CLOUDS CANNOT COVER US

POEMS BY JAY HULME

ABOUT

CLOUDS CANNOT COVER US

We are incredibly proud at Troika to be publishing this new collection by Jay Hulme, a poet we admire profoundly and a person we have loved working with.

We think he has a unique voice and form of expression. We believe that the utter sincerity of his writing, and his voice, is strikingly powerful and deeply thought provoking. We believe Jay's voice is one that should be heard.

Jay says:
When it was decided this collection would be for teenagers I was left with this determination, that this collection wouldn't speak down to anyone, that the world I portrayed within it would be the world we live in, that there would be no attempt to make reality "appropriate for children". People seem to forget that teenagers live in the same world as everyone else, and they face the same struggles adults face every day. Teenagers deal with racism and sexism and disability and poverty and so much more that we don't even see. The things that are traditionally seen as inappropriate for young people to see, are so often the same things they experience day to day.

I remember growing up as a confused working class, transgender, young carer, and never seeing anything in literature that acknowledged any of those things. I accept that in recent years literature has become braver, with books acknowledging those things being published, but the world has also got undeniably scarier and more divisive in those years too. Despite the growth of bigotry and hatred, despite all the economic and cultural uncertainty, there's still this pervasive idea that young people should be relentlessly happy, that these years should be their best; but that's not how it works.

Some of the poems are based on, or re-worked versions of, poems I wrote when I was still in high school. Poems about the fear, and anger, and burning sense of injustice that I felt, when I looked out at the world as a teenager, and saw not only this encroaching cloud of darkness, but a constant unwillingness among those who could do something about that darkness to listen to young people like me. I think it's true that nobody listens to young people, not really. When they claim to do so, it's almost always tokenistic and patronising, but age has nothing to do with the worth of people's opinions and words. Just because someone is young, that doesn't negate their anger, or their fear, or the views they hold, and it is important to remember, and accept, that some of the views expressed in these poems, were originally formed when I was between the ages of fourteen and sixteen.

My aim, with this book, was to create something that acknowledges the dark, and the fear, and the cruelty that is all around us, but to address the fact that all is not lost, that young people are the future, not just as a clichéd saying, but as an undeniable truth. I wanted to share the truth I found in my own experience, that there is still good to be found in the world, so long as you're willing to look for it. The layout of the collection is a journey, from confusion, and fear, and anger, to hope. The poems continue, as I have done, on a journey, from the terror of a future empty of hope, to a life that is absolutely full of it. Hope can only come from within, and to create it, you first have to accept the negatives. There cannot be hope, in a perfect world, because, in a perfect world, there would be no need for it. I have been damaged by this world. In my 22 years on this Earth I have seen people die before my eyes. I have seen people I love turn from me, simply because I'm transgender. I have run from who I am, and who the world wanted me to be. I have been the victim of hate crimes, and bureaucratic incompetence. But I have seen the world try to change, and I have cultivated, in myself, a rich vein of hope, and honestly, if I could live my life again, and live it without any of the fear, or pain, or horror I have felt, then I don't think I would, because without that, I would be without hope. This book is about hope. Yes, there's darkness, but darkness only exists in contrast to light. Without one, the other cannot exist.

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ONE

BIRTH

I was born with two hands
spread against white bed sheets.
My father showed this to me,
he was into photography
back then.

I was told that his eyes
were the first ones I looked to,
his misty grey meeting pale blue,
my eyes have changed like babies do,
but his have stayed the same.

Years later I found the photos,
sitting alone in a drawer of dust,
the negatives missing, the camera just
a pile of glass, a square of rust,
these memories in time.

I COME FROM

I come from two types of coffee,
cooling in the kitchen on a Monday night.
I come from eating together,
from *"Lay the table"* and *"you better eat it
because you'll get nothing else."*
I come from travel
in the back of a van,
from *"Lie down quick
so the police don't see you."*
Sleeping on a shelf,
suspended between the side panels
in the summer.

I come from garages,
and *"Pass me a spanner
from the set in the back."*
I come from oil,
dredged from the mouth
of a weeping engine.
I come from *"You can't"*
so I swear that I will.

