

## **Introduction**

This book of poems was published in 1989. I knew Bill Allchin for many years in his role as Consultant Psychiatrist to the Costwold Community. He was immensely supportive of the work of the Community and after meeting him I was always left feeling encouraged. He was a lovely, gentle person. Sadly he is no longer alive.

**John Whitwell**

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## **A Turmoil of Fragile Hearts**

***By Bill Allchin***

I am indebted to the Welsh Poet Waldo Williams for the phrase „Turmoil of the fragile heart . See *Threshold of Light – Prayers and Praises from the Celtic Tradition*, edited by A.M. Allchin and Esther de Waal. Pub. D.L. & T. 1986 p.47.

### **Dedication:**

To: Dr. R.F. Hobson, in grateful tribute to six years of personal analytical work. This rescued me from impending disaster and made possible a working life of meaningful endeavour.

### **Biographical Note**

Bill Allchin was born in Harrow, Middlesex, in 1921, and lives in Winchester. After war service, including P.O.W. Camps in the Far East, he trained as a Doctor and specialised in Psychiatry and Analytical Psychology. He worked in the N.H.S. from 1953-76, since when he has been an independent psychotherapist and Adult Education tutor.

In four general elections he stood as Parliamentary candidate for the Labour party, in the Winchester/Andover or Alton constituency.

He is a supporter of C.N.D. and Chairperson of the Winchester Peace Council. He is a member of the Society of Friends (Quakers). He has been writing poetry for fifty years.

## FOREWARD

It gives me much pleasure to introduce these splendid poems by Dr Bill Allchin. I feel it extremely important that the practice of psychoanalysis and the theories connected with it should be regarded as an art rather than a science.

As far as I know these are the first poems to be written in this connection and (since much of this sort of treatment depends on symbolisation) it seems very appropriate that verse should describe the problems and treatment of emotional illness.

I have known and worked with Dr Allchin for many years and continue to be grateful for his skills and insights. The reports which he has written over the years on the deeply disturbed and deprived adolescent boys in the Cotswold Community have been invaluable to all of us and the Community owes a great deal to Dr. Allchin.

*Barbara Dockar-Drysdale*  
*June 1989*

Barbara Dockar-Drysdale is a psychotherapist who has worked over the years with children and adolescents who are delinquent and severely deprived. She is psycho-analytically orientated and worked for many years with the late Dr D.W. Winnicott.

She published papers some years ago which are to be republished this year, and her newer collected papers will be published just after Christmas.

## Introduction

These poems arose in and around my life when I was working in the National Health Service, mainly concerned with the psychiatric care of children and young people. Lest such a designation mislead the reader into picturing me moving about objectively, detachedly and calmly, I want to say that my own fragile heart was often in turmoil. Sometimes the comfort and steadiness that the situation required, came not from me but from the person that I was trying to help. I gratefully acknowledge that help, and am still sad for those occasions when I was unable to give the aid that someone was rightly seeking.

The poems must, of course, speak for themselves.

*Bill Allchin*  
*May 1989*

## Contents

Jonah s time  
Little girl to school  
Almost lost  
Contact when canvassing  
Children  
Joker in the pack  
Dog and Boy  
Small wound-big deal  
A loan  
Deprived boy  
Asthma  
Young man of sorrows  
Contrast at the Southampton Show 1988  
A visit  
Hurt child  
The sound of one Hand  
Kids today and tomorrow  
Meeting  
Mass and Balance  
Self-injury  
Isaac and Oedipus  
Ward round  
Separation  
Like clumsy Surgeons  
Arsenal  
Cry-baby  
Resurrection  
Being a soft touch  
At least one Summer  
Door-mat or Wound-Dressing  
Figure of Fun  
Peasant Psychiatrist

## Jonah's Time

Like a giant fish,  
whose Monday mouth  
swallows me,  
the week writhes, until on  
Friday night or  
Saturday  
it coughs me up,  
sprawling on a dry island  
whose dimensions are  
a third of Saturday and  
two thirds of a Sunday.  
On this small space  
I swallow the salty saliva  
of tears from the  
fish's belly and  
play a little.  
Yet on Monday  
I wait on the beach's  
edge,  
to be swallowed again.

