

The Thickness of Blood

Julie Anne Gilligan

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This collection first published in 2012 by Monkey Business

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ISBN 978-0-9557606-8-6

http://www.amazon.co.uk/THICKNESS-BLOOD-GILLIGAN-J/dp/0955760682/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1375952835&sr=1-1&keywords=the+thickness+of+blood

'A sure cure for seasickness is to sit under a tree.'
Spike Milligan (1918-2002)

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PART ONE:

FRAGMENTS OF A GREATER DISASTER

'Imagination is more important than knowledge.'
Albert Einstein (1879-1955)

ACCLIMATISED

'We find nothing easier than being wise, patient, superior. We drip with the oil of forbearance and sympathy.' – F Nietzsche (1844-1900)

Explain rain to an alien,
A foreigner and unfamiliar
With weather here.

Explain, with a confident air,
That we know about drought:
'76! What a year!

When we acquired tolerance
And adapted to the drinking
Of chilled beer.

Nod as though we know
We are knowledgeable
About hurricanes.

'87! We lost more trees than
Than some places ever had.
We are fortunate.

Do not forget our tornados;
Home-grown twisters, plucked
Fresh from our English waters.

Smile to show we understand
About disasters, bad news
And views on survival.

Explain how the residents cope
Admirably; are well-prepared
For anything
Except the wrong kind of snow.

British Rail's Director of Operations, Terry Worrell, blamed the 'wrong type' of snow for train delays in February 1991

TORREY CANYON 1967

It was a slick performance
Graceful in its rolling way
Skin on skin
Separate yet unrefined

It was like a nest of snakes
You must count the heads
Watch them all
Squirring for attention

It was a Herculean task
Requiring strength of character
The Right Stuff
For tactical manoeuvres

It was a vicarious adventure
Into someone else's domain
The wrong channel
Reflecting other offensives

It was a deadly premonition
Implicit in the gulf of silence
In between
Layers of platitudes

It was a perfect target, surrogate
Practice for the real thing
Sadly missed
Proving force and accuracy

It was the sirens' call, parable and parallel
It is so hard to fly, tarred and feathered

March 1967: the tanker *Torrey Canyon* ran aground on Seven Stones reef between Scilly and Land's End. 31 million gallons of oil killed much marine life. Dispersal attempts failed and the slick was bombed by the RAF.

'*The Right Stuff*' Tom Wolfe 1979; film version 1983.

PARTICULARITY

It's no accident of nature
Nor a quirk of human nurture
That we're all fabricated
Out of particles of matter
But should that matter matter
As it makes us so particular?
Why does the patter matter
If the pattern is matricular?

WATER BORNE

The shape of a
Water carrier
Forms the
Shape of
Water within.
As people's shapes
Are water shaped it's
Lucky we've got skin
To stop ourselves
From drying out
And to keep
Our insides in.

WATER CARRIER

There was a faithful water-carrier
By the name of Gunga Din
The poet said his *panee-wallah*
Was a better man than him.
But did the poet mean himself
Or the character inside?
We all have those of varied types
But most, we want to hide.

GULL'S EYE VIEW

'Begin by knowing that you have already arrived.' – Jonathan Livingstone Seagull by Richard Bach (1936-)

How does it feel to wheel and roll
Borne and tossed on the winds of the world?
A silvered streak on misted wings
Where horizons meet in grey upon grey

Borne and tossed on the winds of the world
You plummet and rise on the whim of a breeze
Where horizons meet in grey upon grey
And shoals of light shimmer night into day

You plummet and rise on the whim of a breeze
When stars trip lightly on the oily sea
Then shoals of light shimmer night into day
With a flourish of rainbows laced in the spray

When stars trip lightly on the oily sea
What do you see from your variable view?
Through the flourish of rainbows laced in the spray
You roam and run with the ocean swell

What do you see from your variable view?
Where wild ragged waves are home from home
You roam and run with the ocean swell
And head for the clouds in the cold pink dawn

The wild ragged waves are home from home
To a silvered streak on misted wings
With my head in the clouds in the cold, pink dawn
I know how it feels to wheel and roll

THALASSA! THALASSA!

The sea! The sea!
Cried Xenophon's men
Except they cried in Greek.
Ten thousand strong
They yelled as one
And ran down to the beach.

Why twice? Why twice?
Why double in size?
What need had they to emphasise?
Unless they'd arrived
At the watershed line
And could see the sea both sides.

Some said 'Thalassa!'
And some, 'Thalatta!'
(In the Attic dialect)
But whether the first
Or whether the latter
Both may be deemed correct.

ALAS! ALAS!

1

We run like lemmings to the broiling sea
In a hurry to cast our outsides aside.
We shout to the wind our need to be free
But turn to head home on the rising tide.

2

We were once a thalassocracy
When Britannia ruled the waves
But like the Greeks before us
We gave it all away.

Whether formerly great or latterly lesser
The lesson for each is the same
Alas, Hellas, in the historical test
It's only ourselves we can blame.