I come from fish and chips,
and standing at the counter
as you buy wine and cigarettes at 10 p.m.
I come from fields and factories,
my dreams slipping
through cracks in the concrete,
finding their way back
on the leaves of a dandelion.

I come from school,
twelve flights of stairs
to be pushed down.
I come from bleeding knuckles,
and broken bones.
I come from concrete, and granite,
and shoes that don't fit.
I come from hope,
and find myself lost
in a world entirely bereft of it.

FOUNDATIONS

This house is built on a thousand whispers,
compacted into the earth until they became almost solid.
We trod them in with our boots and our words,
each syllable heavier than we ever were.
Sometimes I think we worry,
if we all stand in the same room will the floor subside?
Are these whispers strong enough to hold us, together?
Is this house strong enough to hold us, together?
Are we strong enough to hold us together?

I wonder if whispers have ever been certified as safe,
if, as a building material, they will ever catch on.
I wonder how many houses stand on foundations like ours,
how many extensions were built, just to spread out the weight,
I wonder how many collapsed,
how many subsided.
I wonder, how many whispers, when trodden into the earth,
does it take to hold up a home?

RED SEA

This house, with its carpets of sewing needles and thumb tacks,
spread out, glinting, like the crests of waves on the ocean.
I wonder if, when I call, my Moses will come to save me;
if he will part the tides, and show me the way.
Until that day, I am on tiptoes in my own home,
a broken ballet with too many steps en pointe,
and I, exhausted, talentless, without the training to spin,
sink, stuck, and bleeding, into this, my newly Red Sea.

832 SQUARE MILES

They said I didn't come from here,
that "here" was just a place, and people come from people,
but so far back as I can see, my family come from here.
I may have been the one to escape, the one to run from here, but I come from here.
My family is not the type to keep records
or to speak about the past
but I know a thing or two about our history.

I know my Grandfather's Grandfather worked in the mines,
all closed now for decades, his for generations,
his hands clawing at the spark of the seam,
in the dark of the Earth, the coal gleam,
I see his eyes like stars, glistening in the breathless black.

I know his Son had a motorbike
and rode it for England, drawing endless ovals in the clouds of dust,
and I know he did what he thought he must
when he stopped for the sake of his family,

and I know nothing of most of the others,
except that this land birthed their Fathers and Mothers
as it birthed mine,
and theirs,
and theirs,
and back.

And I don't care for this city,
it may be my home town, but I know for a fact it's not home,
but it's the place where my blood mingles with the earth and ploughs up a history,
where my blood mingles with the earth and uncovers a legacy,
smudged by the thumbprints of time.

MOTHER'S HANDS

My Mother's hands do not work anymore,
they tremble at the edges,
like magazine pages in a tornado,
like spider webs in a storm.
She used to touch type
so much faster than me,
she offered to teach
but I never took her up on it,
and now she types with one finger,
if she's lucky it makes up a word.
I heard her crying once,
when the scissors didn't work,
when the can opener didn't work,
when her hands didn't work
despite the bones she put in.
They belong to her,
thin, so thin,
stretched out like storm clouds,
trembling at the edges.

PENSION SCHEME

My Father
has been working for so long
his hands do not know
what idleness looks like.
They are always curved,
around a screwdriver, a spanner,
around the handle of a motorbike.
Somehow, they do not look like hands,
but I cannot tell you what else they could be.

And they are darker than the rest of his skin,
tanned from years on scaffolding,
and darker still where tired pores
gave up and let the oil in, that oil,
always there, for as long as I remember,
my Father coming in,
hands mottled black with that oil,
mine black with smears of ink.
I saw a symmetry there,
only his hands were broad,
vast and muscular,
the veins like vines
standing out so far
above the surface of that scaled skin.
I've never seen hands like that
on anyone else,
mystical, somehow.
Worn by so much weather.
So much work.

My Father,
his dark brown beard of my childhood,
the moustache streaked with nicotine orange,
becoming flecked with grey,
then filled with grey,
then simply grey,
with streaks of orange.
His face becoming grooved with lines,
like the isobars on a weather map.
He is not young anymore,
but he's still working.
An emergency surgery,
one organ down,
he's still working.
He will always be working.