## **Little Girl to School**

Snowface unwarmed by  
redflamed hair and a woolly cap,  
feet stuck to the kerb-stone  
on the empty road,  
and a yellow, panic-stricken,  
bear clutched,  
for the impossible move  
across  
to the school bus  
and the day's nightmare.

## Almost Lost

Small child lost  
in Saturday s  
Woolworth crowd,  
running round  
the counters loaded  
with  
looking lamp shades  
and  
jeering gym shoes.

Then

a

rising

Panic

Shriek!

Pale face contorted  
facing the approaching  
abyss of abandonment.

Suddenly – Mother s voice,

And sinking into

Angry relief.

## Contact when canvassing

The small, lively boy ran up to me,  
smiling, and stood on one of my feet.  
I gently stepped on one of his, and we  
began to understand each other.  
The family dog, growling, looked askance  
from the kitchen doorway, and father  
spoke a little sharply to the boy  
for bothering me. The friendly family  
offered me a seat and a mug of tea,  
and as I sat there, the boy came  
over and sat on my lap. He seemed  
surprised as he fingered my nose and  
my greying moustache and beard.  
“You are very old”, he said to me.  
Of course, he was told off again  
several times during my short  
visit, but when he came to the front  
door to say good-bye, our eyes met  
for a moment.  
Then, as I went down the path  
I realised that I hadn't found out  
how anyone in that household  
intended to vote.

## Children

I could weep over this  
constituency.  
But the children came  
and laughed and  
followed the loud-speaker car.  
A red-haired boy with sparkling  
eyes shouted  
„Vote Labour into the  
microphone, and  
ran away, laughing  
at his huge voice.  
Others wrote “Labour”  
with their fingers  
tracing the word in the  
dirt on the car s  
body. They were  
glad of a diversion,  
And their touch was  
pure.

## **Joker in the pack**

On a June morning, already  
hot, sun blazing,  
rounded white clouds moving  
overhead,  
they sat indoors.

Four young men around  
a table,  
the pack of cards  
shuffled again and  
again, as seconds,  
minutes and hours  
shuffled into  
oblivion.

Behind them sat in my mind  
innumerable men,  
in prisons, hospitals,  
ships, trains, clubs,  
bars, factories  
and shops,  
dealing, shuffling,  
bidding, winning  
and losing, gambling  
away, bit by  
bit,  
a once-for-all life,  
its passions lost and  
its purpose still unborn.

## **Dog and Boy**

The Alsatian dog had  
in himself  
man's fear and hate.  
Not the Forest fear  
but that of cities where  
man menaces man and  
no woman is safe,  
even if she sells  
herself, without  
too much discrimination.  
So the sulky dog  
savaged to death the  
ten year old boy,  
visiting his friend.  
The owner said we  
always thought the  
dog too docile,  
while at the inquest  
it was held death  
came by misadventure.  
I still think  
someone had  
murder  
in his heart.

## Small wound – big deal

At the clinic  
a young man  
talks,  
animated, arrogant,  
hiding the tenderness  
and the fear,  
uncaring, contradictory:  
It was good for a laugh, and the  
teacher went berserk.  
The small man facing  
the laughing faces  
as the wave of persecution  
crashed against  
his shaking desk.  
And the fear comes out  
as anger,  
while the creeps shift  
their allegiance and  
the sarcastic voice  
whips out  
in self-defence,  
re-echoing later in the  
clinic room  
where the handsome boy,  
the masters horror, and  
the group s spell-binder,  
complains of the  
Saturday detention,  
seeking a quiet emollient  
on a small wound.

## **A loan**

A young man, round-  
faced, waiting to go  
to Court for stealing,  
sacked and already  
in another job.

We sat in silence,  
smoking, in the small,  
unsuitable office  
in the Health Centre.

As we parted outside,  
in the cold, he asked  
for the loan  
of two shillings.

I handed him half-a-crown  
thankful that he hadn't  
asked  
to borrow my skin.

