Classic Poetry Series

Brian Patten

- 17 poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

Brian Patten (7 February 1946)

Born near Liverpool's docks, he attended Sefton Park School in the Smithdown Road area of Liverpool, where he was noted for his essays and greatly encouraged in his work by Harry Sutcliffe his form teacher. He left school at fifteen and began work for The Bootle Times writing a column on popular music. One of his first articles was on Roger McGough and Adrian Henri, two pop-oriented Liverpool Poets who later joined Patten in a best-selling poetry anthology called The Mersey Sound, drawing popular attention to his own contemporary collections Little Johnny's Confession (1967) and Notes to the Hurrying Man (1969). Patten received early encouragement from Philip Larkin.

The collections Storm Damage (1988) and Armada (1996) are more varied, the latter featuring a sequence of poems concerning the death of his mother and memories of his childhood. Armada is perhaps Patten's most mature and formal book, dispensing with much of the playfulness of former work. He has also written comic verse for children, notably Gargling With Jelly and Thawing Frozen Frogs.

Patten's style is generally lyrical and his subjects are primarily love and relationships. His 1981 collection Love Poems draws together his best work in this area from the previous sixteen years. Tribune has described Patten as "the master poet of his genre, taking on the intricacies of love and beauty with a totally new approach, new for him and for contemporary poetry." Charles Causley once commented that he "reveals a sensibility profoundly aware of the ever-present possibility of the magical and the miraculous, as well as of the granite-hard realities. These are undiluted poems, beautifully calculated, informed - even in their darkest moments - with courage and hope."

Patten writes extensively for children as well as adults. He has been described as a highly engaging performer, and gives readings frequently. Over the years he has read alongside such poets as Pablo Neruda, Allen Ginsberg, Stevie Smith, Laurie Lee, and Robert Lowell. His books have in recent years been translated into Italian, Spanish, German and Polish. His children's novel Mr Moon's Last Case won a special award from the Mystery Writers of America Guild. In 2002 Patten accepted the Cholmondeley Award for services to poetry. Together with Roger McGough and the late Adrian Henri, he was honoured with the Freedom of the City of Liverpool.

Works:

Poetry collections for adults

The Mersey Sound
Little Johnny's Confession
Notes to the Hurrying Man
The Irrelevant Song
Vanishing Trick
Grave Gossip
Love Poems
Storm Damage
Grinning Jack
Armada
Selected Poems Penguin Books
The new Collected Love Poems

Books for children

The Elephant and the Flower
Jumping Mouse
Emma's Doll
Gargling With Jelly
Mr Moon's Last Case
Jimmy Tag-Along
Thawing Frozen Frogs
Juggling With Gerbils
The Story Giant
Impossible Parents (Series)

As editor

The Puffin Book of Utterly Brilliant Poetry
The Puffin Book of Modern Children's Verse

And Nothing Is Ever As You Want It To Be

You lose your love for her and then
It is her who is lost,
And then it is both who are lost,
And nothing is ever as perfect as you want it to be.

In a very ordinary world
A most extraordinary pain mingles with the small routines,
The loss seems huge and yet
Nothing can be pinned down or fully explained.

You are afraid.
If you found the perfect love
It would scald your hands,
Rip the skin from your nerves,
Cause havoc with a computered heart.

You lose your love for her and then it is her who is lost.
You tried not to hurt and yet
Everything you touched became a wound.
You tried to mend what cannot be mended,
You tried, neither foolish nor clumsy,
To rescue what cannot be rescued.

You failed,
And now she is elsewhere
And her night and your night
Are both utterly drained.

How easy it would be
If love could be brought home like a lost kitten
Or gathered in like strawberries,
How lovely it would be;
But nothing is ever as perfect as you want it to be.

Brian Patten

Doubt shall not make an end of you

Doubt shall not make an end of you
nor closing eyes lose your shape
when the retina's light fades;
what dawns inside me will light you.
In our public lives we may confine ourselves to darkness,
our nowhere mouths explain away our dreams,
but alone we are incorruptible creatures,
our light sunk too deep to be of any social use
we wander free and perfect without moving
or love on hard carpets
where couples revolving round the room
end found at its centre.
Our love like a whale from its deepest ocean rises -
I offer this and a multitude of images
from party rooms to oceans,
the single star and all its reflections;
being completed we include all
and nothing wishes to escape us.
Beneath my hand your hardening breast agrees
to sing of its own nature,
then from a place without names our origin comes shivering.
Feel nothing separate then,
we have translated each other into light
and into love go streaming.

