INTRODUCTION

An ugly, lovely town (or so it was and is to me) . . .
This sea town was my world; outside a strange Wales, coal-pitted, mountained, river-run, full, so far as I know, of choirs and football teams and sheep . . ., moved about its business which was none of mine.

– Dylan Thomas, *Reminiscences of Childhood*

I was born on the border, and we talked about ‘the English’ who were not us, and also ‘the Welsh’ who were not us.

– Raymond Williams

The songs on *Skull Orchard* are mostly about Newport, the ugly, lovely town I was born in, and the not so strange Wales beyond. My mum was from the valleys and my dad was from the ‘Port. Like Raymond Williams, he thought of himself as neither English nor Welsh, but on that point he and my mother would never agree. Her family was full of miners, rugby players, pigeon fanciers – there was even the odd Welsh speaker. I moved up to Leeds in 1976 (the year they closed most of Llanwern steelworks) and then to Chicago in 1992, but the eyes of an exile can’t help looking back, and I can’t help going back there.

Newport is full of ghosts for me now, and sometimes when I walk the streets of the town centre I feel like a ghost myself – lost, gone, unrecognizable . . . an invisible man. My dad used to take me and my brother Dave down to the docks on Saturday mornings to see the big Soviet cargo ships and the squat little tugboats. You can’t even get in there now, though there’d be precious little to see if you did. Outside the dock gates, where the Transporter Bridge straddles the brown, tidal Usk, lies Pillgwenlly (or Pill, for short). Like Tiger Bay in Cardiff, people came there from almost everywhere on earth, and anything a lonely sailor might need was always close at hand. As teenagers we were drawn there, to the pubs that turned a blind eye, crazy hot curries, the jazz club, the folk club, and smoky after-hours joints where Joe Strummer, for one, heard reggae music for the first time. Johnny Sicolo, a former ship’s cook who ran the legendary punk-rock club TJ’s, was from Pill. His dad got off a boat from the Seychelles and forgot to get back on.
Like most seaport towns, Newport’s eyes were fixed on the horizon. There was so much leaving and so much arriving. Even the accent isn’t strictly Welsh – there’s a hard, urban a and a bit of Bristol in there somewhere, which is true of my family as well. Once I sat with my Uncle Bob as he traced our family tree back to ‘some posh bloke from England who used to come round every six months.’ So there we were, culturally muddled and racially impure, with class divisions apparent even at the tea-table. During the miner’s strike my dad, a Ted Heath Tory, would have to grit his teeth as my grandmother screamed ‘Scab!’ out of the back window of his Volvo at the passing coal trucks.

I was born the same week the Sputnik went up, in a maternity hospital in Caerleon, an ancient Roman settlement with a ruined bathhouse, sunken amphitheater, and loads of pubs (one of which was formerly run by Anthony Hopkins’ parents). We lived up the Gaer, and from our junior school we could see the docks and the Channel and the weird-colored smoke and flames escaping from the petrochemical plants at Avonmouth. Our playground was an ancient British fort, where my dad once sat in a hole in the ground with a single mortar shell waiting for the Germans to come. At night his mother
TOM JONES LEVITATION

Where ever you wander
Where ever you’ll be
Up there in the Rhondda
Down here by the sea
We’re calling you home,
   calling you home
And this time it’s to stay

And I, I can fly
Over the clouds and over the rain
And I can see the greedy hand
Of the vandals who ravaged the land

It’s just waiting to happen
The equation’s the same
And the rules are as dirty
Though everything’s changed
I see it all, you’re still so small
And disasters will take new names

And I, I can fly
Over the valleys and over the hills
And I see the secrets
The kisses and quiet
I see the moonlight in the valley
It’s taking me back
Where the earth is still black
And the murderer lies under your feet
Taking me back . . .
WHEREVER YOU WANDER, WHEREVER YOU'LL BE UP THERE IN THE RHONDDA, DOWN HERE BY THE SEA WE'RE CALLING YOU HOME, WE'RE CALLING YOU HOME AND THIS TIME IT'S TO STAY.


