

# INN CROWD



**Johnny Fluffypunk**

**Poetry Residency at the York Inn, Churchinford 2021**

**Wander On**    *A Poem for Big Al*

Now here's a man who's wont to get *waylaid*.  
That's no bad thing. They say it's not the destination  
that's important, it's the getting there that counts  
and Big Al, he's one who enjoys the journey.  
Just *stopped in* in Churchinford, y'know, while Cornwall-bound,  
and those far-off cliffs, the crash of surf, they still call,  
but it's a voice too faint to interfere with getting on  
with here and now. Live in the moment, let it take you  
by the hand; it's a policy that's served our hero well.  
Wander on.

Wander on, Big Al  
carpenter and humble ale man  
who *sojourned to the other side*:  
who found, through solid empirical research that  
the apples growing round these parts  
are vessels for a strange and potent Blackdown magic;  
Just the names, for god's sake- *Yarlington. Foxwhelp.*  
*Harry Masters. Slack-mi-Girdle.*  
How the romantic heart stumbles,  
gets drawn toward such beauty;  
before you know, your autumn's spent in lamplit barns,  
stacking cheeses in the creaking press and wringing  
out the fecund blood; Big Al, Pomoma shaman  
to all comers, til the bloody spreadsheets trumped  
the scent of cider singing on November mist.  
His soul knew then, it's time to wander on.

Wander on; Big Al, turner of wooden glories  
furniture-maker, protagonist of a story

of a simple life well-lived.

Wander on, clad in shorts as if life  
were some eternal summer festival;  
and why the hell not? Wander through  
the teeming crowd, sip your beer and  
trust to fate to chance upon a tiny stage,  
a Highlife band from halfway round the world  
that drags you in and blows your mind.

Trust your feet to feel the rhythm,  
trust your voice to find the words.  
Trust that life has something great  
waiting just around the corner  
and wander on.

## A Song for Clair Burton

When I split up with my ex,  
I needed something to do  
and I loved spending time here anyway,  
so I got me some NVQs.  
Now I'm the girl on the griddle  
out the back at the York Inn,  
keeping out of trouble in my little team bubble  
with my sister-in-law and Lyn.

We can do veggie and vegan and gluten-free  
but it's stilton 'n' mushroom chicken for me;  
my man will have a York Scorcher  
cos he likes a jalapeno or three  
and Dan says to me  
*'Turn your hearing aid up, girl,  
they're asking what you'll drink'*

Well, I don't have to think-  
Mine's a gin and lemonade;  
Jaegerbombs at new year  
as the fireworks light up the square outside,  
oh, I've always loved it here.  
And my darling boys, James and Jack  
come down when the rugby's on  
our family orbits this little pub  
like planets around the sun, yes  
our family orbits this little pub  
like planets around the sun.

## Do You Have Puddings?

Yes, we have a whole world of puddings  
Enter ye, and be not afraid;  
we may increase your gullet  
but we will not hurt you wallet  
and you're dentist might not like it  
but it's all home-made.

We do a mean sticky toffee,  
sometimes a banoffee,  
you cannot get enoffee  
of our stuff.  
Make no mistake,  
the choices are tough.  
An abundance of riches.

Anna makes a brownie  
of which the tummy sings

You see,  
the three of us  
we are not witches,  
but we dish up  
magic things.

## A Poem for Dan

This is Dan. He runs this place. Bring to him  
your troubles, dreams and all the your little social schemes;  
watch his face light up as he grants your wishes. *Go for it*,  
he says. Pulling pints, serving dishes, saying *yes*. These are Dan's  
major skills. A love of people, too, and a will to make things happen.

And it's been a long, hard year; make no bones. Pubs are run  
on wings and prayers at the best of times, and these aren't those.  
But, as the phoenix rose from the flames, so The York will rise again;  
though the doors are closed, it's not stopped Dan being Dan. So  
the kitchen's rung to the knives' swish, the crash of pans and his  
takeaways have made our Covid - narrowed lives that bit brighter.