LISPS OF THE PEN

HALF NELSON

'Kismet' said Nelson, 'For this is my destiny.'
'Aye aye,' said Hardy, with no trace of irony.

TROY WEIGHT

The face that munched a thousand chips
Would be very small above her hips.

TITANIC PROPORTIONS

The Captain called out to Lightoller
'What is the weather like tonight?'
Lightoller looked then back he hollered:
'Icy. No ships in sight.'

MARINADE

*'I'm learning to fly, but I ain't got wings.
Coming down is the hardest thing.'*

When I was a child and I pulled a face
I was told it would stick, to my disgrace.
I was told to watch for a changing wind
Or the glower, the frown or silly grin
Might be glued forever for all to see
On my ignominious physiognomy.

Then I was told to aim for the sky,
But I could do anything else, but fly.
It would not work by force of will:
I could not move from standing still.

How strange life is, I thought, because
I had dreamed of being an albatross.
With wide grey wings I would fly at last;
Broad and strong, they'd ride the blast
Of the wind and rain and the stormy sea
And every day there'd be fish for tea.

Then I was told that we could be
Reborn in forms (except for trees)
That we deserved through good or ill
A snake perhaps, or fish, or ... krill?

Then I found for myself and I read it alone
The Rime of a seaman, a 'greybeard loon.'
From his ice-bound ship his plea was heard:
He was led through the floes by an enormous bird.
But this nameless Mariner would suffer because
He killed – with his cross-bow – the Albatross.

Then I thought a lot about what it might mean;
If I'd been given my wish, that could've been me;
What a terrible thing if I came back to be
A lion or tiger, in the middle of the sea.

We thirst for knowledge and we thirst to be free
But the needs can't be met by the undrinkable sea.
It's the edge of reason as the Mariner found:
Leave the past behind, or it'll weigh you down.

I'll remember this lesson: it might be the key
To why everything's worse when it happens at sea.

*I'm learning to swim, but I ain't got fins
Learning to try is the hardest thing.*

First two lines from 'Learning to Fly' 1991 by Tom Petty (1950-)

'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)

THE SHIPPING FORECAST IS HISTORY

Before the news and after tea
We used to listen every night
And thought of those out on the sea

Their names are part of history
Dogger, Fisher, German Bight
Before the news but after tea

Defined by lines not clear to see
How did they know just what was right?
A thought for those out on the sea

Rivers, ports and islands, seas
Humber, Thames and Dover, Wight
Before the news and after tea

Lundy, Fastnet, Irish Sea
Plymouth Sound and Portland Light
For those in peril on the sea.

Names worth the cost of licence fee
Partly habit, partly rite
Before the news but after tea
Remember those out on the sea

One name deserves a special prayer
Alas, abandoned Finisterre

In February 2002, the sea area known as Finisterre since 1949 was renamed Fitzroy after the founder of the Meteorological Office.

DROUGHT '76

I danced to the sun's tune that year

When skeletal stubble-fields lay exhausted
Waiting for the plough
And I danced with the wind
An undercover city-slicker, at a slower pace
Time and place were no more defined
So I danced to the sun's tune that year

Ribbon-cordoned standpipes
Another front for stirrup pumps
Stiff upper lips hid tightened tongues
Sheep dead on by-roads laid out to dry
Ignored by crows too high to care
And long-drowned villages emerged
In mud-crazed resurrection

Men with guns, their anger fuelled
By heat and dust, spat their curses like shot
They did not like the dance, my celebration
They could not look beyond their spoiled fields
Or see themselves as the desecrators
Harvest was past, only drought lingered
But I danced to the sun's tune that year.

ABOVE THE STORM

I'm sitting, twisted in my Airbus window seat,
One hand against the inner pane to shield my view.
The man cut off from his own reflection
Is immersed in a book of cartoon art.
My daughter, between us, sleeps.
Good fortune in the no-frills, free for all,
That these two spaces were left, for us.

After all, it may be possible to be wary
Of young men who laugh into books.

Darkness fills the frame for now
But for the regular pulse of red
The port light showing our direction
To a disinterested world.

It's the best position, the place to be,
Above the wing, stable, reassuring

And perfect for observing the mechanics,
The hydraulics involved when landing.

Thunderstorms now line our route
But shall be avoided by the pilot
Although
We must keep our seat belts on
As even so
There may be some 'lumpy bumpy bits'
Which the lumpy bumpy stewardess
Describes
To those who fear real words
Like turbulence.

We were cruising at thirty seven thousand feet
But my body tells me we are higher now
With a change in angle and a lighter head
The steady thrum of engines
Drowns the sounds of thunder
But once or twice I feel a deeper rumble.
The play of light is brief
And frivolous against the night
A game of tag from cloud to cloud

Thor and Zeus playing pétanque
A man-thing for women to observe
Applaud and pretend to understand

RESOURCING

'Water, water, everywhere, nor any drop to drink.' – The Rime of the Ancient Mariner by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)

We're tapping the aquifers of ancestral memory
Channelled by nature in rivers of blood
Where is the source if hope springs eternally?

