

Selected Poems 1970-2005

Also by Elaine Randell:

Songs of Hesperus

Telegrams from the Midnight Country

Untitled

Seven Poems

A Taper to the Outward Roome

Early in My Life

Long Hair for Birds

This, Our Frailty

Larger Breath of All Things

Hard to Place

Songs for the Sleepless

Beyond All Other: Poems 1970-1986

Prospect into Breath

Gut Reaction

ELAINE RANDELL

Selected Poems

1970-2005

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my mum, Daphne Randell (1927-2005), whose love, encouragement, humour and realism stood me in good stead.

It is also dedicated to my husband Ian, daughters Phoebe, Beatrice and Naomi, and to my friends, with love.

If You Have To Push It May Not Fit

My hands
have changed recently
the skin is rather papery
crinkled foil like
the veins stand out
like small rivers.

Let's face it.
They have been over doing it lately.
Never at rest
always putting on
fastening
pressing down, into, onto up to.
Smoothing out,
cleaning round
pushing back, applying this and that.
Making effort.

The light is blinding
I have over stretched my body
and now it has told me so.
The spirit too willing but pain
dampens its ardour.
The easy tears blotted now by the Daffodils
and Wood Anemone.

The children's arms are like tiny stems
they injure me with such fresh sap.
My soft lips are tethered
homeless.
The muffled world presses its giant mouth
onto my chest.
I must wait my turn
the blackness boasts a terrible hunger.

We Must Learn Not To Breathe

In praise, Paul Auster

The high rise flats; our openness.
Long marshland and seascape
quick growing Kale the
many stones.

Pylons. The lead air.
We have turned to phlegm.
The moon is as quiet as an owl.

We have broken our promises
made alliance with the rain.
This is where the heart is
inhaling the dark.

'To live in this air we must
learn not to breathe.'

The children on the estate clamour
for attention, urgently draw for me
wanting pen and paper, adult attention.

We have rested
together
leant against those huge stories. They tell me
it is for the heart to suggest problems
and for the intellect to solve them
just for the time being.

Kent

Our mute hands.
December rises over the tops of the trees
can we miss so much with our arms
high above the night. Consider this:

The railway threading its polite
thud lulling cattle deep in Barley.

Our home lit up with love nestling
into the ink black night. Swallows
and Starlings. Pheasants and Owls.

All chance germination snapped into
bones, stems, trunks, feather.

A ribbon of sky. I want to talk to you. There are
so many things.

Black square. White edging. Dice. Clip your quick eye.
Ringed ferment clatters
The snow has made a primrose of itself.
Make a note if you can:

The elderly neighbour walks each day
further and further from his home
soon he may not return.

We play one another off against
the other and yet there are no winners.

The stench of mortality shuffling through
all these mad-made things. Banter. Electricity.

A thin stream of water. I am hoping to cross the bridge
before nightfall. Cool the ice.

Frozen river and bleak roadsigns tell me that your heart
is at the cleaners.

*“Men Must Live And Create.
Live To The Point Of Tears.” (Camus)*

for Polly Hartcup

I have been touched by the lives of others
brought home
to their beds by the sullen silence
of their wrists.
Experience is a comb
which nature gives us when we are old.

The worn warm ways of the world
weary with repetition
it is the only form of permanence
that we see.
Our learning
does not come from only our sorrows
look how common is our blood.

*“Who Takes the Child By the Hand
Takes the Mother By the Heart”*

Scabious paper white
turn inside out making the
everlasting eternal gift one heart inside another
like carrying a baby inside of you
she said
my heart forever with yours like that
as a mother is
knowing where the worry is.
My neighbour here died suddenly
planting willow planting oak
the hurricane killed him
she said
never recovered from the shock
of seeing the devastation
couldn't think where to start
so he planted
just planted too many.
As his wife
knew
some things as a wife
you just know
his heart in mine
like that just petered out.

The Path Between the Yew Trees With Grass and Damp With Dew

I

“The simplest lessons are those which are taught last.”