You see, this is what a good landlord does. Steps up to the mark.  
Finds a way. Does what must be done to help his punters, his community,  
get the strength to soldier on. For at the end of day, a pub exists  
as a symbol of the common good; and so, it seems, does Dan.  
Should it be required, he'll raffle meat to fund the school,  
he'll help a sickly child with an auction, he'll get food out  
to those who've got to shield and, come December,  
it's Dan who'll fetch in santa on a tractor.

He drank in here long before he came to run the show;  
this pub is written through Dan's DNA like letters through  
a stick of rock. Like it's written through the village. A place  
like this needs holding close in all our hearts; it's local treasure,  
rare as gold. And so too Dan. As long as pub and landlord are alive,  
life will thrive in old Churchinford. Let's raise a glass to pleasure; to when  
these doors are fastened open once again, and all the good times we've  
had to bottle up flow like ale up the pulled pump...

**Future Primordial** *for Ian Firth*

Beneath the billion stars  
that burn bright over Blackdown

Beneath the gaze of owls  
and the snuffling, screeching  
blanket of the unknowable night

Beneath a ripstop camo brasher sheet  
strung between sentinel trees

Beneath an eiderdown of knitted moss,  
rocking gently in a hammock, he sleeps.

A flint-spark fire, snuggled to embers,  
basks his fancy mountain bike in  
a friendly orange glow, dances on deer  
pelts, hung and scraped and strung to dry,

glints off the whittling knife  
clenched in one sleeping fist,  
the GPS winking softly in the other.

This is how you kick back  
after a hard week at the helm  
of the good ship Parish Council-

defibrillators must be organised,  
dog bins don't install themselves;

navigating the slow seas  
of local legislation  
is a thankless job but  
these things must be done;

then there's the consultancy,  
the family, a home to run  
and other dreams to nurture, too

so when he scrapes some *Ian Time*,  
a few hours to himself,  
he's out of here-

dive thumbs-first into  
the digital wilderness  
or grab the goretex,  
get back to sky and soil.

Like something glimpsed by Blake,  
this is Churchinford Man-  
one for future anthropologists-

hands stretched upward, fingers fizzing  
aerials plugged into the zeitgeist;  
feet dug deep in fecund earth.

He stands on the hilltop, smeared  
in nature, phone beeping recipes  
for wild berry cordial;

this is surely tomorrow today;  
Ian Firth: Future Primordial.

## The Man in Red Speaks Out

After 40 years of keeping secrets,  
it's nice to have one that's a pleasure to keep;  
and having made an art out of creeping  
deep beneath the North Pole ice,  
how good it feels to get to fly  
high above it, lungs drunk on  
innocent air, the bearings set  
for the village pub and a payload  
no one will protest about.

Once near, I'll swap the reindeer out  
for a link box on a tractor, draped  
in fairy lights, a pair of villages girls  
for elves who'll park themselves on  
either side and we'll ride on in,  
a flurry of joy and tinkling bells,  
crashlanding merry havoc  
in the heart of community.

This is such a *special* place.  
And for ten years it's been  
my privilege to minister  
to a tribe of upturned faces  
speechless with wonder.

You see, my shoulders have borne  
some heavy things, stuff no-one  
sane would want to think about,

but right here, right now, in  
the backroom of a village pub,  
I get to gift a pure and simple magic.

It would lift the spirits of the dead.

After, as the sleigh soars upward,  
I feel weightless.

## John Milnes, *Submariner Part 1*

Lockdown? He can't exactly say he felt it bad;  
half his life's been underwater; he's not mad. *Yet.*  
You get confined to base in Churchinford,  
there's worse places to be; you want to try  
a high alert at the bottom of the sea  
There's fresh air. You can walk and talk.  
There's women. Beer. *Community.*

40 years, all told, with submarines, for John,  
and these were nuclear subs. Commander on  
*Revenge. Repulse.* And others, too.  
All through the cold war John  
was lurking, murky in the deep

John explains that  
as commander of a crew,  
there's a few other things  
you're expected to do:  
you're the *de facto* chaplain, for one  
a little training done with a vicar ashore and  
You're in charge of sailors' spiritual needs.  
You calm worried heads  
You bury the dead.  
You get to shed wise light on the dreading  
that treading this strange path breeds.