Brian Patten

Gust Becos I Cud Not Spel

Gust becos I cud not spel
It did not mean I was daft
When the boys in school red my riting
Some of them laffed

But now I am the dictater
They have to rite like me
Utherwise they cannot pas
Ther GCSE

Some of the girls were ok
But those who laffed a lot
Have al bean rownded up
And hav recintly bean shot

The teecher who corrected my speling
As not been shot at al
But four the last fifteen howers
As bean standing up against a wal

He has to stand ther until he can spel
Figgymisgrugifooniyn the rite way
I think he will stand ther for ever
I just inventid it today

Brian Patten

I have changed the numbers on my watch

I have changed the numbers on my watch,
And now perhaps something else will change.
Now perhaps
At precisely 2a.m.
You will not get up
And gathering your things together
Go forever.
Perhaps now you will find it is
Far too early to go,
Or far too late,
And stay forever

Brian Patten

In Tintagel Graveyard

Who brought flowers to this grave?
I, said the wren.
I brought them as seeds and then
Watched them grow.

No, said the wind. That's not true.
I blew them across the moor and sea,
I blew them up to the grave's door.
They were a gift from me.

They came of their own accord,
Said the celandine.
I know best. They're brothers of mine.

I am Death's friend,
Said the crow. I ought to know.
I dropped them into the shadow of the leaning stone.
I brought the flowers.

No, said Love,
It was I who brought them,

With the help of the wren's wing,
With the help of the wind's breath,
With the help of the celandine and the crow.

It was I who brought them
For the living and the dead to share,
I was the force that put those flowers there.

Brian Patten

Minister for Exams

When I was a child I sat an exam.
This test was so simple
There was no way i could fail.

Q1. Describe the taste of the Moon.

It tastes like Creation I wrote,
it has the flavour of starlight.

Q2. What colour is Love?

Love is the colour of the water a man
lost in the desert finds, I wrote.

Q3. Why do snowflakes melt?

I wrote, they melt because they fall
on to the warm tongue of God.

There were other questions.
They were as simple.

I described the grief of Adam
when he was expelled from Eden.
I wrote down the exact weight of
an elephant's dream

Yet today, many years later,
For my living I sweep the streets
or clean out the toilets of the fat
hotels.

Why? Because constantly I failed
my exams.
Why? Well, let me set a test.

Q1. How large is a child's
imagination?
Q2. How shallow is the soul of the
Minister for exams?

Brian Patten

Nor the Sun its Selling Power

They say her words were like balloons
with strings I could not hold,
that her love was something in a shop
cheap and far too quickly sold;

but the tree does not price its apples
nor the sun its selling power
the rain does not gossip
or speak of where it goes.

Brian Patten

One Another’s Light

I do not know what brought me here
Away from where I’ve hardly ever been and now
Am never likely to go again.

Faces are lost, and places passed
At which I could have stopped,
And stopping, been glad enough.

Some faces left a mark,
And I on them might have wrought
Some kind of charm or spell
To make their futures work,

But it’s hard to guess
How one person on another
Works an influence.
We pass, and lit briefly by one another’s light
Hope the way we go is right.

Brian Patten

Party Piece

He said:

'Let's stay here
Now this place has emptied
And make gentle pornography with one another,
While the partygoers go out
And the dawn creeps in,
Like a stranger.

Let us not hesitate
Over what we know
Or over how cold this place has become,
But let's unclip our minds
And let tumble free
The mad, mangled crocodile of love.'

So they did,
There among the woodbines and guinness stains,
And later he caught a bus and she a train
And all there was between them then
was rain.

Brian Patten

Simple lyric

When I think of her sparkling face
And of her body that rocked this way and that,
When I think of her laughter,
Her jubilance that filled me,
It’s a wonder I’m not gone mad.

She is away and I cannot do what I want.
Other faces pale when I get close.
She is away and I cannot breathe her in.

The space her leaving has created
I have attempted to fill
With bodies that numbed upon touching,
Among them I expected her opposite,
And found only forgeries.

Her wholeness I know to be a fiction of my making,
Still I cannot dismiss the longing for her;
It is a craving for sensation new flesh
Cannot wholly calm or cancel,
It is perhaps for more than her.

At night above the parks the stars are swarming.
The streets are thick with nostalgia;
I move through senseless routine and insensitive chatter
As if her going did not matter.
She is away and I cannot breathe her in.
I am ill simply through wanting her.

Brian Patten

Sometimes it happens

And sometimes it happens that you are friends and then
You are not friends,
And friendship has passed.
And whole days are lost and among them
A fountain empties itself.

And sometimes it happens that you are loved and then
You are not loved,
And love is past.
And whole days are lost and among them
A fountain empties itself into the grass.

And sometimes you want to speak to her and then
You do not want to speak,
Then the opportunity has passed.
Your dreams flare up, they suddenly vanish.

And also it happens that there is nowhere to go and then
There is somewhere to go,
Then you have bypassed.
And the years flare up and are gone,
Quicker than a minute.

So you have nothing.
You wonder if these things matter and then
As soon you begin to wonder if these things matter
They cease to matter,
And caring is past.
And a fountain empties itself into the grass.

Brian Patten

The Day I Got My Finger Stuck Up My Nose

When I got my finger stuck up my nose
I went to a doctor, who said,
"Nothing like this has happened before,
We will have to chop off your head."

"It's only my finger stuck up my nose,
It's only my finger!" I said.
"I see what it is," the doctor replied,
"But we'll still have to chop off your head."