WHEREVER YOU WANDER, WHEREVER YOU'LL BE?

TOM JONES - LEVITATION

Aberfan

River Usk

WSW
One of the Langford traditions was to drive for miles and miles in order to walk up Rudry Mountain in Glamorgan (it’s called Rudry Mountain, though Rudry Modest Hill or Rudry Quite Large Tump would be more accurate names for it). There were adders there, actually allowed to roam the wild without a BBC film crew to record every wiggle and hiss.

My confrontation with a Rudry adder is a cherished family legend, many times retold at the watering-holes where aunts gather. At the time, I was young enough to be in the habit of carrying a large plastic sword and scabbard wherever I went. It was a sunny day, and they found me carefully keeping the coiled snake in my shadow because (according to hazy memories of something I’d read in the Children’s Encyclopedia) this was supposed to stop it getting overexcited. My plan was to lure this reptile into the scabbard – which was just about the right size – and carry it triumphantly to Cardiff Zoo. Instead it slid off into the bracken.

Unlike many of our family legends, this one is entirely true. But I never quite believed the uncle or cousin who knew for a fact that we’d all been in deadly danger, because [voice drops to a low, blood-curdling tone] a friend of a friend had seen just such an adder uncoil like a spring and leap thirty feet to fix its fangs in the doomed victim.

Though I never managed to import adders into the household, we did once find a slow-worm at the far end of Burnfort Road from our old pebbledashed house there. ‘It’s not a snake,’ I learnedly explained, ‘it’s a legless lizard.’ We then discovered how to tell the sex of a slow-worm: if it promptly gives birth to a litter of jelly beans, it’s a she. The jelly beans twitched feebly. Dad performed Caesarian operations with a razor blade, releasing tiny silver snakelets with black stripes down their backs. They were almost unnervingly cute.

We kept the family in an old fishtank and fed them gourmet slugs, but maybe the wrong kind of slugs since the mother quietly died in there. The surviving little ones staged a mass escape while being exercised on the back lawn, and vanished into the rockery. For all I know, whoever now lives in the Burnfort Road house is still wondering what idiot established a breeding colony of snakes in the garden. Don’t worry! They’re only legless lizards.
It is not true that my experiments with home-made explosives left Newport High School an insurance write-off that wasn’t worth repairing. Not long after I left, though, the school moved from its St Custard’s redbrick building near the railway station to a dull new home in BETTWS, well outside town on the Cwmbran road. I was moved to commit blatant plagiarism of John Betjeman:

*The High School’s transplantation*
*In nineteen seventy-two*
*Has left for contemplation*
*A rather dismal view.*
*On masonry and woodwork,*
*The concrete dust collects:*
*Sing praises to the good work*
*Of female architects!*  

Our old headmaster D. Parry Michael followed his school to Bettws, and I went to see him there on some now forgotten errand. He kept me waiting in his outer office while he and other visitors – including that female architect – sang the whole hymn for my benefit. Of course I deafly couldn’t hear a word through the closed door, but it gave me a warm glow when DPM told me afterwards.

*Within that grey emporium,*
*Who knows what madness lurks?*
*How like a crematorium,*
*How like a sausage-works!*
*How high the phallic tower*
*Thrusts upward through the air,*
*To symbolize the power*
*Of teachers everywhere!*  

A touch of poetic licence there, since the ‘tower’ was hardly more than a tall narrow chimney. The word before that tended to get mumbled when sung on official headmasterly occasions, like one of those bits of the National Anthem that no one quite remembers.

*O concrete grey and dismal:*
*Behold the wondrous sight!*  
*
*O corridors abysmal,*
*O gay fluorescent light!*
*Sing on, with hymns uproarious –*
*From rain and storm aloof –*
*Look up! and oh how glorious,*
*It’s leaking through the roof . . . *

Jon’s whole secondary school career happened at Bettws. He reported bitterly that the older staff from Newport High had somehow acquired a deep suspicion of pupils called Langford and tended to blame them for just about any unsolved crime. I couldn’t possibly comment.

