

The Prince of Wails

Stephen Knight's two previous collections, *Flowering Limbs* (1993) and *Dream City Cinema* (1996), were both shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize. His novel *Mr Schnitzel* (2000) won the Arts Council of Wales Book of the Year Award. Born in Swansea, he now lives in London.

From reviews of *Dream City Cinema*:

'Knight's is an urban world, edgy and strangely lit, at its most vivid when described in the echoey full rhyme that he handles so well.'

– Helen Dunmore, *Observer*

'A masterpiece in miniature, packed with surprisingly enthusiastic and musical treatments of entropy, whether universal or personal, by a top craftsman with a quirky and disconcertingly loveable voice.' – Robert Potts, *Guardian* (Books of the Decade)

also by Stephen Knight

POETRY

Flowering Limbs (Bloodaxe, 1993)

The Sandfields Baudelaire (Smith/Doorstop, 1996)

Dream City Cinema (Bloodaxe, 1996)

FICTION

Mr Schnitzel (Penguin, 2000)

FOR CHILDREN

Sardines and other poems (Macmillan, 2004)

AS EDITOR

I am twenty people! A third anthology from The Poetry School

(with Mimi Khalvati; Enitharmon, 2007)

THE PRINCE OF WAILS

Stephen Knight

B editions

for Ted

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*Dad somehow meets my daughter
when she is tall and he is back
in the garden of the house where I was born.
Side by side and still above the water
shining in the goldfish pond, they look
for what? A tail? Two eyes? A face
neither would be able to discern
now afternoon is changing into night?*

*The surface of the pond is black.
What happened to the time?*

*Did I turn
to register an alteration of the light
then drop at my feet that bedtime book
I was reading aloud, into space?*

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'Happily Ever After' won a small prize in the 2010 *TLS* Poetry Competition.

Commissioned by Lavinia Greenlaw for *Signs and Humours: The Poetry of Medicine* (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2007), 'The Nightingale Standard' is constructed from material found in *The Family Physician* (The Caxton Publishing Company, 1951).

An earlier version of the poem in boustrophedon was commissioned by Jude Winnan and broadcast in 1998 by BBC2 Wales on Swansea Night.

'Our Father' responds to a poem of the same title by Alan Perry.

Thanks to Paul Henry, Daljit Nagra and Oliver Reynolds for their advice; to my brother for the ubi sunt; to my daughter for her orthography; and to Kate Knight, these poems' first reader.

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The Prince of Wails

Thank You for Having Me

everyone's packing up everyone's going home
the girl guides and the traffic wardens all the souls
the neighbourhood has harboured downing placards
turning signs like *PUKKA-PIES* . . . *they're delicious* CLOSED
CLOSED EVERYTHING MUST GO the dummies stripped of clothes
don't mourn them uselessly [something something something]
men whose shoulders sink a little further from their ears
hail cabs or wait for buses Dora *¡vāmonos!*
The Ink Spots old poor Johnnie Ray The Prince of Wails
The Nabob of Sob running like a younger man
the boy in fluffy slippers and the men on stilts
lolloping past the locksmiths outside New Cross station
HARRY & SON established 1960 now
where are you Harry everyone's going home
it's raining in this poem here come on let's shelter
underneath these rough-and-tumble alexandrines
yonder raindrops dripping off an overhanging word
shaken from umbrellas under awnings *allons-y*
the pink girl in the boob tube in the first class carriage
insects from the cracks in paving stones conquistadores
in tarnished [technical term for piece of armour]
bankers vendors Captain Cook home before it's dark
before the lights are necessary in houses where the chairs
hold out their puffy/threadbare arms to take them in
everyone's leaving clickdripclickdropclickdripclickdrop
so many footsteps now or shadows rounding corners
bone-dry box-shaped holes in car parks everywhere
we have to go home in the end leave the swings
to hang their heads strap you in then steer you back
through the high tide's twigs and plastic see the river
cross that road we took not long ago

A British Summer

My boredom chock-a-block
with furniture – the desk
in bits, the sofa cushions
cluttering the bed, drawers
shoved beneath the dresser
– I stare at Wimbledon
while listening to the man
restretch then clean
the carpets in two rooms.
Suds rumbling in their drum,
the smell of pine detergent
creeping up to me.

Two hours of plucky Brits,
mauve clouds, the covers on,
or grim-faced teenagers
washed up before their spots
have cleared, then I descend
like Norma Desmond,
out of touch, magnanimous;
and all the little dents
where chairs and tables stood
have disappeared, as though
the years of being here
had never happened.

The Nightingale Standard

A sick person who fears his nurse or who knows that her handling of
him will cause him pain [. . .] is liable to get nervous and morbid.

– *The Family Physician*, 1951

An ideal sickroom, facing west:
Ornaments and useless furnishings dispensed with,
Dusted, disinfected pictures on the wall,
Drugs placed carefully in drawers,
Light literature,
My correspondence littering the floor,
Damp dusters for the woodwork,
Beef tea, soon.

Now, I'm drinking cocoa from the nibs.
Clear, like coffee, and most refreshing. Refreshing me.
Wine whey? Milk tea? Egg flip?
– Please. Anything but cocoa from the nibs.

Business-like in rubber heels, methodical,
Nurse contemplates the muscles of my face.

Air hunger
Air passages, obstruction of
Alkalis
Allotments
Amputation
Anvil bone

Stewed according to size and age,
Stewed pigeon next. The trussing string
Removed, it's almost free from grease.
Broiled chops? Stewed sweetbread? Tripe?
– All right. This bird is not restoring me.

18 breaths a minute, 15 when I'm old.

A regular exchange of air:
The bottom sash raised every day;
At night, the top 3 inches.

A slight touch here, the smoothing of a wrinkle there.
The under mackintosh pulled straight.
I ruffle my covers, adopt all sorts of attitudes.
(A benefit, both mentally and physically.)

Business-like in rubber heels, methodical,
Nurse

- keeps back the crowd
- lays, around my bed, linoleum
- dashes water on my face
- applies a little powdered starch
- encourages the bleeding
- gives me ice to suck

Lathered, several times a day, with tarry soap,
I'm trussed from toe to head.

18 breaths a minute, 15 when I'm old.

Looking for the bottle labelled POISON,
Nurse shows her strength of character.
She has given me a sporting chance.

I have no foreign bodies in my feet.
I have no fish hook in my hand.

Russell viper
Rubber bandages
Robert Jones abduction frame
Roundworm
Rigor mortis
Rickety rosary
Reticulitis
Rescue me