Weddings, there's less call for.

## John Milnes, *Submariner Part 2*

I read it takes only 15 minutes  
from receiving the order  
to pressing the button,  
sending us over the border  
into areas of experience  
no-one wants to go.

I don't want to know  
how heavy that must weigh.  
That responsibility.  
Day after day after day.

John tells a story; how one Christmas,  
he was holding the service for eighty men,  
together in the submarine's mess, right  
down in the depths of the ocean.  
There was a little organ for the hymns,  
and they lit a couple of candles, and then  
they turned out all the lights.

And John says it was like  
nothing else on earth

Gathered in the blackness  
of the deepness of the sea,  
a human community  
alone with their thoughts  
on Christmas Day;

with hopes and fears and families

somewhere a world away,

and Polaris missiles,

and a button.

The coxswain whispered

*I think we'll leave the lights off, sir*

and so they did.

And there they were,

this fistful of fragile

little people

a couple of candles

against an unthinkable darkness

and a silence so strong, so crystal clear,

you'd swear you could hear the tears

streaming down their faces.

**Forever Home** *for Lyn Clothier*

*I've had houses all over the country  
I've been out in Germany too  
I've lived the life of the army wife  
for years, but now I'm through  
with changing places, changing faces  
and worry and making do  
I want a forever home  
and Churchinford, it's you*

Now don't you get me wrong- the army life's  
wonderful, if it suits you, and for me, by  
and large it did- everyone's got each other's backs,  
and it's meant my kids have grown up strong;  
learned to talk to anyone, to take all sorts;

one of my brood's made it to Australia,  
forages food caught from the sea, swims  
among the sharks. The other boy's in Yeovil,  
which after dark is just as wild and dangerous.

And I've a daughter, and a grandson, little Vinny,  
too- we've all grown up and life's moved on  
and I need a forever home, and Churchinford, it's you

I've spent years with my other half off  
for Queen and Country; six month tours  
in spots that make the News at Ten, and us PADs  
we had to learn to keep each other smiling  
til the boys come marching back again  
It's living with that worry, will he come home

in one piece? Holding on and staying strong and  
it will never cease to amaze me how well  
we learn to live with stress. B ut comes a time  
you want a bit less drama, thank you very much.  
And this village seemed such a *friendly* place,  
ticked our boxes. Through and through. We  
needed a forever home, and Churchinford, it's you.

And now, I work here, in the kitchen in the pub; I  
knock up lockdown takeaways with military efficiency  
and if it all gets too much, we crank the radio up to ten  
and then everything just gets done. It reminds me of  
the good bits of army life, a place like this.  
It's *community*. it's like a warm hug and a loving kiss  
that picks you up and keeps you going...

*I've had houses all over the country  
I've been out in Germany too  
I've lived the life of the army wife  
for years, but now I'm through  
with changing places, changing faces  
and worry and making do  
I want a forever home  
and Churchinford, it's you*

## ***I Belong for Madeleine Walker***

I belong to Churchinford,  
I belong to my community.  
I belong to pub and village shop  
and they belong to me  
but not legally, just in spirit.

I belong to the open mic  
I belong to the buzz that comes  
from humans in a room  
I belong to banging out  
the odd John Martyn tune  
I don't assume it's best  
if I do it by myself.  
I belong to believing music  
is a great collective wealth.