P.S. Early in 2010, yielding to everyone’s opinion of its architectural value, the decrepit, weather-stained and horrible Bettws school was demolished. To us it seemed hardly any time since it was shiny, new and horrible.
Inside the Whale

We saw a better world just around the corner
Time’s arrow pointing down some happy trails
Big, clear dreams arising over the event horizon
But no light escapes
From inside the whale
Long blue summer nights, some basic human rights
The lunar landing craft, a donkey’s ear and tail
All swallowed up as midnight struck
It’s so dark down here
Inside the whale
An end to hunger, equality, under the sea
Inside the whale
Progress, progress, rose tinted glasses
cock-eyed optimism all cracked and paled
And all the astronauts and the Kennedys got caught
Down in the depths
Inside the whale
So naive, this white boy’s dream
Tucked up in bed
Inside the whale

DOLPHIN INFORMATION AGE
It was the dolphin who told me about the old sea captain and all the fuss you people made. I have to say it didn’t ring any bells at all. Dolphins are really smart, smarter than you could
ever imagine. This one had read the book from cover to cover and when she finally bumped into me – literally: she collided with my scarred white flank somewhere off the west coast of Africa! – she could scarcely believe it. She never even saw me (so much for that mighty dolphin sonar).

She said you’d been looking for me forever. How was I supposed to know? ‘You’re most famous,’ she clicked. ‘You’re bloody mythic,’ she added with a frantic nodding screech. Apparently, I discovered, I am the very rarest stuff of legend. This dolphin knew everything. She even knew my name, which at that time was, of course, still unknown to me. Dolphins don’t have names; they’re way beyond all that. So we’ll just call her Flipper.

THE FIRST RETURN TO THE DEEP
Like me, she ditched dry land hundreds of generations ago. The time was right. All that earthly tattle and crap was weighing her down, the gravity of it all depressed her. With every hailstone and pecan nut that fell and cracked her rapidly expanded mammalian skull she inched deeper into the wetlands, before finally shedding her fur and feet to slip back beneath the waves forever. Too much responsibility. It was the only intelligent thing to do. Who has the will to stay grounded when right next door the neighbors are frolicking in the pool?

But even as she soared through the warm bright bubbly blue, Flipper still nursed a hankering for that old abandoned world of dust and roots and shale. She was endlessly curious
INSIDE THE WHALE

WE SAW A BETTER WORLD JUST AROUND THE CORNER

BIG CLEAR DREAMS A-RISING DOWN SOME HAPPY TRAILS

TIME'S POINTING TO A RISING OVER THE EVENT HORIZON

BUT NO LIGHT ESCAPES FROM INSIDE THE WHALE

ALL, A DONKEY'S EARS AND TAIL, THE LUNAR LANDING CRAFT, SOME BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS

LONG BLUE SUMMER NIGHTS, ALL SWALLOWED DOWN HERE...

SO NAIVE, THIS WHITE BOY'S DREAM

TUCKED UP IN BED, INSIDE THE WHALE...
SKULL ORCHARD REVISITED
Jon Langford with the Burlington Welsh Male Chorus

1. TUBBY BROTHERS
2. VERDUN
3. LAST COUNT
4. BUTTER SONG
5. SENTIMENTAL MARCHING SONG
6. YOUGHAL
7. TRAP DOOR
8. INSIDE THE WHALE
9. I AM THE LAW
10. GREEN VALLEYS
11. PILL SAILOR
12. PENNY ARCADES
13. MY OWN WORST ENEMY
15. I’M STOPPING THIS TRAIN
16. DEEP SEA DIVER
17. TOM JONES LEVITATION
18. THE BALLAD OF SOLOMON JONES
19. MESSAGE FROM NEWPORT

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