

A Girl Called Owen Selima Hill

Owen Merton, written in cherry-coloured paint on a white ground. He had left this corner of the canvas unpainted: It was the white sand of Algeria. I knew it like I knew my own hand, my mother's plates, with cornflowers painted round the rim, her hand-blocked table-cloth, because I ate my meals beside it every day. I knew the yellow boats, the azure sea. But the painter himself was a mystery to me, a distant romantic figure from my father's youth, when my father was happy, and loved, and had friends, and no family. Was free.

Latterly (and he was sixty when I was born) he did not talk much, and rarely of his past. But I knew what a friend he must have had in Owen, as a fellow painter in 'the early days', because the name I know he wanted to call me was Owen.

When I was only a few months old (a girl, as it turned out, and not a boy) a barn on the farm where we lived caught fire. Then the house caught fire, the curtains of my bedroom, and my cot. My life was saved by the farmer, but the scars I was left with have made a deep impression on me, both physically and, I have to say, emotionally.

My earliest memory is sitting under the grand piano, home after six months in hospital, deciding to be a saint. I modified this ambition as I grew up to being an angel. And, as a young adult, to being a monk. This ambition was no less difficult to attain, for two very good reasons: I was not a male. Nor was I a Christian.

Instead I studied Moral Sciences at Cambridge, and it was here that I became interested in two very different men., The first was Alan Turing, mathematician, breaker of the Enigma Code and parent of the digital computer. The second was a monk I did not know the name of but whose death, for some reason, haunted me. He was killed by an electric fan somewhere in the Himalayas. A Buddhist, I presumed, and a hermit. Though why he should have an electric fan in his cave was not clear.

I wrote a poem about them called Natural Wonders, which I published several years later in the faint hope a reader might identify the mystery monk for me. (The person who told me about his death had known nothing more about him). Or was I dreaming? The image of his burnt skin obsessed me.

About ten years later, I found myself sitting behind the counter of a bookshop in South London waiting to shut up the shop. In many ways I had had a privileged life and education, and was finding the wonder and energy that I

had always enjoyed, being severely tested by the frustrations of bringing up three children, in an inner city environment, with little support. My working in the bookshop a few hours a week was like a brief nostalgic return to freer days.

Meanwhile my father had died, and all his stories with him. I too had had a child I had wanted to call Owen, in recognition of my father's hopes for me, the son he had never had; and of his friend from Paris all those years ago. A Welshman, I assumed, and a Bohemian.

As it happened, my child was a girl, and I called her Masie. And I was wondering whether my next child would be a boy called Owen (as I am wondering now if my next grandchild will be a boy I will do what I can to call him Owen!) as I picked up a book from the Special Orders section and flipped idly through it. The rush-hour traffic churned away outside, lighting up the street with red mindless lights. Customers stopped coming in, and I was late home.

As I read - yes! The penny dropped! I had the curious excited feeling that here indeed was the man I had been looking for all my life without ever knowing it. We were meeting at last.

The book told the story of a monk whose father, like mine, was a painter and a traveller. Who brought him up in France to the sound of church bells. Whose wife died young. And who himself died young. Leaving behind him three gifts: his memories. His sons. And his paintings. In the midst of which, in a household of unbelievers, I grew up.

The poem that follows is a personal, and admittedly rather inaccessible poem (from my 1988 collection, *My Darling Camel*, published by Chatto and Windus) in which I trace Owen's life as friend, husband, painter, and of course father. And it closes with my feelings of dismay. I feel unworthy of this friendship that glitters in the distance like hot sand. And ashamed and angry that I did not even know who the baby son grew up to be, that my father's friend, in the Pyrenees, in 1915, gave birth to.

A Girl Called Owen

I was a disappointment,
not a boy:
they couldn't call me
Owen after all -
the brilliant young man
I should have been.

My father, who loved no one,
did love him:
bald as a pearl,
unlovable;
a naked sailor
in a world of bells.

Ah, just the two of us,
tilleuls, tilleuls.

He liked bare feet.
His wife died in pain.

He was a little man
obsessed with light.

The sea was red
like peonies or glass.

He had a funny feeling in his chest.

He made himself
a wooden hermitage
and sat on the verandah
drinking milk.

The moon was like a stone
he crushed with love.
The mountain-tops addressed
le rossignol.

His only friend
was buying sugared violets.
He didn't tell his son
that he was dying.

His son became a monk.
He saved the world.
I am the daughter
of his only friend.
They couldn't call me
Owen. I'm a girl.

Who am I?
I'm a rat.
I live downstairs.
Daylight
is an eyrie.
Give me wings.