I belong to the animals;  
a few belong to me  
the ones that I refer to  
as my furry family  
a cat with legs you  
cannot count beyond the number three  
and a Spanish rescue dog who is  
turning out to be rather complicated,

I belong to the Blackdowns.  
I belong to autumn fog.  
I belong to wild wet woodland walks,  
I belong to the smell of dog  
Damp dog

I belong to knowing  
mushrooms on a log  
are linked by a carpet of  
mycelium beneath  
the bark and earth.  
I belong to feeling that it  
probably is worth hanging  
onto metaphors for interconnection  
between superficially individual lifeforms

I belong to keeping in mind  
beneath apparent difference  
we are all of one kind.

Every woman, man  
and dog and cat  
and elephant and horse  
every creature, every plant  
and every tree, of course

all of us that share the warm kiss of the sun,  
every one belongs to something bigger.

We belong to jungles, We belong to seas.  
We belong to species. We belong to families.

We all belong to life. We all belong to place.  
We all belong to this tiny bright blue speck of rock  
floating out in space,

So let's look after it, eh?

## **A Poem for Phillip**

Two feet rooted in the soil  
Heart pumping finest free-range  
farm-fresh milk;

In one hand,  
a foaming bottle  
of Amstell

In the other,  
a polished ball  
of apple-wood

Roll away the winter blues  
Roll away the tears  
Roll away the thinking about cattle  
Roll away any fears about supermarket milk prices  
Roll away the rattle of the tractor in your ears

Roll away your worries  
they matter not a jottery

Roll the beers around your tongue,  
then roll home to Upottery.

**Dambuster for Phillip Arscott and his skittle crew**

*Dan- played by Kevin Costner-  
stood in the ruins of the  
burned-out skittle alley  
and listened to the voice  
of his dreams:*

*If you build it, He Will Come*

*He will come from his fields.  
Come from the farm.  
Come from the herd safely in the barn.  
He will come to the warm arms of his local;  
He will come and He will play and  
He will drink.*

*Yes, He will drink, alright.*

*So build it, Dan, build it!  
Build A Brand New Skittle Alley.  
They say it pays to listen to that little voice...*

*He came.*

*Phillip. The Dambuster.  
At his side, his crew.  
Farm boys. Soil's sons.  
League Champs. Number ones.  
Warriors with balls of wood  
Judd, Sam, Bob, Titch, James and Stu,  
Through the door, sink a pint or two*

then head upstairs to dash the dreams  
of all who dare to take them on.

Phillip and his Dambusters,  
who rose from shaky start  
in a reluctant village hall not so keen  
on lairy pissed-up skittle hooligans;  
but Dan came good as Dan so often does;  
now they're upstairs at the York.  
Now they're upstairs, they're the talk  
of the Blackdown Hills skittle league

and when they won, they held that cup  
up high, filled it up with Christ-knows-what,  
then drank the bugger dry. And the hangovers  
next morning would have made the angels cry

and even the strong flavour of Brasso  
did not spoil the taste  
of victory.

## **Part of the Hedgerow *for Ross Henley***

It's different out in the country: you've got to be part of the landscape; in town it's different, but out here folk don't want to get the world second-hand; they'll note the day the blackthorn blossom bursts; clock the first swallows; sniff the air in the lane for the sharp tang that says it's time to lift the tarp off the cider-press.

And we councillors have got to fit with that- be part of the hedgerow; dependable as frost; there to be collared while you grab a swift half after work. So you'll find me in the shop, or at The York, often out the front, bold as a berry ripe for picking; a Farmer's Breakfast on a Saturday morning, or a pint of Otter and buried in *The Observer*.

I've represented wards in town, enjoyed it, did my best, but now I'm here, who'd be someplace else? The Blackdowns. They get into your blood. And that made lockdown hard; kept away and forced to live my life by Zoom. I want to feel the soil beneath my feet, as necessary to keep me sane as my beloved swimming.

The last chap, I heard, never came all- *Wanted: Have You Seen This Man?* posters on the telegraph poles. They're so friendly here, but they don't spare the punches. It's why I love this place so much. Warm and real, they take you as you are. Trust what they can see.

