

*Sean O'Brien*

## FLYING THE FLAG

The pollarded Bramley appears  
in a flourish of frost and fog  
that will survive the morning  
as the moon retires slowly, going,  
gone in the blue of beyond,  
and low-voiced old couples, out for the sun  
with the grandbairns, in secret, stop  
by the railings once more to consider  
our half-filled bath, the cabbage-stumps  
and desiccated artichokes, the kale-bed  
cleared for planting. Should summer  
come at last, there'll be enough to share.  
Till then, the evermoreish smell  
of someone's bonfire in a dustbin,  
mitigated with a cowl, against the law  
the gardeners wink at. Let it burn.  
Let the allotment manifest  
a green benevolent untidiness  
where time runs quietly away.

When the Union Jack was run up  
under cover of darkness  
on New Year's Day, it seemed  
a secret triumph had occurred,  
and with it came the right to claim  
this tiny pastoral republic  
for a colony, because why not.  
The patriot's a neighbour

I've been glad to share a pint with  
on and off for thirty years.  
He has his reasons, he declares,  
yet cannot name them.

Raspberry canes, and the lines of rigging  
runner beans will climb into the sun,  
courgettes and spuds and pomodoro,  
sweet peas in due season, green apples  
to reclaim the butchered tree: all these  
survive the poison, but the knowing  
has no cure. And I am sick and tired now  
of loud and sentimental people  
who never know quite what to put,  
who cannot tell *A* from a bull's left foot  
but will put something anyway, any old how,  
then afterwards can't understand  
what all the fuss has been about, and think  
it must be personal. It is.

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## STAR OF BETHLEHEM

Your pilgrimage is halted here  
beside the path, beneath the storm  
that would uproot you:

far too few, and none to spare,  
but times are evil: now the tiny  
candour of your stars must be enough.