Often by those we least consider.

Humour.

The sun goes down on our minor
squalls and makes rainbows of our fears.

Illness.

Rest. The sleeping willow does not
ask for water waits for rain.

You won't be as you are now again.

II

“For the first time I have noticed
the lost and the lonely, how, with their
curious apologetic gait, they move through
the world like strangers.”

Others stride with determined hatred
some amble honest and humble to salute.

Apology. Accepting triumph
welcoming sleep

watching the dark green trees, the pale
green lawns.

Sitting.

We are sinking beneath the soft stones
of the wearisome. The blue the blue
Anchusa, Delphinium, Purple eyes, green
skirted Viola.

III

“I hoped, I think, that she would recognise
in me what I had already discovered in myself.”

It is perhaps that understanding which shakes
the tall cyrus tree, calls the infant to sleep.
Pretend the sky is only a mouthpiece, the
rain shifting in on the earth.

Lemon trees

fireflies

the handles of the, drawers are shaped like snails.
A lane with high overgrown hedges.

Seeing through the trees to the water in
the pasture. The
Wren sheltering the
tiny nest.

Loved and worried for
the children lay asleep adored, cherished, tired
with sun, with the demands of adults.
We sleep under the bright blue painted ceiling of
golden Nightingales, sun and moon.
The crickets and frogs sing together
patiently safe in the pocket of the valley.

The quotations are taken with thanks from Peter Ackroyd’s book,
The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde.

The Shape Of Things

for Frances Presley

Having long come to know him and
respect and worry
for the things she saw that mattered
her eyes turned away at the idea
of him

with another.

The spring in his curl and the way one leg
crossed gamely

before the other

she vowed never to sleep willingly again

she would

instead be lost in slumber

not asleep

merely dreaming.

Grant O Lord

she said

any careful plans for nakedness

for rest

My heart has long been

in formalin

stained puce white.

It's Easier Now

1

What is left of my Father's harvest
has lapped into the soil to bear fruit.
The birds have that look about them
I saw them thirst and suckle.
Tethered against the moss stones the tiny
violets shy away from fame.
Without the energy to form a shadow he moves
through us into laughter. The light breeze
against my foot, minute ideas chase the tip
of the afternoon. Nightingale heart.

2

Dream air. Flap away you quiet hours.
The heart is but a token of the body.
Stubbled visions and the hair runs wild
with blazing ink.
Walking like this O floss O talcum:
A bright stream of sunlight lights up your hair
but I can't say how this holds me here. Hold on
to that piece of your target. The dry weather
has made the nettles lose their sting.

3

What are the poets doing tonight?
Rounded mouths fill with petals
my arm is lost. It's only paper
on which they write. Despair
maroons. Walk on glass. Sleep on stilts
and eat water.
In the dust skulls wake up.
Look we don't love like the flowers
we haven't got it in us to be that
open.
Of exit and idea it's a wanton
access across your shoulders.

4

I try hard.
The geese in the moonlight. A bloated stiff
dead chicken drowned in sheep dip, white daisies
under my lips my gums have cracked with effort.
All swimmers must take the plunge. It's too easy
to be still let me light up the mud.
My face is lined. A map in retrospect.
Revisions response issues we see we feel we read
we turn over a new leaf and
find no index.

Run Down

In the dark by the Reservoir the lights
move
flash on and off.

My heart is irregular temperate like the
weather; I hear its dangers. I plant the
bulbs slowly this year.

Out in the fields even at dark the men
feed animals shake down hay, level the water.
It is a world we have saved for.

Plums and zinnias in the market place
Old men buy seeds; their hands are like glass,
they touch their caps to me: I am not so old.

Time runs out on us, the person so quickly
vanishes there can be no preparation for the
final disappearance.
I miss my father
my daughters cannot hear his stories.

The strong bindweed in the garden
tiny lilac faces of the michaelmas daisy
upturned hopeful.
The children lay asleep dreaming of
pleasing me
sometimes I am not shouting.