

## Poems of Remembrance 2020

Or so I was told....

Not a memory of mine, though I was there,  
one of a very ordinary little family group,  
just Mum, big sister (all of four years old!) and we twins barely seven months.  
And there it could've ended,  
but for the pity of one young man whom we would come to call the enemy.  
Half way home from the beach; halfway across the bridge from East to West Looe.  
He too on his way home, not from making sandcastles,  
but offloading his bombs on the target he'd been given.  
Were we to be part of the target? What did his orders say?  
He had us in his sights. So close my sister looked him in eyes.  
Was it that which in the split second took his finger off the trigger?  
Now here I am alone to recall the memory which I don't have, of something he didn't do.  
Did he get home too? What picture did his memory keep bringing back  
of that moment when he held our life in his hands,  
and pity won the day?

*Colin James*

### **Martha and Incas**

Two birds died in Cincinnati Zoo:  
a pigeon and a parrot.

A photograph exists in which  
they're lying stuffed and rigid

as a pair of rolled-up panama hats  
not wanted on the voyage.

The sleeker bird  
(a cousin of the Mourning Dove),

relict of flocks so populous  
they could advance for days

on fronts a mile wide,  
darkening the sky, and dense

enough that just to thrash  
the seething air would bag a brace,

in death recalls the bearing  
of a lesser Hapsburg duchess,

while the other bird, the gaudy one,  
still shows the Mannerist hues

that moved James Audubon  
to cram the image seven times

within the folio plate  
where now we see the only parrot

of the dandy eastern seaboard  
as it might have been before the day

in winter 1918 when  
in a Cincinnati cell the world,

unnoticed and unnoticeably,  
became a little greyer.

That in September '14  
the pigeon also'd died there

was not coincidental,  
in the main part.

Martha, the last known living Passenger Pigeon died in captivity on Sept 14 1914  
Incas, the last known living Carolina Parakeet died in captivity on Feb 21<sup>st</sup> 1918

*Martin Haslam*

Pandemic Park

In the park today  
Children were running  
Everywhere without a care  
For their distance.  
Coloured bicycles left by the paths  
Pointed out  
Even more fun elsewhere.  
Parents were looking on  
Benevolently  
Indulging the spaces with chat  
It was as if they had never emptied  
And no-one was missing.

*David Hodgson*

Puppets  
*(Reflections on World War One)*

My mouth is dry,  
my palms are sweaty,  
I am in a dream,  
a mere nightmare.  
But then I blink.

My life slows and my pulse quickens,  
a memory of every soul I touched and talked to,  
flashes in my mind.  
But then I blink.

My friends, companions, comrades fall around me like puppets with their strings cut,  
Their last memories of this nightmare land,  
Where the air is damp and spikes grow out of the ground, like a twisted crop,  
Seared into my mind like a hot poker.  
But then I blink.

I made it here at last,  
The land where men do not reach,  
The light mumbles, the noise ever present,  
Like fireworks on New Year's Eve.  
But then I blink

Something moves,  
A shadow,  
A figure,  
A fear,  
A flicker of light,  
A prayer.  
But then I blink

*Mhairi Lochhead*

The Statistic

It shouldn't have happened.  
She'd done nothing wrong.  
Except do her job,  
conscientiously.

The long hours were demanded.  
The tiredness accepted.  
No patient objected  
The Nation expected

Their worried eyes pleading,  
behind plastic prisons,  
Her heart and soul bleeding  
No, it's just not enough

The double shift's, "madness!"  
"But it's only the tiredness.  
We must beat the virus.  
I'll be fine in a minute"

The Nation said thank you  
Every Thursday at eight  
But, was it too late?  
"No, I'm good, really."

Her family said, "it shouldn't have happened"  
"She'd done nothing wrong"  
Why wasn't she protected?  
Wasn't she important?

The Nation stopped clapping  
Every Thursday at eight  
But, for an invisible Nurse  
It was already too late.

*John Boylan*

7 x 7

Death is always a memory-jogger  
Whether you've had The Close Shave  
Are living with it in your body right now  
Or have felt the dark hole of the grave

For someone else.

The space vacated, the love lost  
The place where she lingered  
The memory of touch and smells  
The life light-fingered

From your grasp.

Did you appreciate autumnal colours?  
Humour between friends?  
That lover's look across the room  
Designed to always mend

Your torn-apart heart.

The quality, the granularity, the texture  
The kaleidoscope of joy and pain  
The senses assaulted and overloaded  
The precious tears, the long-lost refrain

From history's tunnel.

Beware nostalgia's ditch:  
Falling, you recreate the past  
To compensate for random futures  
That didn't give what you asked

Despite earnest petitions.

The terraced houses sliding downhill  
The Morris Minors parked outside  
The cycling gangs  
The random door-knocking, running to hide

Quickly, laughing, fearful.

If I try hard  
I recollect empty blue skies

A diabetic father fainting in the living room  
Welcoming grandmas with hazelnut brown eyes

Melting, buttered crumpets.

The divorce at 14  
The deaths at 24 and 28  
The lives that flickered and then vanished  
The questions, the places where you simply wait

And ponder mortality.

Will I be here next year?  
Standing in the cold  
Staring at leaves falling  
With the weight of the world

On their shoulders.

The fear of regret  
The damning of deceit  
The door to the past, bolted  
The words you could not speak

Echoing in silence.

There is a key (I used it once)  
Creaking locks cracked, light shone through  
I offered my shameful past, you smiled  
Accepted it as truth

7x7

*Peter Barrett*

Conversation with a ghost

Why the tears then? We never met...

I know that. I can't explain.  
But you were my uncle before I was there to be your nephew.  
You started just a name,  
    Joe, the big brother Dad adored, but never talked about.  
Until you came to life - well, you know what I mean - when I read your thoughts  
    on the eve of the Somme and beyond.  
You were glad you were hit and out of danger, or so you thought.  
Not even two years further on and you're hit again – the fourth time, wasn't it?  
That's the one that sent you to the cemetery at Loos where I am standing now,  
    reading your name, engraved on marble.  
And I just can't hold back those tears...

*Colin James*