

Better life

By Sir Andrew Motion

You think I must be asleep when you sit at my bedside
and well might I be what with the late afternoon hush
now the other residents have all retired to their rooms
but no I am not asleep although you could say uncertain
whether I am myself alone or the sum of those I remember
whose voices have become mine along with their destination.

I can say this at least. I was born a Brixham girl and dad's ship
was the pride of the fleet so every day when they came ashore
I had my pick of the mackerel in their beautiful shiny blue suits.
But then again I was stationed on the flying boats. Wasn't that
a lovely time? The way they came in very low over the harbour
and the deep green water lifted up to greet them or seemed to.

Ask yourself this question. Is it only when you become like me
that you will hear what I have to tell you? Make your mind up.

Here's me when we were in Llandudno on our honeymoon.
I painted my toenails red. If you cared to look you could see
I still have my toenails red. I do this by myself with no help.
And that's me dancing round the house – it was the fresh air
kept me going, without a single brown penny in my purse.

You see what I am saying. I am living here among you
and you pay no attention or decide what I am thinking
which is not worth your attention. I am every single colour
in the rainbow but you see no colour. You see the colour grey.

We have singing here at night or perhaps it has begun already. Can you hear them singing? You would not believe how old I am without feeling it. I tell myself that is because I have looked after everybody. When I go to the doctor now I find the door is closed.

Do I knock? Once I'm inside it gets better. I say give me a minute.

I am Richard and I am perfectly able-bodied thank you and also of perfectly sound mind. What can I do for you? The chances are I know more than you about most things. I landed on Gold Beach on D-Day then worked as a brewer. It was a useful life. Defending the realm, than making beer. Now I am waiting for my telephone to ring. It never does ring.

If you were looking this way you would see my right hand stretching towards you with something I have to pass over. When I open my fingers you must look at the gift carefully. You may well not recognise it to start with although soon you will see it is the very thing you can never do without.

Who are we talking about? My name is Peter and in one way or another I was married to Steve for 57 years. Today I am alone. The pain is very strong because nobody would miss me if I died. It would affect nobody. I am Simon, aged 67. I am Liz, aged 82.

I am Helen, aged 72 and I do tatting and keep fit on Wednesdays.

I am Ali and I am a widow and I think if you don't do anything then God won't do anything. This is Mehmet. And this here Geti. I am Ron, and I enjoy a few boiled potatoes and a drop of broth. I am not a lover of sweet things. I like simple bread and butter and a bit of fish. My friend Rowena likes a slice of sponge cake.

Open the window and let me hear the geese flying across.
Can you hear what I am saying? Are you paying attention?
I love to hear the geese flying and know their ways home.

As for me, I was born in 1939 and all our people came down
from Staffordshire and Cheshire; I class myself a Traveller
not a Gypsy. When I was a boy we had a horse and wagon.
I had to make a fire and put the horses out to graze at dawn
then I had to bring them back close beside the wagon at dusk.
When dad bought a bus, which we called a freezer box, he sold
the horses. I stood and cried. I was a big lad. It was not the same.
You couldn't smell the horses. Our people are in Magna Carta.

I had the life of Reilly. Now I have a serious illness and won't last
but when I count my blessings at night I have a load of blessings.
I love God and want to die. What better thing is there to live for?

Is that you leaving now? Very well. As for me I have not done.
I am still the child that loves to arrive by night in a new place
then wakes early to pull the curtains back on sunlight pouring
into a bay I had never seen before where big pelts of seaweed
left to dry by the retreating tide and the dainty orange crabs
crawling across them and the pebbles are everything I need.

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