

*Who Will Put the House to Sleep?*

**A selection of poems**

**by**

**Anne Caldwell**

**May 2008**

## **List of Poems**

- 1. The Redwoods**
- 2. Lunch Hours**
- 3. For Ten Years**
- 4. Devil's Drop**
- 5. Baby**
- 6. Hospital Bath**
- 7. Love is Pink**
- 8. Who will Put The House to Sleep?**
- 9. Touched**
- 10. Bulletin**

## **The Redwoods**

This pool fed water to the Osbournes' house,  
its bamboo fringe cut back hard  
the year the *in crowd* flocked to Clun.

Literati women in flamingo print dresses,  
stilettos claggy with Shropshire mud,  
London lovers flung down dinner jackets

in the stand of Sequoias,  
startled the owls, as pine needles  
pricked their soft, drunken thighs.

The critics, puffed up like mallards, licked  
John's *Sense of Detachment*, spat out the play  
with fat tongues serrated round the edges.

His fast cars and failed marriages rusted  
in the timber-sheds. Tanners' delivered more booze  
to an Estate fermenting with anger and debt.

Thirty years on, Helen's trees catch the sunset  
with their red-feathered trunks,  
watch us laugh, then cry into the lily pads.

Anne Caldwell

*Published in Writing in Education Issue no. 43 Autumn 2007*

## **Lunch Hours**

If we had the time  
we'd tow each other back  
through years of rope swings  
and chart the downy surface of our skins.

If we had the time  
I'd read you Madame Bovary  
and when the spray of rain on tyres  
made you fall asleep I'd start again.

If we had the time  
we'd talk on lazy Sunday afternoons  
discuss the heaviness of purple, the pleasure  
of sugared tea in polystyrene cups at Main Road.

Yes, if we had the time  
we'd skim pebbles across the bay  
at Lytham St Annes, make love  
beneath the pier as the highest tide came in.

Between half pints, every word we  
snatch must carry  
all the lightness  
all the weight  
of absence.

I cram goodbyes into your pockets  
like crumpled paper handkerchiefs.

Anne Caldwell

*First published Poetry Wales Vol. 27 No. 1*

## **For Ten Years**

She carried your bones on her back  
straining the tendons  
in her shoulders, bent over -  
a pilgrim with a relic.

Whenever she moved house, each bone  
was wrapped in linen, placed in your  
old initialled suitcase to stop them  
rattling when she walked.

She was eighteen and strong limbed.  
Other men tried to love her  
but she never let them climb the stairs;  
the bones took up one side of her bed.

In her dreams, you came back to life  
and read her stories, let her feel the warmth  
of your bristly face, that large hand  
holding hers.

One night, you were standing at the  
end of the bed. She shivered.  
You were just as she remembered –  
young, clean shaven, broad shouldered.

At first light she packed the case,  
set out to The Rocks,  
a ridge worn smooth,  
high above a reservoir.

She made a great fire from  
brushwood and heather, tenderly  
laid each bone in its hot centre,  
watched them burn to dust.

That night she held a pillow to her chest.  
She felt a shadowy gap,  
that space  
you had occupied, grow smaller.

At first light, she looked in the mirror  
at the clear sky in her eyes.

Anne Caldwell

*First published Quattrocento Issue 3*

## Devil's Drop

Deirdre's got a rash of freckles,  
bright red plaits, a tooth missing.  
She's pretending to be Pippa Long-Stocking,  
And I'm Anne of Green Gables.  
We can go on like this all summer.

On Saturday's when her dad's glued  
to watching Mick McManus on the telly  
we play '*true, dare, kiss, command or promise*'  
in his shed that smells of metal shavings,  
condoms, rotten fruit.

We nick our sister's bikes, pedal up hill,  
head for *Devil's Drop*, (strictly off limits),  
burn our skin raw in the hot sun,  
stuff our cheeks with bilberries,  
stain our mouths, our homemade cotton shifts.

Deirdre dares me to race along the unfenced path  
at the quarry's edge, then climb into  
it's gaping mouth. Mid-way,  
my foot dislodges a boulder  
the size of a child's head.

We freeze. Millstone grit  
strikes one rock, then another,  
as if it's about to ignite.  
We wait forever for a soft thud.  
Deirdre twists her hair around a finger.

I think of bone crazing like china,  
The curve of a skull like a  
full jug of milk,  
slipping from my grip,  
splattered over kitchen tiles.

The following year,  
Deirdre's older brother, (nickname Shorty)  
is spliffed up with four mates in his VW Beetle,  
rams into the tailgate of an articulated truck  
on the A6 from Congleton to Buxton.

The year after,  
my mum's riddled with Pancreatic cancer,  
the kind that's a well aimed toe-cap  
in the guts, vicious as a snake-bite,  
just as bloody quick.

Deirdre flunks 'O' level Maths, French  
and English, (*a straight A girl*).  
Sometimes I skive, meet her  
for Pot Noodles in the indoor shopping centre  
across from the Girl's Grammar.

She has a boyfriend with a 250 Kawasaki,  
I develop asthma.

Anne Caldwell

*published Red Ink Issue no. 4 June 08*

## **Baby**

There is a place women never speak of,  
a steel and metal place  
of green cotton, latex gloves,

where words are hissed,  
ventuse, caesarean, emergency.  
Where no one speaks

except to give your orders.  
A place of tidal waves  
bending the body over,

a row of palm trees on a sea front  
in a hurricane raging.  
Stranger's faces blur

as if through a windscreen.  
The world periscopes down,  
fingernails are fishhooks

in my lover's palm,  
the baby's head – a melon of pain.  
Year's ago we'd both be dead by now,

all those breathing classes,  
birth plans, diagrams forgotten.  
We are dragged back

over a beach of stones,  
my boy with his battered head and scar  
that will last forever,

a circle of love from my body.  
And me, stitched and bloody.

