

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.