## Forever Sixteen

Trevor doesn't know it, but he got a coded message from god  
in the crackle of a run-in groove on a tatty ancient 45

and when I say god I mean of course Richard Wilson,  
proprietor of Left Bank record shop in Paris Street, Exeter.

And Trevor, now slave to forces beyond his control, like a Greek Myth  
rewritten in the NME, finds himself condemned to never forget the thrill  
of stolen lunchtimes in a listening booth, eating sarnies,  
getting his mind casually and routinely blown.

Trevor finds himself condemned to never get *old*, not *properly old*, not *old*  
like an *old person*; he's condemned to never be at one with piped Mantovani,  
to never twitch one arthritic knee to *The Best of James Last*.

Trevor doesn't know it, but that coded message from god  
in the crackle of a run-in groove on an ancient 45  
means that he finds himself cursed, The Ancient Mariner stuffed into a faded  
Pink Floyd tour t-shirt, forever trawling through record crates and donated  
collections; sifting the Cliff Richard bootlegs and the Perry Como dub LPs  
in search of the Lost Chord; the riff he's never heard. Condemned to live  
for the buzz of turning up a banger.

So bring your undiscovered gems. Proffer your lost classics. This is a soul in  
constant need. A perpetual hunger for the transcendent glory of music.

That coded message from god is why Trevor saying *turn it down*  
is something never heard; something that's never been seen;  
that coded message from god left a big part of Trevor forever sixteen.

## **Music Man *for Trevor***

Here comes Trevor, the music man; opens  
the pub door with his forehead- hands too full  
of speaker stands and record bags to be bothered  
with functional mundanities.

Heart full of soul and rhythm and blues, Trev's  
the guy who gets to choose the spells in the  
alphabetical heaven of his freezing garage, spells  
to cast upon the hallowed few on this: Vinyl Night.

Trevor's a groove shaman; a champ with an amp-  
he's one of the village's Chosen Ones, trusted  
to fetch the record player from out the back,  
flick the clamp off the tone-arm, turn the volume up  
and crank out the old familiar voodoo

which swirls through tired bodies, dances with the beer  
which clips wings to knackered souls and floats them  
home down bedtime lanes, plastered in nostalgic smiles.

It's not a bad way to be, to forever  
remain alive to everyday magic

So keep the sweet music coming, my friend  
Keep your needle fluff-free. Keep your EQ tweaked  
and may the ghost of Hendrix curse the helpful fool  
who winds your jack leads round his elbow.

## Here Comes Trudi

Now, Jane said there was a house for sale, and that was that.  
Churchinford didn't know what hit it. Here she is,  
two doors down from the pub, which suits her just fine.

She's a people person, see. Always has been. All the years in A&E  
not as a customer, but nurse. Started back in the glory days  
of the NHS; it's all got worse now, of course, but Trudi was there  
when they opened the Nuffield; walked wards in Portsmouth, too

Nursed soldiers who called her *ma'am*; she liked that.  
And the Navy sailor boy who couldn't swim and made her chuckle.  
Trudi's a good chuckler; she's a people person, everyone says  
that. An action magnet. She arrives; things happen.

Youth Clubs spring up like miraculous temples; disaffected  
teens drawn from under hedgerows, trickling down through  
Somerset lanes, wild as spilled cider, for a bit of *Trudi Time*.

Feminist magazines staple themselves into being  
and village ladies form marauding gangs- *The Fishwives*,  
knocking back the chips. *Angry Birds*, taking flight  
fuelled on coffee and white wine. They say she's  
*a people person*, but what it is, is *life-*

when Trudi the Painter of Pets gets her brushes out  
cats keen to offer up their souls prowl about; dogs  
get portraits to howl about and flowers proffer petalled  
heads like upturned cups of colour and she drinks deep  
and spills their glories out on raw canvas.

Trudi doesn't do backgrounds. Prefers to have you drawn to the most important thing. *I leave the eyes til last, she says, it's the eyes that give it life. And that's the important bit.*

Yes, that's the important bit.

The *Life*.