Anne Caldwell

## **Hospital Bath**

I am wheeled into a dim room  
each joint aching, like an old wooden trawler  
battered by the North East coast.

A young student nurse gently lifts  
my limbs, sponging each in turn  
combs out tangles in my hair as if I were a mermaid.

Her crisp gingham shift smells of soap powder,  
her ear lobes pink, two daisy clips holding back  
a mane of curls.

She's never felt ropes of pain  
unwind into black water, yet her touch  
smoothes away dried blood and sweat.

Tenderness, like a waltz or slow prayer  
astonishes me. She hands me my sleeping son  
wrapped in a hospital blanket.

Anne Caldwell

## **Love is Pink**

the soft underbelly of cooked prawns,

the pink of a ripe watermelon  
bursting with seeds,

the frilly pink of a bunch of carnations  
thrust into my hands, stems dripping from the sink.

Love is the pink of your cuticles, the cat's  
rough tongue licking

sea salt from my fingers  
as I season garlic dressing.

*'I hate pink; it's for girls'* you shout,  
yet, as the sun sets,

your face flushes,  
my lipstick leaves a pink message

on your eyelids, on your lashes.  
A smile flickers across your mouth

like a riff from Billy singing Summertime.

Anne Caldwell

*published as a poster for Leeds City Hospital Arts Project  
Summer 2008*

## **‘Who Will Put the House to Sleep?’<sup>1</sup>**

check all the doors, turn off the boiler,  
draw velvet over the bleak sky  
if I sneak away with the Wild Things,  
wear my dancing slippers,  
grow silver-tipped feathers,  
or the strong legs of a she-wolf  
striding to catch the pack,  
the moon low behind the peaks?

A layer of dust  
will settle on the dresser  
the cats will lick chicken bones  
and fish skin clean  
from plates piled high in the sink.  
In the small hours, you’ll turn over,  
feel for my warmth,  
cast out your right arm

to an icy draft, begin to long for  
your ex-wife’s order -  
regimented, table-napkined meals  
timed for the turn of your key in the lock.  
Can we just jive tonight across the lino?  
sing out loud to *The Dixie Chicks*,  
or *Steve Earle*, *Alison Krauss’s* sugared voice

that poured maple syrup over the fig of love  
as we split it open, juice, black seeds  
running down our chins.  
You’ve had your time in the limelight,  
these middle years of strong productive work,  
the door to the garden of success  
wide open, its box tree hedges  
glossy and well clipped.

I could let you cook all night,  
or we could learn to knit together  
or mend the leaking sump  
in my clapped out car.  
When I’m back from the mountains  
I’ll clear a room in the house  
with a view of Stoodley Pike,  
oak forest stretching like Narnia

---

<sup>1</sup> Emma Beltrán *Poems to be Read in the Rain*

to the horizon, line it with books and silk  
and bask like a salamander  
in the sun's afterglow,  
the joy of a day at a desk well spent.

Anne Caldwell

## **Touched**

I search the house -  
a finger mark on architrave,  
measurements in soft pencil-scrawl,  
the plaster curve in my stairwell  
smooth as a woman's thigh.

Each mitred joint,  
each fine-grade sanded corner,  
each door frame  
carries your imprint.  
There's the faintest smell of us

lingering in the sawdust.  
You may catch me  
wearing nothing but lipstick  
and smiling, when the house is still,  
pressing

my body to the floor as stars wink,  
just to be touched by something of you.

Anne Caldwell

## Bulletin

*A politician, in response to Peckham shootings, said  
'Our society is broken.'*

*Two new prisons are announced.*

*A wolf escapes from a wildlife park in Devon.*<sup>2</sup>

I slipped under the chain link fence  
when the keeper thought he had my trust,  
lay with my belly hugging the wet grass,  
fur flattened.

My ancestors crossed these moors  
in family packs,  
suckled their young in broad-leaved woods  
that stretched for miles before you  
felled the timber for your warship-fleets,  
muzzled or shot us, ricocheting  
bullets into muscle.

I've been captive so long  
I've lost the will or knack to hunt,  
but I smell blood in this country,  
congealing in the wound of a city boy  
who opened his door wide as a smile  
to his pack of 'brothers',  
blood in the razored, self-inflicted  
cuts of men caged in their zoo  
with a pot to piss in,  
pacing back and forth  
through nights punctured  
with inhuman groans, the slam of metal doors.  
I'll make a run for The North -  
Sherwood, Delamere, the Trough of Bowland,  
follow the Pennine's spine,  
with hunger hollowing my belly's  
empty leather pouch.

I'll smell doorstep light spilling out  
from isolated farms,  
nose the feathered warmth of chickens  
in their coop, viscous yolks  
warming beneath their breasts.

---

<sup>2</sup> News Bulletin from Radio 4 February 2007

You may find me  
curled in the souls of island loving,  
Gaelic-tongued women  
whose ties to each other  
are strong as coiled hemp,  
who lick their lovers clean at night  
and calm this lust for blood,  
until they spy the un-tamed slit  
in my eyes and kick me out.

Anne Caldwell

*published Red Ink Digital Magazine Issue 4 June 2008*