Streams of unconsciousness flow into analogy
Squeezed in proportion unblocking the flood
We're tapping the aquifers of ancestral memory

Trapped between layers, to become sedimentary
Squashed into shape we are formed from the mud
Where is the source if hope springs eternally?

Our forefathers' stories flow down through our history
An inherited dreamtime, our original good
We're tapping the aquifers of ancestral memory

We slow as we're ageing like river to estuary
Leaving just footprints to show where we trod
Where is the source if hope springs eternally?

Leaping for meaning with common alacrity
We pass on life's learning, our spiritual food
By tapping the aquifers of ancestral memory
We return to eternity, the source of our hope.

RELATIVITY

'In necessary things, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; in all things, charity.' – Richard Baxter (1615-1691): motto.

I followed the cliff path
Worn down by generations
The sheep-nibbled turf still dew-covered
So undisturbed
As if it never changed

I imagined the sun's warmth
Rising over lands to the west
As it mixes with the chill morning air
So unrestrained
As if they were never apart

I stood at the cliff top
And gulls flew below me
Mocking me on my higher ground
So unedifying
As if they understood jealousy

I was so close to the edge

GETTING KNOTTED

'The English language has a deceptive air of simplicity. – Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957)

When you're feeling all at sea
And no longer see the point
When the waters are uncharted
And you think you've lost the plot

I'm flagging up a theory
Or it could be just a hunch
That the plot is never really lost
It is merely out to lunch

It's important to remember
That the x that marks the spot
Could be put in just to fool you
To cool it if you're getting hot

A sou'wester's not a vest
If there's any cause for doubt
Nor is it ever full of wind
But keeps the outside out

Don't try to be too clever
In discerning sheets from ropes
But be clear of reefs in knots
Or destroy your best laid hopes.

You could knot your sheets together
And go wholly overboard
Or batten down your hatches
'til the storm has blown its gaff

But veering into doldrums
Will scupper all your plans
And erase all the traces
Of the treasure close to hand.

Some people seek adventure
And around the world they'll roam
But miss the sense of history
Surrounding roots and home.

THE BOYHOOD OF RALEIGH

There! Out there! The old salt stabs the air
His finger crooked to hold it tight
That tenuous thread still clear and bright
He still sees lands beyond my sight, out there.

There, is where I'll be, where I shall go
To find myself one day. Not yet awhile
But later on when I am grown. Then
I'll be the one who weaves the yarns
Of far flung lands and gold and pearls
Of my own fair ship and her loyal crew.
And she'll be tall, tall and strong
Like the English oaks that made her so.

I can hear it all now. The creaking decks,
The groaning of timbers and the slapping of sails
And the crack as they pick up the wind.
The smell of tar and salt in the air
Where white foamed waves are welcome friends.
See the masts and spars and the rigging too
And the four culverin at her waist
And the Master of all who stands at the rail
While the wailing cries of the herring gulls
Join the call to up anchor and away.

I shall ride with the wind and run with the tides
Like the old sailor had told me before
In my own fine ship on the high rolling seas
Where the waves are as tall as his tales.

Inspired by the painting 'The Boyhood of Raleigh' by Sir John Everett Millais.

SAYONARA

"I play for Seasons; not Eternities" says Nature.' – Modern Love by
George Meredith (1828-1909)

Silence for now

Cries from the darkness

The same question

With no answer

Cut from the bias of ownership

Left only remnants, thoughts,

Clues to ponder

In Fukushi-ma, Sendai, Miya-gi,

Spectres of Hiroshi-ma, Nagasa-ki

Rebuild, rebuild

Again

Rebuild, rebuild

A few simple monuments

To materialism:

Fresh clean water,

Warmth and shelter

Tsunami,

A whisper of a word,

Conjurer of images,

Destruction and power

And how it feels

To be utterly powerless

Even to hope.

On Friday 11th March 2011 a magnitude 9 earthquake 43 miles off the northeast coast of Japan triggered a powerful tsunami reaching 40.5 metres high, travelling 6 miles inland at Sendai. As well as moving Honshu 2.4metres east, the earthquake shifted the Earth on its axis up to an estimated 25cm.

GRADUATION

Ignorance is bliss, they say.

You should read between the lines.

I rather think I do, you know.

Some things are better not to know.

But knowledge forms a powerful mind.

And ignorance is bliss they say.

You say that now, but when the post arrives

With bad news? **Do you know before you read?**

I think I do. **But do you know...**

...when sometimes life just gets too

Rough? **And common sense eludes the mind?**

So they say. **That's when the bliss of ignorance**

Appeals? It would. **But then I think again.**

You think too much! **What good is being ignorant?**

I'd rather think than know. **Then do!**

A little knowledge is a risky thing

Sometimes it's hard to see the signs.

Of ignorance? **It's bliss they say.**

They do. **Yet I think I'd rather know.**