



These Days

A poetry chapbook by Ruth Mark

"You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come."

(The Bible, Matthew 24:6)

"But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one."

From "*The Parable of the Old Man and the Young*" by Wilfred Owen

"These days - are fast, nothing lasts
There ain't no time to waste"

Bon Jovi, lyrics from *These Days*

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NO MORE HEROES

A week when chaos has reigned
all Hell let loose
fear cracking the very air
people twitchy, watch faces
movement for menace.
Men, women, children who
have lost their way, cry publicly
yearn for a dead hero
will him to walk amongst them
fill the empty void.

But, there are no more heroes
no-one will rescue us
present us happiness wrapped up
in a box with ribbons.

There *is* a Savior
who has never gone away
will hold, reassure, help
when asked. He is the last hero
if only we would stop to listen.

ONE NATION. ONE LAND

Come, men, women, children
enjoy the beauty of the land where
you have been blessed to be born,
grow old in. Savor the color
the rainbow of green
all around you.
The land, sea, mountains
call to you.

Leave down your anger
your petty grievances
embrace your mother, father,
brother, sister, neighbor
set aside your prejudices
rejoice in the all-encompassing
beauty. Lift your arms up
feel the soft rain on your face
and dance a jig – kick your feet
high, tap out time to the ancient rhythms
your ancestors have given you
rekindle the age-old tradition
of story-telling, huddled together
at home, in bars, on windy mountain tops –
and know this – you have been blessed.
Together we will rise again
as one island, one nation, one land.

MOTHER TONGUE

Accents come thick and fast
English butchered, unconsciously
no awareness, self-conscious only
in this new-found language we grapple.
He thinks he can speak English
but struggles with the spelling
quizzical, eyebrows raised
when given a colloquialism.
She says Dutch isn't necessary
in this land of the guttural g
a mistake one feels when
at every corner tourists are ripped off
for ignorance of the Mother Tongue.
Foreigners in a land famous for its business sense
with money the heart-blood, the pulse
in millions of homes, windows glowing
all of life inside on perpetual show.
To live in this ironed-flat land
most of it reclaimed from the sea
to feel less foreign, knock off the alien pallor
which clings to our faces
we must learn their tongue
their cadence and rhythm
if we are going to have
any chance of a foothold
a planting in the sea-soaked soil.

THE CAILLEACH RUA VISITS ANGOLA

I didn't know the Cailleach Rua
old Woman of Winter, red-haired Hag of Hunger
stalked the fields and squatted
by empty cooking pots in summer.
I thought she was only to be found
in the hedgerows and townlands of Ireland,
I thought the 1850s were her heyday
not the second year of this new millennium.
Not again; this time clawing, nails piercing
straight through the very heart of Angola.

I see that she's clouded the babies' eyes
with her death-veil, turned her dark aura
to horror in the mothers' faces
sucked the life-blood from the white faces of
careworkers who scurry around yet feel redundant
useless in these dying rooms –
makeshift tents over cracked earth floors
drips, bandages, water, even food
too late for these children, their drum-bellies
smoothed round with malnutrition.

Take your mantle and leave Hag –
find some other planet to inhabit
suck the life from the Moon perhaps
go away, someplace, anyplace
let the skeletal babies once more grow plump.

THEM AND US

Is perestroika a worse evil
 than the Cold War?
 A selling-out in some way
 to the distant yet familiar
 Russian communists?
 Have they infiltrated
 every nook-and-cranny
 of our societies? Is there
 no place left to hide?
 Do we accept their spin
 reject our age-old
 religions so easily?

The lure of peace
 tantalizing, yet
 further away than it
 ever was. Bali the latest
 in the Atrocity. Is it
 all one global network
 and not cells scattered
 like black pearls over the
 Earth? Is there an
 unfathomable link
 between what's happening
 in America, Afghanistan,
 Chechnya, Iraq,
 many countries in Europe
 and right across the Middle East?

It can't be as simple
 as *Them* and *Us*
 Muslims and Christians
 Communists and nomads
Us and *Them*. The
 media labels this fear
 we feel as *War on Terror*
 as *Jihad* as *Saddam*
 yet we who think
 who question, struggle
 with all this disinformation
 dumbing-down, fed
 reality TV 'til we
 can no longer assimilate
 the evidence. Until we

roll over and pant like
the obedient dogs
They want Us to be.

Orwell's 1984
a daily reality, all
the predictions in
Revelations coming to
pass. We can only
stand up and be counted
hope we have more in us
than the scourge, the waste
that is the prerogative of
the suicide bomber.
Martyrs for their cause.
Dead all the same.
Forgotten after a time.
Left in some unmarked grave
somewhere no-one will ever find.

A FAR CRY FROM HOLLAND

Rain is lashing a billion windows
in Holland. A storm is on its
way, begun by a bullet
in Fortuyn's head, the
cabinet fallen, and
this communist state
has no dictator at its
helm.