I couldn't have  
borne the burden  
and indignity  
of three years' acne  
of the face's skin  
with such fortitude. And  
yet,  
if he had asked ....

## Deprived Boy

Loveless eyes,  
and living without style,  
the small, cheap cigarette  
as the sucking comfort,  
while the hot smoke  
burns the lung s  
delicate tissue;  
the bitter bile of  
abandonment, spat out  
as a hateful distrust,  
and repeated kicks  
against an envied body.  
How shall such a wound heal, with the  
hardened tissues that  
will not join, and  
the unthinking blood  
cold and moving, which  
mingles with the  
victim s envied blood,  
gushing suddenly  
from the struck nose?

## Asthma

Like a broken bird,  
on the bed's edge,  
a breathless terror  
fighting the bronchial  
constriction;  
And the thin body  
With bony projections  
of the spine, as,  
talking, I rubbed  
the heaving back.  
"Don't lean on me,"  
"Don't crowd me," as  
he turned his thin  
face, with starting dark  
eyes, away from me.  
There was a cyanotic  
tinge on his small ears,  
and his heart-beat  
was almost as fast  
as a bird in fear.  
I, too, thought he was  
going to die.

## Young Man of Sorrows

The under-sized young man, with rare  
unusual fingers, showing foreshortened  
ends and rudimentary nails,  
whose eyes were squinting and uneven  
under reluctant lids,  
with ample, epicanthal folds,  
whose brain-power, so they said, was only  
seventy per cent normal,  
turned his face from me, as I  
questioned him, and wept.  
Reports said that he „needs more practice  
In mixing, especially with the  
opposite sex , and his angry father,  
long ago, had already  
forbidden masturbation.  
As he cried and searched for a handkerchief,  
I thought again that he might have  
been me, me him, with those  
peculiar fingers, that strange, sad  
appearance, making him, with children  
or grown-ups, a person to be  
bullied, mocked and persecuted.  
This crucifixion will last beyond the  
ninth hour, and the darkness  
when the thunder came, an the tombs opened,  
for he is trapped within that shattered  
temple of a body, unworshipped and  
unworshipping,  
until his time is done.

## **Contrast at the Southampton Show 1988**

Contented cow,  
Clear eyes, brown  
Shiny coat and  
Milk-filled udders.  
Lurking, restless  
Behind her pen in  
That big tent on a  
Cold July afternoon.  
A pale thin boy, perhaps  
Ten years of age,  
Grey-dirty-white thin vest,  
Urgently thumb-sucking,  
Alone, backing away from people –  
The words came piling  
Through my mind, deprived,  
Abandoned, starved, unwanted,  
Cold on that summer  
Afternoon, while  
My guts twisted in pain.  
How to go to him,  
Touch him, hold him,  
Comfort him –  
What, for five minutes  
Or, perhaps, for ten,  
Maybe in ten years time  
He will, with justification,  
Stab me to death, an  
Old Man, alone in a  
Dark Street.

## A Visit

He s not my son, but he was there,  
standing on the step,  
before breakfast, with a  
swollen face, and  
empty veins.

He d come seventy miles  
for junk and bread,  
the need cried  
out of him –  
he was dying for it.

He s not my son, but he was  
dying of junk, before breakfast;  
I had only my early morning  
aggression and an already  
boiling egg to give,  
but what he wanted was  
Prescriptions.

He came in and ate  
and smoked and  
went away, after breakfast,  
with bread and junk,  
unwillingly given stuff,  
both keeping him alive and  
killing him.

Either way, I became  
a kind of helpful  
murderer,  
or murderous helper, for  
although he s not my Son,  
he was there on the  
door-step.

## Hurt Child

She cried in front of the  
customers  
in the café.  
She was over seventy,  
but she cried,  
and tried  
to touch the strong  
Italian woman  
behind the counter.  
Through her sobbing  
fragments of a life story  
like bits of broken,  
jagged glass projected,  
never had a father,  
was not loved,  
(Should I go to her,  
try to comfort her?)  
knew how to behave, and  
wouldn't do it  
again.  
(I can't eat my bacon  
and eggs. Her broken  
glass makes my  
stomach hurt).  
Had no place and  
still now in old age  
has none.  
Perhaps a solitary room,  
with noisy, unfriendly  
neighbours.

