

## **Gardening in the trenches.**

*France, the trenches, 1915.*

Along the line, Gillespie trailed, in thought,  
his mind with brothers, face-down in the mud,  
hands clutching at the banks. Destruction raged.

But mud is dung- when morning came again,  
the sunlight shone into a disused trench,  
where a few straggling, purple violets clung.

So, from war-torn allotments, he took plants,  
old roses, golden marigolds and herbs,  
and made a garden in the churned-up ground.

Wrote home and begged for seeds: all seeds of life.  
They came, potatoes, cucumbers, and greens,  
pansies, cornflowers, hollyhocks and chives.

He set the men to dig, sow seeds in broken shells,  
give birth to carrots, cabbages and leeks,  
soil in their fingernails, the smell of home.

They even found that celery would grow,  
inside the mildewed darkness of a trench,  
pale salty columns reaching for the light.

Gillespie's corpse was blown apart at Loos,  
his blood, and brains, and bowels, fell on the earth,  
and fed the hidden roots of all that grew.

And after Armistice, through No Man's Land,  
where nitrogen had seeped out from the bombs,  
wild blooms exploded, red and gold, and blue.

*24 lines, excluding title & stanza breaks.*

*Alexander Douglas Gillespie, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant, Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders, 1889-1915  
Previously published in Twelve Rivers, Suffolk Poetry Society, Autumn/ Winter 2003.*

*Aoife McClellan*

## **Salmon farm lament.**

Here in the dim loch waters we huddle,  
torpid, passive, fragments filtering round us,  
scales, flesh, flakes of insects, filaments  
of being. Dull eyed, desperate, we dream of cold  
sea waters, bodies thrashing in the thrust  
of currents, tide-polished scales which flash  
in icy moonlight, dashing from seal's tooth  
and shark's fin, slicing through waters,  
orcas' shadows: death-ships sailing.

Streamlined surge of our red flesh under  
silver armour, knights of the ocean,  
questing for crustaceans, the fierce hunt,  
the sweet-sharp crunch, the belly-fire of them,  
galvanising blood and being.

Then the smell, imprinted in our bones,  
the home-smell, river-smell, calling us,  
calling, drawing us with a dreadful ache  
and yearning: *we must go, we must go,*  
earth's magnet, moon-magic, star-pathway,  
*we must go, we must go,* our long tails  
drive us, up, up, in lust for leaping,  
up through the terrible downward drive  
of knife-sharp waters, tumbling the torrent,  
up to the cool river, birthplace, place of quiescence.

Here we unload our treasures, shimmering egg-spill,  
shower of shining sperm, our children, our bloodline,  
held by the flow of the river. Birthplace, death place,  
this is a good death, a salmon's death, pure and fasting,  
quietly resolving to rich ancestral soil of the bed of the river -

not this living death, grey-fungal mouldering,  
motionless in clouded underwater prison,  
with only our wild sea-dreams to hold us together

*32 lines, excluding stanza breaks and title.*

*Previously published @poetrywivenhoe, 'today's poem,' 2003, day 309.*

*Aoife McClellan*

## **Jellyfish plead for cleaner seas.**

Dense impenetrable mangrove forests,  
lush and liminal, where land meets sea  
where pale, innocuous *Tripedalia cystophora*  
undulating among the shadow- roots surprise their tiny prey.

Visceral as tripe, delicate as deep-sea dahlias, they have no brains, but learn,  
when trapped in tanks, with artificial grey-white stripes,  
that this cold, hard, metal place  
is not their swampy mangrove home,  
and not to crash their fragile mesoglea against the unforgiving walls.

Jellyfish are brainless, yet they learn,  
wallowing in warm Caribbean waters  
that those diaphanous floating forms are plastic bags,  
not tripedalian friends. Shimmying  
along the ocean-bed, close cousin to these jelly forms,  
the dumbo octopus gleams in divers' headlamps  
with phosphorescent fire,  
darkness doesn't dim its plankton wits.

*Cyanea nozakii*, geisha of the Pacific,  
pulsating gently in a cloud of ice-cream pink petticoats,  
rose-flush spirit of the deep,  
glistens with knowingness,  
its silken nerve-net senses the toxic currents.

Ethereal moon jellyfish, beaded with rhopalia,  
set on its shining watery course,  
detects light filtering between  
polluted garbage islands floating overhead,  
a tangle of dense placenta: polystyrene floats, fishing nets and twine,  
milk cartons, those deadly plastic bags, disease.

Jellyfish are innocent of brains, and yet they learn  
the great creating ocean's starved for breath  
and that the clean, green sea, incorruptible,  
lies gasping in its poisoned tank with unforgiving walls,  
in which humanity, equipped with three pounds  
of jelly-like grey semolina, including brainstem and a wrinkled paper ball  
called the cerebellum, has dipped its bloodstained hands.

Jellyfish gather in the harbour, carried by the spring tides.  
In murky green waters, they hold their silent, glistening protest,  
pleading for cleaner seas.

*38 lines, excluding stanza breaks and title. Previously published @poetrywivenhoe 'today's poem', 2023, day 340*  
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