We float aimless
on a rudderless ship
over a fathomless ocean
know there is no going
forward, no going back
suspended, waiting
for something to happen
change to rip our throats
out.

A nonsense glows green
from boxes in every box
windows framed by yards
of spun webs, gossamer
drapes, impractical
against this
storm.

I want to run for cover
kick the dust of these lowlands
off my feet.

PLUS ÇA CHANGE

Small angel-face, pale as
paper you stare at the camera
with dead eyes. You're
barely sixteen, yet you have seen
enough, felt roughened
hands on your smoothness.

No one will fight in your
corner. Stoically you endure.
Where do you come from?
Albania? Kosovo? Russia?
Sold like meat and treated
just the same.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.
Nothing ever changes. Females the
world over are still
exploited, used up, vessels
cracked before they're twenty.
It's no wonder they attempt
oblivion, escape. Today the
game is pass-the-Prozac
tomorrow who knows what
we'll have graduated to.
This sameness, injustice
depressing, knowing that in
our world vulnerability
always loses.

DECLARATION, MARCH 2003

It's late March in North Holland
the crocuses are everywhere
a regular carpet of blue and white
and the sun shines periodically
warming the red stone of the roofs
which stretch as far as the eye can see.

Doorways framed with thin metal
arches topped with mock chalk
figurines - a plethora of animals
cut into grey marble slabs. Opposite
a stag frolics forever frozen in joust.
Next door has a greyhound in a perpetual
bounding leap, while the trees are
losing their starkness, sprout the
buds of a new spring.

Windows everywhere turn their faces
to the street, eyes watch the
children dodge the cars
rummage in the great concrete
bins topped with corrugated iron lids, watch
as they pull the treasure out
turn it over in their filthy hands.

New life is round the corner
ironic in a way – war has just been
declared, Iraq once again the target.
The desert once more the gates of Hell.

HOLLAND TURNS ITS FACE ON FOREIGNERS

The frown creases a scar
between her soft brown eyes
that look wary, a deer in
headlights, tell-tale grey
glinting through the curly brown
which frames the oval face.

She's only thirty yet looks
and acts much older,
weight of the world
on her slender shoulders.
A caged animal at least
knows how to fight when requested.

It bubbles like hot stew in
a pressure cooker this frustration,
unable to follow a career path
laid down in her native country –
the bricks and mortar don't work
here, in this land of reclaimed soil.

This place does not use
the talent it has, doesn't see
the potential imbedded in it's
foreign branch, nurtures stupidity
finds it safer, neglecting
the sun, the warmth she offers.

ELEGY FOR A CHILDHOOD FRIEND

I

What made him choose the priesthood?
Faith or opportunities? He wasn't always
destined to join the Brothers. Kinder than most
and full of exuberance as a child. Active,
a work horse, a non-delegator as an adult.
Work killed him in the end. Denial
too quite possibly. Maybe he was
ready. Who knows what goes on
in the closed Northern heart we
possess buried deep in our chests.

II

Congregating to bury one of their
own. Men of the Cloth from
all over the world. Descending
on Ireland to put a young man
into the Earth, to say
their last goodbyes. Shocking
that one so young should die
of a hemorrhaging ulcer. Twelve
pints of blood couldn't
save him. Too late for mercy.
Too early, despite his readiness
to meet his Maker.

IMMIGRANT

Immigrant a much friendlier title
than *asylum seeker*, *foreigner*,
scum yet it doesn't make her
feel any better, the weight of
exile hangs as heavy as a tree
on her frailness, hunger the only
sensation she's managed to feel
today, yesterday, a month ago.

Her country, a war-zone, the soil
pock-marked, scarred. Her people
scattered as easily as blowing
the seeds from an old dandelion head
the clock stopped for them, their
roots groundless. Where can they
call home? Who will even have them?

BORDERS

Borders are both barriers and bridges
invisible lines which can cross or
not, gateways for communication
or insurmountable obstacles
between countries, peoples,
land. Is there a border we
have yet to cross? Perhaps
we can view it as a bridge
rather than a brick wall
let's talk, come on – step over the line –
we can rub it out together
it doesn't really exist
is only a line on a map, on
a two-dimensional sheet of paper.
We can ignore it if we choose to.

COMMON GROUND

It's not just a cultural thing
these differences between us
a chasm that no amount of coffee
can wash away, no ice-cream can sweeten.
There is simply no common ground
nothing to soften the barbed-wire edges
cold memories, not old enough
to be buried, stark in their nearness.

Your tantrums an embarrassment
only to yourself, as the people you scorn
laugh openly, not bothering to hide their amusement.
A profusion of loud complaints
bursting from your tired face
like a dandelion gone to seed in the wind.