But her living-room was  
here in the café, she  
had her place, her cup  
of tea, accepted,  
a little, at least,  
awkward,  
cantankerous,  
argumentative,  
insecure.

This Saturday morning,  
early,  
a stranger sat in her  
seat.

She objected rudely, like any  
unhappy child,  
like any child she was  
told off by Mother,  
and so she cried,  
in front of the customers,  
in the café.

## The Sound of One Hand... .

Sitting in the Happy Eater  
on Tottenham Court Road,  
drinking tea, I didn't expect  
the harsh sound  
as she hit the small boy  
on the side of his head.  
He didn't make a sound  
as she pushed him contemptuously  
through the glass-doors  
into the street, and,  
grabbing a tuft of hair,  
steered him leftwards  
in the required direction.  
I was shouting inside myself,  
as my heart beat faster,  
my stomach turned over,  
the hollow sensation in my  
epigastrium expanded.  
I was shouting with hatred  
"You bitch, you fucking bitch",  
and other words which beat  
their barrage against the inside of  
my bursting head.  
One day, no longer young,  
he'll take his revenge, maybe  
his finger on the final trigger,  
turning us into atomic dust.  
"You bitch, you bitch", yet  
her pain too, was knotted up  
in my contracted stomach, and  
in my screaming mind.

## **Kids today and tomorrow**

You have to grow up fast these days.

Kids are a nuisance, dependent,  
asking questions, needing meals  
and shoes.

You're in the way, they say,  
because of you we can't go out,  
meet friends, enjoy ourselves.

Why can't you be like real kids  
which walk and feed just after birth,  
and can follow the other goats across the fields,  
treading the new-grown grass.

So grow up quick, throw away the  
schoolcap and the text books;  
grown-ups don't have to learn,  
they just go out and earn,  
and can stay ignorant if they want to,  
having a good time every night.

Today's unwanted kids become  
tomorrow's parents, who, in turn,  
will have another generation of  
neglected children.

They, in rage, will use gigantic stocks  
of bombs we've left for them, heating beneath  
The mushroom cloud their cold world  
and leaving behind them  
the slate wiped clean.

## Meeting

They stood around the  
meeting.

Grey, substantial, shadows  
encircling the sitting group  
of boys and girls.

Young faces already old,  
lined, and mutely  
sad.

The ghosts were blind but  
the eyes of the living  
shone with a hard  
bitterness,  
a startling distrust.

Like lightning across  
the meagre room, resentment  
crackled.

The old despair beneath  
the pallid complexions  
blazed with a fresh anger  
against the  
uncomprehending adults.

They, too sat mute,  
accepting the sentence  
passed upon them.

## Mass and Balance

Christ's mass of  
suffering, and  
at the time of birth  
the unwanted child  
cries with thin  
bitter tears.

With him all those  
who are separated  
and rejected, in  
outhouses or in no  
houses, together  
the weight of all  
their tears pulls down  
the scale.

What wealth and food  
and comfort enjoyed  
complacently by others  
with heedless laughter  
can tip the balance  
back?

The thin blue flame  
flickers, not yet  
extinct, and still the  
tears of the perpetual  
homesickness, are brushed  
aside by those who yearly  
return to the parental  
home.

## Self Injury

A razor's cut  
first opened these small  
lips,  
and the message then was  
blood.

The blade across the  
wrist, feeling abstracted  
and so  
nothing felt.

A hesitant wound,  
itself not deep,  
and the other wrist  
unwounded.

Yet that blind mouth  
would not be dumb.

He opened its lips  
repeatedly, and the  
proud flesh pouted,  
unhealing,

wanting only to heal its local hurt.

But the uncared for years  
could not be silent.

With pins or needle  
he kept opening  
the closing lips,  
now reddened and  
oedematous.

But still they tried to  
communicate, to  
close themselves  
upon the cup's cool

lip, wine-moistened,  
for the heart's bleeding flows  
and there is no one  
now to close the wound,  
lip upon lip,  
with a kiss.

