

The Spirit of Odstock

A hospital is where the corporeal meets its spirit -
its mirror opposite – an invisible and weightless force
amongst the contraptions and damaged freight.

built from brick and metal
on a scrubby hill by local men
on one and nine an hour.
Odstock Hospital was bound
by an arterial jeep-wide corridor
open, to whatever an ill wind blew in,

It watched over its city and to the peril beyond.
and in freedom's name
ten thousand wounded came
the cost of war inscribed on them.

Love became urgent, and necessary
when life was uncertain and quick.
look close at the guard house pillar
You'll find Peggy's name scratched
into brick with an arrow plucked
from a GI's heart, softened by age.

And when war was done, the American's gone
Odstock became an empty memorial for a while,

but in the face of:
Want, Ignorance, Idleness, Squalor and Disease
boldness was still called upon.

The idea of help for everyone –
rich or poor, man or woman or child
according to need.

Let privilege squeal all it likes
Let, this time, sacrifice have its reward.

The corridors' footfall's never slackened
Odstock shows its resolve every day
for our fragile bones and flimsy skin,
this mortal battle we cannot win.

This little place is where pioneers don't give in,
the repair of war's human wreckage
the mother of invention:

Students the world over drawn
for what Doctor Barron learned
from the damage and havoc of conflict.

Doctor Darmady building the first Kidney Machine
in his garage from Spitfire parts, wire
and substitute sausage skin.

With Miss Jean Yates - frontierswoman
by his side in the theatre's gleaming light
of her curious new ideas and filtered air,
Laing operating on a horse's cleft palate,
to school himself in the reconstruction
of people's lives,

It's necessary to sometimes dress up
and forget yourself.
There's evidence in the archive
of a bottomless dressing up box
for infectious gaiety at pantos,
good causes, carnivals, celebrations,

parties and other excuses.

The things this place has seen and heard:

Sea Captains rattling collection tins in town
with nurses in costumes of many nations;
carnival queens down the ages;
from hats and pearls to mini-skirts;

Tony Rossey, burns consultant
as a passable caterpillar.
renowned cyclist of the corridors,
Matron Rose O'Malley
the clopping front legs of a pantomime horse;

consultants smiling through the lampoons
of their small conceits and funny ways.

The shortage of nurses, is nothing new,
nor are nurses from overseas –

They came here from everywhere
travelled to and from the infirmary
on the cream and maroon double-decker bus.

staff voted to welcome them from Germany,
some with just one small bag,
their homes and family lost to war.

Jewish Nelli Fisher who fled Vienna
on kinder transport, would marry
another refugee and nurse servicemen
through their plastic surgery.

Nigerian Bessie Pearce and her friend
danced to work across frosted grass

In those early NHS days
newspapers printed photographs
of vulnerable and dying patients
lying on bare mattresses
in dilapidated rubbish-littered rooms,
imagine that;

In Nineteen-Seventy-Four nurses
protested through the town for fair pay,
imagine that;

On the 18th of January Twenty-Two
nurses stamped their feet all day long
held placards calling for decent pay,
the cold buried itself in their pockets
as the light slipped away
and the rooks came home to roost,
imagine that;

A charity fund-raising poster in a corridor
asks people to walk through fire
and over broken glass,
imagine that;

junior doctors picketing,
ambulances held in queues - imagine that;

some have left, some for overseas
not because their unearned wealth is taxed too much,
but because home is a cold house
and the pay isn't nearly enough,

Anniversaries have come and gone,
banners unfurled, cathedral services held,
prayers said and hymns sung, bishops have spoken
and Wood Falls Brass Band has played
Fanfare for the Common Man –

Imagine Odstock emptied out
and stripped to the bone,
left to the brambles
imagine a tree falling
unheard in the woods
imagine us then.

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