There is no common ground
and I'm sorry for that
but know what can and can't be discussed
work within the confounds.

There is no common ground.

THE FINAL CURTAIN CALL

March 11, 2004. 191 people killed
in Madrid among the rubble,
the chaos of the rail system
frayed blankets made weak curtains
hiding the carnage in a makeshift,
all too inadequate way.

Sept 11, 2001 - 2823 people killed
in New York, two landmarks
wiped from Manhattan's skyline
forever annihilated. Bricks fell
like a card deck pushed, lives
snuffed out, flaming candle wicks pinched.

Nowhere is safe from these mad men,
women who strap their bodies with
explosives. Jihad reigns and we trust
no-one, eye packages left in trains and
wonder when it'll be our turn. We
pray for a conclusion, an end to this
war, a homecoming celebration. Faith
may yet be our final resting place. Paradise
awaits just beyond the
smoking rubble, the wasted bones,
will be our final curtain call.

THE WEEKLY MEETINGS

There was a meeting of sorts next door today
the shoes, from children's pumps to old
women's slippers, a crowd outside our doors. They
came in their full-length robes, veils, *purdahs* I think
they're called, covering everything from neck to
toes. The bell rang for an hour, sporadically
they gathered. This was Little Turkey putting its
two fingers up at the West in their own quiet, behind-
closed doors, everyday kind of way. Snubbing the
country that fed them, clothed them, gave them the
very flat this meeting was taking place in, the very
floors they were spilling their crumbs on. This
was their resistance, their way of holding on to
the old country. Culture, traditions won't die here.
They have also kept their language. It's more
common, less shocking to the natives than English.
We westerners have a lot to learn from them. I just
hope we don't have to fear them, hope these
weekly meetings are gossip-gatherings and that
these women aren't hatching some plan. Perhaps
revolution is in the air. Perhaps this is how
racism begins – in fear, mistrust, not being
included. In a breakdown of communication. We
might all speak the native language of this, our adopted
country, but how much do we really understand
them? How much do we understand ourselves?

THE SOVIET WINTER IS OVER

Let democracy begin. Europe
almost doubled in size yesterday
with ten new member countries, all
with hope for a new dawn. Time
will tell if borders dissolve, whether
free-trade will reign or whether
old Europe will continue to play
the role of strict patriarch, doling
punishments at will, letting its
fat cats grow fatter, the divide between
rich and poor grow ever wider.
Communism is dead, long live
Democracy. We can only hope
some other demon isn't
lurking under the carpet
of freedom we pretend
Europe is covered in.

GROWING UP IN 2004

Falluja, a city of mosques
Sunni stronghold and
keeper of twelve-year-old
killers who show no remorse.

Humanity fights for
survival amongst the
squat sandcastles
on the edge of Iraq's

Western Front. Children
grow up much too
fast these days, girls
with infertility rods

implanted in their arms
aged fourteen, fifteen, their parents
ignorant. And this in
Britain. Meanwhile

Iraq becomes a graveyard
atrocities sleep with
sodomasochism and children
become adults before their time.

THE DAY OF THE TERRORIST

Al-Qaeda's deadly clutches
grab those down-on-their-luck,
misfits and no-hopers, all
looking for a way out. Glory,
the jihad, to die in battle
against the enemy, instant
martyrdom, the final cake's icing.
These young men are already
dead before they strap the bombs
to their chests, their eyes on a
mistaken prize. They think
Allah will listen, will reward
their ultimate sacrifice.

ALL FOR THREE EUROS

Plot lost, near heart attack
and all over three euros. Crazy
what this country does
to a person. Stress, tiredness
and incomprehension
combine. Borders between
cultures will never be
crossed at this rate.
Personnel on Dutch trains
should be taught public
relations. Maybe then
we foreigners would give
a toss about this, our
temporarily adopted
land. A land many of
us pay our dues in.
We're not immune from
taxation, ignorance, cold
faces. We have to learn
the language, the culture.
In fact we're better
targets. The sad thing is
though that many of us
come, think Holland is
temporary and end up
staying a lifetime.

FEAR OF OTHERNESS

Multiculturalism is dead, long live national migration – buzzwords in Britain these days. *Limiting immigration is not racism* – another favorite expression of the politick while everyone knows there are ways to beat the system, that racism is very much alive and putrid in the streets and villages of this land.

Fear is the religion of many, suspicion of others and the inward focus subconsciously or consciously used to survive. The class system is even more divided than it was fifty years ago, except that the poor are now even poorer.

Melting pot of underutilized resources. People everywhere stick to what they know, fear the different. Most kids these days can't think outside the box, resent yet need guidance not brainwashing before anything will be achieved, anything will move forward. Is education the key or just another gloss over the underlying stink of all our hearts?

