

WORK, ETC
Jean Sprackland

Jean Sprackland was commissioned by Manchester Literature Festival to produce a series of poems responding to the exhibition *Ford Madox Brown Pre-Raphaelite Pioneer* at Manchester Art Gallery. The resulting poems *WORK, ETC* were performed at a special event as part of Manchester Literature Festival at Manchester Art Gallery on Tuesday 18th October 2011.

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THE LAST OF ENGLAND

In the harbour the ropes are keening,
the boat jitters on the nerves of the wind.
Coming on board, she slips, but steadies herself –
he's too deep in his own shadow to notice.

Out at sea, the rain twists and snaps
like a wet sheet dragged writhing from the line.
The wind seizes her thin umbrella,
whips her ribbons across his face.

The tremendous muscle of the sea
clenches and flexes beneath them.
The smell of salt and sickness, the squall
of a child, an old man's toothless prayer.

They screw their eyes against the gale
to catch a final glimpse. But by now
a dark judgement of sky and water
has pressed the cliffs thin as a document.

He's hunched and wretched with loss.
But she's watching another horizon.
She slips her hand under her coat
to feel the warm future folded there.

THE HAYFIELD

We worked that field like a factory floor,
scything till our hands bled
and our arms were numb and trembling.
We bore the weight of August on our backs.
The horses coughed and sweated. The old cart
racketed over the rough ground.
The young ones raked, the infants swept the scraps;
they snivelled from the dust and too much sun.
We worked that field like a coal seam,

and maybe it was nothing more than thirst
made the spilling moonlight look like cool milk.
Maybe it was just the heat of the day
seemed to turn the sky to sea-glass
and the piled hay pink as coral.

TAKE YOUR SON, SIR

Her cheeks were flushed with that final fever;
I smelt the soap and the blood.
A pane of silence stood between us;
the words like ice on my tongue.

She was still as a headstone in that gown;
Her rebuke was the marble child.
And the gown was somehow made white again
and the child's blue gaze was mine.

Behind them, a broken constellation,
a glass halo, a shrunken room;
and me with my hopeless open arms
and my smile like a poor excuse.

THE ENGLISH BOY

Of the Kingdom of Childhood he is absolute monarch.
He possesses the orb and the sceptre.
They are made of humble stuff – wood and leather –
but they are his, and he would yield them to no one.

Does it matter that his robes are calico?
Who cares if there's dirt under his fingernails?
He has been anointed by the sun and the wind
and his lips are scarlet with authority.

No one reigns over this kingdom for long.
Like many princes, he'll be dead by twenty.
But for now, he's crowned with straw, and he is sovereign
of the nursery, the woods, his father's eye.

THE BROMLEY FAMILY

Every family album has one of these:

a moment under a blue-enough tree

the arguments brought into the garden

you can practically smell the brothers

Someone is having a birthday:

the matriarch in velvet furniture

the roses, bickering as usual

remember when that dog was all the rage?

A moment when everyone comes together:

the book where he skinned his knees as a boy

even a vase of hands

its paws on her favourite bonnet

This is how they were, back then:

the new sky, sleek with happiness

Clara had such a sense of ribbon

the wife so young, little more than a pup

WORK

The street, which only yesterday
was simple as a tugged forelock,
is opened to reveal a muddy underlife.
But the navvy has no time to stand
and contemplate – he's paid by the piece,
and his hands are blistered from forcing the shovel.

*Man, observes the gentleman Carlyle,
is a tool-using animal. Without tools he is nothing,
with tools he is all.*

Here comes the girl and her brats,
bringing bread and cheese and beer.
Two ragged old mongrels follow, scrapping
and lifting their legs wherever they choose.
The clang of the blade against rock,
the curses, the cutting again.

Carlyle taps his cane in solidarity.
Every noble work is at first impossible.

One passing lady takes a curious look;
another tilts her parasol against the noise,
the smell of sweat, the grease and foul water.
So this is what they mean by progress!
Hampstead used to be such a peaceful place.
Still, she thinks, with a sidelong glance,
the men seem frightfully energetic,
and their hands, though certainly not clever,
must be strong...

Carlyle leans on the railing,
feels the sun on his face.
*Blessed is he who has found his work:
let him ask no other blessedness.*