

*Firewriting  
& Other Poems*

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# Firewriting

& other poems

John Muckle

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“How continually it comes to pass, thought Hepzibah, in this dull delirium of a world, — that whosoever, and with however kindly a purpose, should come to help, they would be sure to help the strongest side. Might and wrong combined, like iron magnetized, are endowed with irresistible attraction.”

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*



**I**



## CARING FOR YOU

My new job takes up more of my waking days  
But sometimes it seems an easy, useful thing to do  
Arriving to find Shane already up & risen  
Shouting to be washed. In your letter, good news  
Of a vocation! I really like the way you write.

And, seeing I am wet through from cycling  
Steve finds a dry pair of jeans, same colour,  
In his wardrobe drawer. What's he saying?  
Not much probably, enough for now, just enough.  
Alright, John? I've been good. I've been good for you.  
I put wet things in the hall airing cupboard  
And wipe Shane over with a half-damp flannel.

Mad Darren the master tea-leaf is at it again.  
He hovers at my shoulder by an open padlock  
Feathering hands at the edge of peripheral vision  
Tossing up leaves to watch them blow away,  
Sidles in like a cat burglar for the jar of QT.  
A mid-morning decaff is his methadone.

And I feel as though someone had set me a test  
As we listen to a crackly single, to its flipside:  
Come on and take the rest of me, you know it?  
The Real Thing, circa the year you were born.  
My hearing both present and a late reminder  
Of what came before us, which is far too much.

On nights – ginger-haired Lauren in the lounge –  
And I sleep on through Shane's fits and diarrhoea  
But at least I can spell it rightly in the morning.  
Fran and Lauren are scrubbing out the carpet.  
They love it, that's my explanation. Poor Shane  
Shaking, sobbing, disorientated and ashamed.  
All men are fated similarly. No choice, you let them

Irene does her backward vocal clicks – gibbering her  
yadayadaya. Be quiet. Rubs her head, her knee.  
And lays her curly head in my lap. All better now.

Life's flickering. I've got seven women on my mind  
Growing like tuberous sclerosis, white larvae in my brain.  
In the hall, in the back garden. Blearily singing.

## IN A LONELY PLACE

I cried and sang, seeing only what was awful to see.  
Everything as empty as a face whose own light  
Is left broken or helplessly replaced  
By rays from a surrogate sun. That cracked me wide open  
And all fun yellowed and seemed to mock at me . . .

It had turned blue, but obscenely  
As though each morning bore a new death by slow stages  
Another lapidary entry in the Unusual Occurrences Book.  
Shane picked up an iron bar; Steven May  
Struck out at kids, was quickly restrained on the beach  
At Clacton, appalled in the knowledge of his malice.  
Trying to run to safety in the off-white minibus.  
A whole Shanedom to draw you into  
As you opened your mouth around a pattern.

A book of lies not truth.  
Yes. Each point is taken. Had I been deceived  
By her openness, a crime, or a plan,  
Or should I open a vein? Darren  
Through the front window, straight next-door  
Had helped himself to tea-bag. Such a lovely  
Well-mannered boy. We made  
Him a cup and a buttered bun.  
Stayed here, very charming. We thought  
He might miss his mother ... so gentle and affectionate ...  
All orders calculated in advance, a charade  
That swallowed up the world; chewed, but slightly  
Lightly, and decided to spit it out on the mat.

Delighting inference of blame at Shane's late lie-in.  
A blind-eye stared out ... you let him sleep too long.  
Soap scum in the sink, records thrown about his room:  
The things he plays with others put there for him.  
Come on, I know so many people like that  
And I try to guide & cajole this into being what it isn't.

The rights folder's cover. Her scheme of gargantuan squalor  
Was growing daily to fruition; we're enthralled

By our complicity in the knowledge of darkness,  
The way the leaves tear off, small scraps of pornography  
Weathered in the rains. Another story circulates at lunch  
In looks and glances; the old barter & exchange system  
Of night, duplicity & silence. Oh, Mr Kennedy called  
Hoping to destabilise the profit motive in an angry word.  
Shane & a member of staff had been out watering the garden.



Your words in drips and dribbles  
Altering without doubt

Your meaning

Nowhere left to go  
A nothing comes to pass  
A pasteboard counter

Smiles at another's ordeal  
Letting go one of his mock rages  
A pleasure in his sister's pain  
Readily cracks his face

Girl fears are unspoken  
Wondering where they have gone  
Obeys commands  
Nobody rushes towards a knife

Trying to find a word for you  
What isn't black or candy  
Boy or girl, lightness and darkness  
Treacle set into a rock

On a small percentage, sad or happy  
Now trying, now playing dumb  
Gone where, gone there  
Without rhyme or reason  
Like a dropped stone in the grass

## THRILLING WONDER STORIES

I'd like to write a few of those myself.