CARPETED CAGES

Winter is closing in already.
Early September and dark by
midday. Yet the wind, darkness,
is no deterrent for the head-scarf-
covered ladies congregating on the
bench beside the bins. These Turkish
women understand community, unlike
the Dutch natives who live with
uncovered windows inviting the
world to view yet still a wall exists
between them and the world. Queens
and kings in their carpeted rooms
their box castles. Kingdom and cage
with no door in or out
no access to the inside.

SRI LANKA

I

Teardrop island once called
Ceylon. Names matter
no more. A Tsunami wiped
the point away, razed your
surface, killed your people.
Some will never be
found. Missing dead
cannot be buried, do not
have a gravestone, somewhere
to place flowers, say a prayer. Lost
to any who remain, exist
only in memories, on celluloid
water-marked but cherished
glossies. The missing
have been razed from
the Earth's surface. Gone
in an instant. Gone in a flash.

II

Ceylon, Sri Lanka you have been
called many names. The most
poignant now, given what happened
on Boxing Day 2004 – *Serendip*.
Serendipity was born from you, meaning:
“good things happen by accident”.
Can anything good come from
all this destruction, this shattered wood,
lives, people? This rubbish-strewn paradise?

NEXT STOP BAGHDAD

The West destroyed Falluja
next stop Baghdad. This democratic
election: a joke surely? Most
Iraqis will not vote, those who
do are in fear of their lives.
Civil war beckons in this
war-torn country. Will Iraq
emerge new like a
phoenix from the ashes?

THE HUMAN'S FATAL FLAW

Green leaves hide wet sand-colored
bricks, finger terracotta roof slates.
Above the chimney pots the sky
is a study in grey, patchy and darker
in places. Children play on regardless
of the gloom, the breeze. They eat
ice-cream despite the chill in this early
May afternoon. I can't help but envy
their freedom in play. No responsibilities
just endless days stretching. Too young
for school, their carefree smiles
say it all. Our fatal flaw is that we
grow up too soon. These kids are blissfully
unaware. They live for the moment
enjoy their play with abandon.

OUR COUNCIL'S POLICIES

The powers that be want to knock down these buildings to make way for a better money-spinner: an old-people's home more lucrative than rent. They'll be breaking up more than homes, bulldozing more than brick. Communities will flounder, kids lose their playmates. Fifty-year-old buildings eradicated from Hilversum Noord for ever. Only the original brick-strewn side-roads will remain. It's only a matter of time. The Hei will be next. Roads more important than nature. Money means more than people to our council. Access to T.V. Stations means more than wildness, heather, deer.

Note: The Hei is a wonderful area of fenland in the North of Hilversum.

CESARE LOMBROSO

Son of Verona but hardly a gentleman.
Father of Criminology you thought
tattoos, protruding lips, slanting
foreheads were all signs of the *Criminal
Brain*. Nature not nurture ruled
for you. Racist or simply naïve
you were blamed for Mussolini's
say in the Final Solution. You'd
have been horrified if you'd lived
to see what they did to your people.
Then again, you could have been
one of the herded crowd,
could have also smelt the gas
last thing before *Lights Out*.
Atavism wouldn't have mattered
then when survival would
have fought to win the day
when there were no doors labeled EXIT.

KIDS AT PLAY DOWN A DIRT PATH

Little Indians, they created
a dust haze, threw
dried mud from the path
in handfuls, in wide circles,
filled their hair with filth
marked their faces, rubbed
the dirt in like cream from a pot.

“Swallows and Amazons”
the title popped into my head
the children following
their own law, gleeful,
wild abandon in their
play, freedom tangible.

Memories of similar days,
the same free joy
made me wistful, then
glad – children don’t change,
not really, they enjoy the same
games we did
a cardboard box, some dried
mud, bunches of grasses
picked selectively – all
infinitely more interesting
than the latest expensive toy.

THESE DAYS

Time warps, slips away from
me these days. The clock
lies, it must; seems like five
minutes ago it was afternoon
the sun high and now it's
8pm and darkness. My thoughts
wander, broken as glass shards,
impossible to pull together
make a coherent whole.

War and rumors of war
the only news on the T.V.
these days. Innocence gone
and bodies in bits under
Kings Cross Station. The world
is upside down. Trust,
true friendship: impossible
to find. We want to cocoon
but how safe are we
even in our own homes?

About the Author

Ruth Mark is a licensed psychologist, poet and editor. She's Irish but currently lives in The Netherlands where she teaches undergraduates about the workings of the brain. Her work has been published in diverse print and web venues including *Riviera Reporter*, *Dakota House Journal*, *Poems Niedergasse*, *Midnight Minds*, *Snakeskin*, *Wicked Alice*, *Pebble Lake Review*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, *Poetry Superhighway*, *Green Tricycle* and many more. She also reviews on a regular basis for Tamafhyr Mountain Poetry and The Blue Iris Review. More details can be found at: www.remark.be