He went to the cabinet and took out an axe.
I watched with considerable dread.
"But it's only my finger stuck up my nose.
It's only a finger!" I said.

"Perhaps we can yank it out with a hook
Tied to some surgical thread.
Maybe we can try that," he replied
"Rather than chop off your head."

"I'm never going to pick it again.
I've now learned my lesson," I said.
"I won't stick my finger up my nose -
I'll stick it in my ear instead."

Brian Patten

The innocence of any flesh sleeping

Sleeping beside you I dreamt
I woke beside you;
Waking beside you
I thought I was dreaming.

Have you ever slept beside an ocean?
Well yes,
It is like this.

The whole motion of landscapes, of oceans
Is within her.
She is
The innocence of any flesh sleeping,
So vulnerable
No protection is needed.

In such times
The heart opens,
Contains all there is,
There being no more than her.

In what country she is
I cannot tell.
But knowing – because there is love
And it blots out all demons –
She is safe,
I can turn,
Sleep well beside her.

Waking beside her I am dreaming.
Dreaming of such wakings
I am all love's senses woken.

Brian Patten

The Newcomer

'There's something new in the river,'
The fish said as it swam.
'It's got no scales, no fins and no gills,
And ignores the impassable dam.'

'There's something new in the trees.'
I heard a bloated thrush sing.
'It's got no beak, no claws, and no feathers,
And not even the ghost of a wing.'

'There's something new in the warren,'
Said the rabbit to the doe.
'It's got no fur, no eyes and no paws,
Yet digs further than we dare go.'

'There's something new in the whiteness,'
Said the snow-bright polar bear.
'I saw its shadow on a glacier,
But it left no pawmarks there.'

Through the animal kingdom
The news was spreading fast.
No beak, no claws, no feather,
No scales, no fur, no gills,
It lives in the trees and the water,
In the soil and the snow and the hills,
And it kills and it kills and it kills.

Brian Patten

The Right Mask

One night a poem came up to a poet
From now on, it said, you must wear a mask.
What kind of mask? asked the poet.
A rose mask, said the poem.
I've used it already, said the poet,
I've exhausted it.
Then wear the mask that's made out of
a nightingale's song, use that mask.
Oh, it's an old mask, said the poet,
it's all used up.
Nonsense, said the poem, it's the perfect mask,
still, try on the god mask,
now that mask illuminates heaven.
It's a tight mask, said the poet,
and the stars crawl about in it like ants.
Then try on the troubador's mask, or the singer's mask,
try on all the popular masks.
I have, said the poet, but they fit so easily.

The poem was getting impatient,
it stamped its feet like a child,
it screamed. Then try on your own face,
try the one mask that terrifies,
the mask only you could possibly use,
the mask only you could wear out.

The poet tore at his face til it bled,
this mask? he yelled, this mask?
Yes, said the poem, yes.

But the poet was tired of masks,
he had lived too long with them,
he snatched at the poem and stuck it in his face.
Its screams were muffled, it wept, it tried to be lyrical,
it wriggled into his eyes and mouth.

Next day his friends were afraid of him,
he looked so distorted.
Now it's the right mask, said the poem, the right mask.
It clung to him lovingly and never let go again.

Brian Patten

When you wake tomorrow

I will give you a poem when you wake tomorrow.
It will be a peaceful poem.
It won’t make you sad.
It won’t make you miserable.
It will simply be a poem to give you
When you wake tomorrow.

It was not written by myself alone.
I cannot lay claim to it.
I found it in your body.
In your smile I found it.
Will you recognise it?

You will find it under your pillow.
When you open the cupboard it will be there.
You will blink in astonishment,
Shout out, ‘How it trembles!
Its nakedness is startling! How fresh it tastes!’

We will have it for breakfast;
On a table lit by loving,
At a place reserved for wonder.
We will give the world a kissing open
When we wake tomorrow.

We will offer it to the sad landlord out on the balcony.
To the dreamers at the window.
To the hand waving for no particular reason
We will offer it.
An amazing and most remarkable thing,
We will offer it to the whole human race
Which walks in us
When we wake tomorrow.

Brian Patten

You come to me quiet as rain not yet fallen

You come to me quiet as rain not yet fallen
Afraid of how you might fail yourself your
dress seven summers old is kept open
in memory of sex, smells warm, of boys,
and of the once long grass.
But we are colder now; we have not
Love’s first magic here. You come to me
Quiet as bulbs not yet broken
Out into sunlight.

The fear I see in your now lining face
Changes to puzzlement when my hands reach
For you as branches reach. Your dress
Does not fall easily, nor does your body
Sing of it won accord. What love added to
A common shape no longer seems a miracle.
You come to me with your age wrapped in excuses
And afraid of its silence.

Into the paradise our younger lives made of this bed and room
Has leaked the world and all its questioning
and now those shapes terrify us most
that remind us of our own. Easier now
to check longings and sentiment,
to pretend not to care overmuch,
you look out across the years, and you come to me
quiet as the last of our senses closing.

Brian Patten