★

The sheen of them, so and so's shy smile.

★

Care's An Easy Living.

★

Space 1999: Between Your Ears.

## MAKING IT

“Art is medicine for imbeciles” — Ted Berrigan

“Who is going to work with Irene?”

Everybody demurs, the air’s thick with protestations,  
Tantrums, claws appear – and Irene is plumped  
Down at one of the round tables. “John,” says Sam,  
“Would you like to work with Irene today?”

I don’t say anything, not wanting to seem eager  
Or crawl. Pick some clean white cards, markers,  
Pencils, stencils, shout her down, shove  
A red pen in her hand, and set her to draw  
Hoping the miracle of Monday daycare will occur.

Irene is right there, stabbing me with her pen,  
Scribbling a violent square with cross-hatched bars.  
White teeth are pulled to gums, an excited screech.  
I switch the red to mauve and cobalt blue  
And it’s a reasonable start. Broken everywhere, spluttering  
Like a damp bonfire with petrol underneath

Her lines crackle and fizz. I grab the stencil  
Snatch a blue felt-tip from her fist and write  
Irene Irene Goodnight. 26. Nininini. An eggshell, a heart, an arrow –  
All a bit Tracey Emin, if you know what I mean,  
And we finish up a whole cellophane packet of silver stars.

How quickly these hours wear on  
Quiet, intense, encapsulated days  
That might have been a lesson to her  
Had she understood the words passed  
Between us, like pencil and paper.

“What do you think would make Irene’s life better?”  
I enquire of Julian, who is sitting opposite Andrew  
Painting a burnt match stick black with a modelling sable.  
“A silver bullet,” is what he mutters.  
Another subject I wasn’t meant to touch  
Being new at this game and superficially impressive.

I know I will never forget these  
First stumbling steps, remembering them in the way of inside and outside,  
up and down,  
Early manoeuvres I'd hoped would cling to me –  
But will Irene remember this day  
Or see her own finished drawings piled up in a stack like fresh laundry?

Following tea break we pack up all  
The materials in the day care trailer  
And coax wobbly Steve into the back of the minibus, set off  
On a short drive home to lunch –  
Each looking out through a similar window,  
A quintet of improvisers with no common repertoire.

We hate them so these creatures, they don't hate us  
Their horizons are too limited, putting it mildly.  
"It's cruel to keep them alive," says Julian as, adding cruelty to cruelty,  
He pulls Irene's hair, screams in her face to "shut up!"  
A troubled man, in love with a capricious woman;  
I'd do the same to him if my opinions were worth anything.

Back in the kitchen she turns ten slices of toast  
And microwaves four cans of Value Spaghetti –  
A pseudo-aristocratic filly from a nineteenth-century novel  
Bucking to feel the sting of Heathcliff's riding crop,  
A small town flirt with too much time on her hands:  
A headmaster's daughter, her name Stephanie.

Perhaps, though, Julian is right.  
Andy's a machine on the blink  
That should be turned off. These rights are a fiction  
So we can have jobs. And beyond all this  
For Joy and Alison to go on safari, and love it,  
Returning to opine that Irene is a monkey.

Just trying to live in the world has a sinister ring.  
Although others love it seems to make them unhappy  
And I am as unhappy with this as anyone else.  
It's only we who think of them, they can't see us;  
They're in control yet cringe before our rule.

Needling for help, wheedling for attention,  
Playing out their little dramas of malice when your back is turned,  
Each twisting on his hook; a minnow shoal metaphor –  
All of them jumping into your net, uninvited,  
Quite impossible to gainsay or persuade to depart.

But I've resisted too many plain truths for too long  
Although they've been set before me plainly enough;  
I am stubborn. I wanted to believe in those things  
Ubiquitous, free of charge: like a common cold  
Unfolding in each of us, probably, in each of our hearts.

Irene's pictures aren't quite beautiful, or hers  
Because it's me, really, who made them; and later  
Julian tears them to bits in a jealous frenzy  
Thinking I meant them as love notes to Princess Steph,  
Empress of bathtime, bosses' nark. Okay, I like you,  
    you scruffy tart,  
But you're a silly mare, and such a careless madam.