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Ray Crump

## The Tinder Box – Sparks of Poetry

IT WAS THE TINDER BOX ITSELF that intrigued me. Not quite knowing what it was made it magical. The soldier sat by the roadside and showed it to me. The sparks in the dark, the sooty sky, cast a spell on my post-infancy. A rag book with pinking-sheared edges. A giant bumble bee at the window, my mother lying scared in the bed. She took me to have a haircut; a white-haired old man in his back parlour dipped buttered crusts in his tea while I waited until he cut my curls. Notting Hill, post-war, so many house-fronts hung with peeling paint like ragged lace. Dense fog. Peter Pan in Holland Park, pretty smock, tuneful pipe. Outside Holland Park tube station the wind tossed multi-tinted bus tickets into a flashing mosaic in the air. Fragment memories. Superman at Saturday morning pictures, b/w, freaked me out. The goodies and the baddies; cowboys thundering round the bend in pursuit of fair play; cheered and hissed by disparate groups of boys and girls, loose chains, long gone unlinked.

Poetry lives in the heart before it is found on the page. Nursery rhymes come first to us, I guess, as verse form, sing-song into sense, rhythm into mind, the story and the dream, fictive elements whose characters and properties foster and charm infant sensibility. Long may their incantation endure.

The junior choir is swept off in a coach to a grand educational edifice, a broad-winged school with tower, quite unlike our motley cluster of red brick schoolrooms, where swallows nested, too low, on the open-topped wooden wall of the outside loo, so that some fool tore the mud cup down, broke the little white eggs. My mother had hastily packed me brown bread with hard boiled egg which, undercooked, spurted yellow yolk onto my grey flannel, grown-up, stuffy trousers where we sat for lunch on the wide grass lawns. There was a girl from another school, stood behind, above me on the stage where the choirs were arranged (to

avoid much shuffling on and off, I now see). I watched her sing Masefield with her sisters; "I must go down to the sea again...." ..... "..... and the seagulls ca - au - au - alling...". It is somewhat disappointing that Kipling's 'If' is the most popular traditional poem in this country. That work is more a political rant which champions upright conceit of manhood, than a poem. Give me Masefield's 'Cargoes' anyday.

On the way home from school, in summer, I would pass aside into a strip of uncut field beside the community hall, there to lay on my back and squint through lashes, chewing a grass stem the while, at the skylark hovering high, warbling and twittering at the golden sun. (I am grateful now, that this innocent poetic idyll was not followed by my dying in a foreign field.) Shelley's 'Ode to a Skylark' seems in its second line to be fully emblematic of the 'anti-poetic' sense of poetic composition; "Bird thou never wert." It would be pretentious of me to expand on this as I am not a learned person, being more of a 'little bird' who may be tilting at the sun.

Did I have a notebook wherein first, untutored efforts at poetry were inscribed? I have to advance to student 'independence' and the acquisition of a portable typewriter to be reminded of the flush of inspiration engendered by the new-found ability to publish poems on the page before me. That poetic voice is probably echoic, as much musical as literary and sings youthful rapture, enthralled and sensuous. Most of those poems are lost and are no loss, but I still naively thrill to publish, to print as I write.

At art school in London, I caught a small room performance by Bert Jansch, the Scottish guitarist songwriter and an equally intense poetry reading by a young Brian Patten.

Michael Grant, a live poet and tutor at the University of Kent, was a welcome influence on my versifying. One of the old school, he opened my eyes to the beauty of words and phrase, of image and scansion in modern poetry, French, English and American but I was a sixties type, alienated and enthralled by the mysterious, esoteric cult awareness of

that volatile era, and fell through the cracks, though not before somehow winding up drinking cognac from a jam jar in Tim Longville's kitchen and subsequently throwing parts of an iron bedstead over the wall at some women's college windows. No harm done; we missed.

A woolly-haired, hippy street poet in Ladbroke Grove chanting;

“Banana, ba-na-na, banana, ba-na-na.....”

Andrew Crozier, one of the most charming and friendly poet souls I ever met, came to see me in a Camberwell basement lodging where we chatted poetry and now I feel, saddened by his passing, that's where I should have connected and realised the value of writing, of keeping in touch with the scene. There were many of Peter Pan's “lost boys” in that time...

In Hackney, East London, I connected with a poetry group called Ignition, run by poet Ed Simpson from his home. Poets of varied hues came from across the city to this al fresco venue and it was a happening scene. Good parties there, too long gone.

So now, I look at my poetry shelf and am aghast at its gaps. I am a ghost of yesteryear with a small body of my own work. I have been traced and hooked, almost by accident. The tinder box sits in my nervous hands. Sparks of poetry.

## Author Info

Raymond Crump was swept away on London's flood wherefrom he surfaced, south of the river, with a toehold on the poet's life like that of the protagonist of Shelley's *Alastor*. He divides his time between working as a day-centre driver, seeking new inspiration and worrying about what happened to Villon.