mr George is lying upside down
while dirty granny squeezes out the flannel
she's just used on his thingummy and balls.

The shrimp who's seven and six months
looks on as his dirty old granny –
who reeks of snuff and sweat and the stout
she's fond of drinking –
gives the gentleman a 'thorough scour'.
'He's made a motion,' she informs the man in black.
'They all do at the end. It's only natural.'

Imagine the little boy's state of mind
when he hears his dirty granny declare
'He's sweet and lovely for his Maker now'
as she sprays the body with lavender cologne.

He has witnessed something strange and thinks he knows
it has to be doing with death and not feeling free
to play in the sunshine.

That night, in his bed in dirty granny's cottage,
he hears himself crying softly for his very clean mother
who's in London hiding from the doodlebugs.

He wakes in the faintness before dawn. He's feeling happy
and warm
before he becomes aware of his thingummy trickling.
He's done it again. The sheet is wet and so are his pyjamas.
He's a bad boy who has to be punished.
It's what he deserves, his granny will tell him
as she plunges his head into the wetness he's made
that she's sprinkled with pepper.

Imagine.

Passion

My father's rolling a cigarette. My mother's knitting.
There's silence between them, except for the clickety-clack
of her needles.

He pours himself another beer. She wonders why
without ever asking the question. He hears it even so
since he's alert to all the things she doesn't say.

It's now he calls her Woman. She loathes the word.
Woman, he snarls again. Be quiet, Woman.
She goes on knitting.

I'm in the corner, reading. Although I'm only ten
they've named me the Professor. Neither of them knows
how much I see of their unhappiness

as I look up from my book. I try to picture them
as they must have been once, desperate to clutch each other
like Romeo and Juliet in a place called Verona.