## Isaac and Oedipus

Sung asleep by pigeons,  
doped by doves,  
blanketed by blackbirds –  
through the open window  
into a sunlit May  
evening he uttered  
a primeval roar,  
full, open-throated terror,  
total being ensounded,  
an issuing wave of  
fear and protest, its  
impact ringing through  
the mountains of the world.  
A boy about to be murdered  
by his father;  
or so he feared, or  
so it seemed, measuring  
the dimensions of a daytime  
nightmare.  
Perhaps with some such  
shocking shield of sound  
did Isaac, hands and feet tied,  
hold in air  
his father's knife, raised up;  
and with that self-same roar  
the startled ram, moving,  
disclosed his hiding  
in the thicket.  
Thus the story turns itself  
again, this time around

a world contained,  
a hospital, with bed for alter,  
its sheet stained with the sweat  
of struggle, and the  
spat-out syrup of largactil.

## Ward Round

O Poor Mother  
Confused and lost,  
Who found yourself in a  
Strange, white room,  
Lying in a bed,  
With cot-sides, like a baby's.  
Around you and over you  
Went the words of the doctors  
And students,  
Skilled people with quick minds.  
But their ringing laughter  
Seemed like ridicule,  
Uncertain fragments of it  
Penetrating your poor,  
Deaf ears.  
And did you see the laughing faces  
As they talked of blood electrolytes  
And serum balances,  
As raising up  
A cliff of steely sneers  
Over which you almost tumbled?

## Separation

Empty  
aching  
epigastrium,  
a hole in my  
inside where  
someone lived.  
Then the long struggle  
of feelings fantastical  
against the slow  
infusion  
of grief-freed  
reality, drop by  
drop,  
to fill the pain-filled  
space.  
No wonder you can  
sometimes stumble  
upon a cavity  
containing innumerable  
gin bottles,  
or those disposable  
syringes, with their  
blunted needles  
ripping at random  
the membranous  
curtain  
of the heart's chamber.

## Like clumsy surgeons

Like clumsy surgeons  
with willing hands  
exploring dark spaces,  
a controlled fumbling  
as the blood leaks  
away.

Misjudged words of the  
hesitant physician  
fall into unconscious  
recesses,  
fall into deeper layers,  
and, like comets,  
are suddenly  
extinguished.

Determined manipulations  
of the Social Worker  
force life into different  
channels.

But always the situation  
reverts,

turns,

twists

and re-manipulates the  
helpers.

Distinctions vanish between  
doctor and patient,  
helper and helped, the  
sick and the well.

The painfulness of living  
and these sad faces  
separate us, by a paper s  
thickness  
from the abyss.

## **Arsenal**

Lusty loins and  
frozen hearts,  
love and hate  
tattooed on eight knuckles,  
portable weapons  
ready to relieve the tension,  
or fashion the shape  
of revenge, which  
emerges amid the clutter  
of empty beer cans and  
minds charged with resentment.

## **Cry-baby**

After the bomb in the  
bar-room,  
or a stomach full of  
sub-machine gun bullets  
at the airport,  
don't use my corpse  
as fertiliser for your  
grow-more-hate  
campaign.

Rather let the water, which  
is what it's mainly  
made of, flow away  
like tears,  
shed willingly for that  
small child inside the  
killer-hero-terrorist-patriot-  
fanatical guerrilla,  
whose tears dried up  
so many years ago in  
the desert refugee camp.

There the Cause  
becomes parent, and  
the only good son is  
he who can kill for it,  
without remorse or crying.

## Resurrection

Every crucified child  
comes down at noon  
from the cross of his  
deprivation and rejection,  
in the cloud-covered darkness,  
with a rain of thin tears  
falling.

The nails become the weapons  
of his revenge,  
the barrel of a machine-gun,  
and congealed blood from  
the pierced hand adheres  
to the swiftly-thrown  
grenade.

Jesus-Christ, what a way  
to make a  
resurrection –  
you, who shouted “no swords”,  
and healed the attacker s  
severed ear, hastily retrieved,  
in a haze of pain, from the  
dusty ground;  
you, whose weapon is accepted  
suffering, and the word of  
Forgiveness, spoken or cried  
not once, or ten times only,  
but a hundred multiplied by four,  
with ninety added, more than  
the bullets in an automatic gun s  
destructive gullet.