My Father
says he must die soon,
and though his Father
almost reached his eighties
before asbestos carried him off,
my Father says sixty years old
seems like a luxury.
That he will never be a retiree.
That for a working man
the days are too empty,
and anyway,
he really doesn't have the money.
Because after years of working, over forty,
his pension pays out £2.60, annually.

So he says he will keep on working,
until one day he'll just
fall from the scaffolding,
like a bird leaving its nest
for the last time.
Fingers spread like feathers,
all the way down.

WORKING CLASS

I was born in a place where stars lose their sky,
where they fall into streetlights, to dim and die.
I was born in a place where concrete cracks under broken dreams,
losing the seams that hold hope together.
"Whatever the weather", we used to say,
thinking that *this* could be wished away,
like so much confetti, after a wedding.
But we were wrong.

The Ofsted reports of schools round here
say there's a culture of underachieving,
and that's kind of true.
But it's a lack of dreaming that's our true affliction,
a predilection for a life that's easy
destroys the dreams of the kids that, maybe,
could have done so much better.

But when your Mum and Dad,
and their Mum and Dad,
and their Mum and Dad,
have never gone to uni,
never dreamed above their station,
then it's hard to see what right you have to betterment.

We are the working class;
and it's true that it's hard to get out, but you see, I'm trying,
and even if I become some high flying millionaire
I'll never forget these streets,
where the first sheets of my story
were written.

For I, like so many others, was told not to try,
that my dreams were too high,
and there was a ceiling over the sky
to stop me from trying to reach them.
It doesn't matter though,
because dreams are what I'm made of,
and I'll make it in the end.
I have to.

A COMPREHENSIVE EDUCATION

You think that comprehensive schools fail
because the students learn less,
that we were born to earn less,
and our intelligence is somehow measurable by postcode.
But ten miles up the road
the private school makes A* students like photocopies;
every one of them born to be exceptional.
But the thing is, so are we,
but I know I'll never become Prime Minister
because my education was free,
and I never wore the old school tie
that is the fast pass to the top.

See, I can have an IQ as high as you,
but I won't get the grades,
because mine are earned in hardship;
in classrooms with leaky roofs,
and teachers who didn't pass with A's themselves.
See, I've never been taught in a school
rated higher than "satisfactory" by Ofsted,
and still some think the difference between us
is aptitude, but it isn't, it's attitude.
Cuz people round here really don't give a crap,
that's that.

We have a culture of underachievers,
and no-one believes us when we tell them our dreams,
as if we are not entitled to have them,
as if we were born for the council estate,
and people will tell us that is where we belong.
They are wrong.
Because we could be amazing,
if only some would let us.
But they won't, they don't,
and they twist the system, making it so much worse,
our prospects are travelling by hearse,
to the pit in the centre of parliament
where they bury the dreams of the poor.

DID YOU FIGHT TO BE HERE?

Did you fight to be here,
punch new things through old walls?
Did you burn the memory out,
to not face what you have done?
Did you rewrite your history with Tipp-Ex and apologies?
Did you hunt?

Did you slip down a stairwell,
when everyone was sleeping?
Each quiet footstep a prayer to the dark.
How were the shadows?
Did they dance to your touch or slide still?

Did you open books of empty phrases?
Each syllable a new fruit
unknown, and untested, and maybe unsafe.
Did you throw them across rooms, sometimes?
Break the spines?
Smooth them down with a sorry,
and a crack in your voice?

Did you fight to be here?
Were your battles the street or the page?
Were they everywhere?
Did they spiral into wars?
Fought with yourself and the world,
each on either side of a torn dust jacket
pointing rusted bayonets at the other,
as if this was worth dying for.

Maybe this is worth dying for.

THE FEET OF GIANTS

When I was little we went to Italy,
my parents took me to every gallery
that didn't have an entry fee,
and between you and me,
this will be their legacy,
because it affected me
far more than a day at Disney ever could.
The marble and wood,
creating a temple that connects
not God and Man
but us with our souls,
filling the holes in our hearts
with paint and glue,
whispering in every language
that you
yes, *you*,
were the only person
this painting was made for.

