

13. POEMS by Tim Lenton

THE TORTOISE AND THE DRAGON

I could see the head teacher's hat
as she approached,

which gave me just enough time
to breathe on the thermometer
and cajole the temperature up
to legal minimum

Heat came from the tortoise, slowly:
it needed a little help

That's right, it was me:
I took the wood from the Dragon –
small pieces, like kindling, nothing really:
some of them with carvings,
which burned as well as any

It was a dead building then,
falling apart,
going down like wheat
for rebirth, as far as I could tell

Funny building: it didn't mean a lot
and we needed warmth to stay alive:
there was no other way to light a fire
in those penniless, empty,
transcendental days

*[Based on an interview with Jack Fincham
and using some of his own words. The
tortoise refers to the tortoise stoves used to
heat the classrooms, all of which had to be
at least 62 °F.]*

UNDERNEATH

There are caves in these hills,
chalk caves under the school
– a gap in their education

Chalk under the hall too,
wide enough to swallow a steam engine
– swallow anything, like the kids

No, I was not gullible:
emptiness lurks in cellars, and
sometimes you could feel it

It rises up and touches you,
or you could hear it in the darkness

It is timeless:
clocks are flung off walls
and there is a mystery woman in the room

We are not alone:
there is a sinister, angry smell
in the riverside studios
where life models behave badly

Nothing you can put your finger on

*[The first part of this poem was inspired by
Jack Fincham's interview, then linked to
remarks made by Diana Lamb referring to
Wensum Lodge many years later.]*

USES FOR BATHTUBS

When they put new, bright bathtubs
into what had been coalhouses,
people were confused

What was the brightness for?

When they came back on the third day
the fitters found

one bath full of coal
one bath full of guinea pigs
one bath full of old, dirty water
(because it was too heavy to
empty)

and some old-fashioned families,
washed out,
waiting for a resurrection

*[Jack Fincham mentioned that when
bathrooms were created in former
coalhouses, possibly in Argyle Street, the
occupiers were not at all sure what to do
with them!]*

BEFORE BANANAS

Nothing left now, just empty ground,
but it all happened here

We lived two steps up from the street
before the days of ice cream and bananas

and we were always under attack:
machine-gunned as we ran from the
rainmakers, bombed by blind Germans

Even my father carried a gun
and meant to use it

Long before our honeymoon in the attic

my brother was running miles
to see if his grandparents were safe
after the siren's familiar song
bounced around the Andersons

Lady Julian's home got a direct hit, straight
from God,
but she and her love had long gone:
we gathered up her possessions

then had to take them back to the nuns,
unlike the gifts the Americans brought us:
the gum, the parties, the babies

Nothing left now where we lived:
no mice, empty ground,
and I'm just like anyone else –
very happy, but sad

*[June Cooney's recollections were
fascinating, and I was a little disappointed
that I only came up with one poem from all
she said. Most of the words in the poem are
hers. I hope she won't mind my reworking
them.]*