## Being a Soft Touch

In our world  
Softness has become a word of abuse,  
A way of insulting someone;  
Living matter is pulsating,  
Flexible and warm,  
Soft to the touch, like a roses s  
Petal, or a gentle  
Lover s glance.  
Gun-metal is as hard  
As death, finely finished  
Steel that can as finely  
Finish you, like the impact of a bullet, fired by  
An unseen gunman.  
A very personal thing,  
A live and moving finger  
On the trigger and  
His eyes on you.  
The bullet becoming personal, too,  
When it gets inside you.  
Then it s an intimate affair,  
Ripping around the rib-cage,  
Through the lungs,  
Or breaching the brain s  
Protection of the bony skull  
Or spine.  
The body begins to harden  
Into death;  
The hard-faced-man-with-the-rifle s  
Heart hardens and  
He records another victory.

**At least  
one summer**

At least one summer's length  
of workless days,  
before the last of summers  
comes and goes for me.  
And while my body still can  
move, painfree, in the  
warm air, and under trees,  
and lie in the long grass  
and still get up again.  
Let me have once more a  
childhood freedom, but now  
without its terrors and  
its strange perceptions of the  
people and the world.  
At least one summer in a  
life-time doesn't seem  
too much to ask,  
and yet it is to ask  
another life-time, where,  
lying on the cool green –  
covered earth, the  
fright, fatigue and satisfactions  
of the working years  
could rain away.  
So let me lie at least  
one summer out of seventy,  
from spring to summer's height  
and into autumn's quiet  
decline.

Yet never peasant, clerk,  
nor factory-operative  
knew such a luxury –  
a precious summer's gift,  
nor even housewife, doctor  
or laboratory technician.  
Only the rich man's idleness  
could let it slip away  
from soft, well laundered  
hands, and brain  
untired, moving with  
purposeless excitations  
towards the year's end.

## Door-mat or wound-dressing

“If you let them,  
they ll walk all over you.  
I m not taking any more crap  
from any birds”.  
It was afternoon.  
He was still unshaven.  
The room was stale, and  
the bed only just now emptied.  
“Do to others,” I said to him,  
“as you would have them  
do to you”. “Well,” he said,  
“they walk all over you,  
don t they?”  
Well, I thought, driving home alone,  
What of the fee that walk  
on me... some are deformed feet,  
bleeding, painful feet, that  
you couldn t put down on  
anything that wasn t soft.  
Who would want to lay down  
a carpet of gravel for such feet or  
spread out broken glass to cut them up?  
Sometimes, like Europeans in Asia,  
they tread you down  
with their boots on, and sometimes,  
with or without complaint,  
the blood leaks out  
of their boots, their own wounds  
untended, ceasing not to hurt.

## Figure of Fun

A Psychiatrist!

A psychiatrist!  
the young man pointed  
and laughed, in the smoky bar,  
and a friend joined in.

I smiled back, half-laughing  
at myself.

Then I thought of a night  
in a parked car, holding the hand  
of a young man on the edge of death  
by overdose, or, in his pain,  
whirling off into a  
babbling madness.

As day-break began to change  
the aspects of that dark  
suburban street,  
together, we stepped back a little  
from the abyss.

## Peasant Psychiatrist

Like the peasant farmer,  
following his persistent plough,  
working along the repetitious,  
yet always different, furrows,  
so he drove his attention  
into each successive  
interview.

The field man facing out the  
weather, monsoon rain or  
northern chilling wind,  
his forehead marked by the  
rain's slap or cut by the  
wind's whip. In the office  
he exposed the soul's face  
to the inward climate,  
the skin of it drying and  
cracking in the barren heat  
of deprivation, or inadvertently  
ripped by the barbs of innumerable  
rejections, felt by others, now in him.  
Each one feeling his failing  
energy and the slower healing  
of the later years,  
training himself to serve  
both their necessity  
and his  
until the final stumble  
into the soft earth.