And when we stared at the statues,
and my light up shoes
shone flashing blues
on the feet of giants,
hands reaching out
to moments beyond my imagining,
I knew that *this* is what we were made for.
Not a gallery tour,
but a moment, alone,
with Michelangelo's David,
or Botticelli's Venus,
as they speak to us;
and though the words are in some
unknown tongue,
that even the multi-lingual
guidebooks can't translate,
it's like fate, whispering in your ear.
And once you've been here, you know,
exactly which direction
your soul needs to go.

POETRY

Poetry may not be a choice form,
the norm through which a point may movement make,
but to all the outcasts, and play casts, and class acts, and classes,
to those whose hearts scream for more than cholesterol and blood,
it's the visceral, vital, vile truths of honesty, clothed in ink and paper.

To the smoke brained child with grasping hands,
dreaming of lands beyond a mind's imagining.
To the sane faced, sad eyed, psychopath in black,
whose crime was writing truths in the inkwell of his skull.
To the fancy boy, with broken bones,
tones lighter than summer in a wanton fog
of bliss, and burden, and endless, glistening rainbows.
To the hopeful heart of scorned love,
pretentious prejudice paralysing its aortas
with prose so dense, even ideas cannot pass.
To the girl who dreams of apartment blocks,
on turbulent seas of music and magazine pages.
To the teacher, with hands smeared in ink,
and the tears of pupils, with no-one else to confide in,
the hopes of a generation, riding on their shoulders of stone.

To these it is truth, for they know in their cores:
that though many think poetry is the words that comprise it,
the whole that they make is magic surpassing
the sum of these singular parts.

THE YOUNG

We walk through alleyways
between broken streetlights,
flickering in time
with our headstrong heartbeats,
neither naïve nor brave,
but somehow apathetic
at the prospect of the danger
we are in.

Our pockets are empty
except for our hands,
and our minds are drowning
in far off lands,
and our ears are ringing
from echoing bands,
and somehow we never go home.

We keep on stepping
but we never leave,
and our lungs are heaving
the smog we breathe,
and we keep on yelling,
we boil and seethe,
and somehow we never atone.

Our throats just scream
at conformity,
as we listen to bands
we're too skint to see,
and all that we want
is just to be free,
and somehow we're always
alone.

FLYING'S LIKE FALLING

I don't know much about anything,
but I'm good with words
cuz words are like flying,
and flying's like falling,
and I'm good at falling.

I've kissed the ground so many times,
I scratched rhymes into the earth, with my fingernails,
hoping one day my fails will become passes,
and I will fly for the first time.

When I was a kid, I dreamed I had wings like an angel,
I found my halo in a box in the pub car park,
it was a stark reality that hit me when I realised dreams
don't come true – especially not the happy ones.

But I keep on writing,
because sometimes I get a man-made halo
when the lights are low on stage, and my hair reflects it a bit,
and from where you sit, I could have wings under my shirt.
Because maybe dreams don't come true,
but it doesn't hurt to have them,
after all when I fall the only reason I get back up
is the thought that one day, I will fly.

Because words, they're just like flying,
and flying's like falling.
And one day I'm gonna find
I have wings on the way down,
and a halo as a crown,
and one day –
I, am gonna fly.

FINDING MY VOICE

When I was younger I got into so many fights
I can't remember which back street I left my teeth in,
I'm amazed I'm breathing;

Because I really should have lost more fights,
it didn't put the world to rights, but it felt better –
and maybe that was just some post fist-fight adrenaline rush,
but it was enough to push me down, and let me relax.

Looking back, it's scary,
that the only thing between me, and expulsion,
were my high grades, and an ability to admit,
that what I was doing, was wrong.

But I was headed for a swan song,
a morning where my anger wasn't enough to let me win
because living life by the skin of your teeth isn't easy,
and if you don't get out young, you're stuck there.

So I ran – so far and so fast I shed the skin of my past
and found a new soul – one that's whole,
not bruised by too many hits. And yeah, bits of me are different,
but I can ignore an affront, and get down my anger in words.

Cuz I found a voice – my voice,
a way to show the heart of me non violently,
and honestly, I'm certain it's saved my life.