

Smiles Like Roses

All down my street
smiles opened like roses
sun licked me and tickled me
sun said, Didn't you believe me
when I said I'd be back?

I blinked my eyes, I said,
Sun, you are too strong for me
where'd you get those muscles?
Sun said, Come and dance.

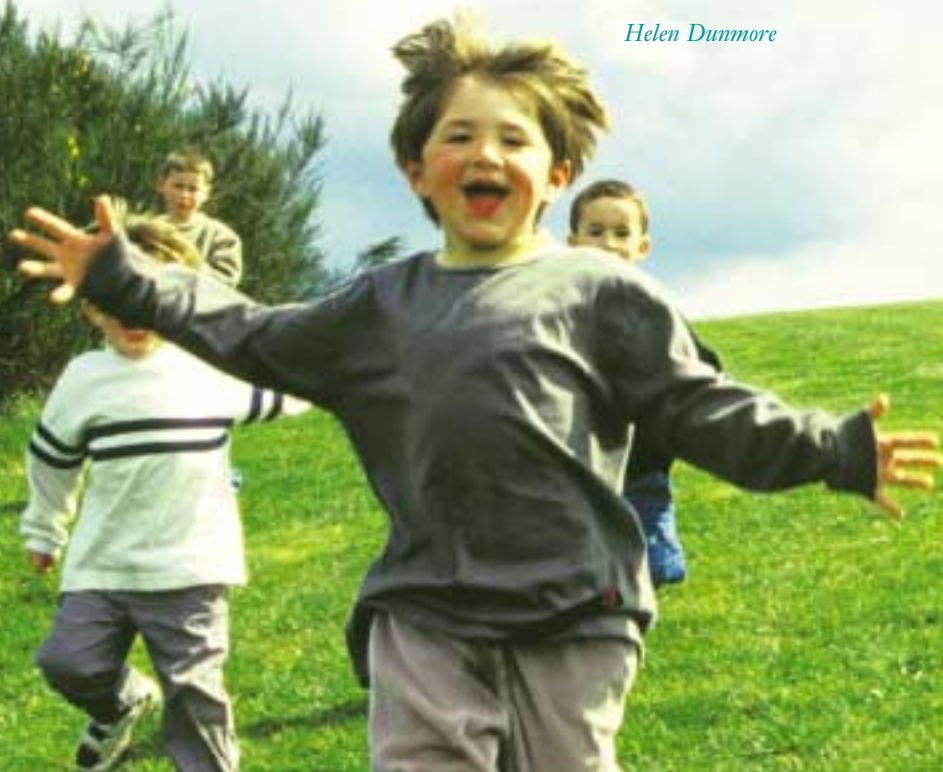
All over the park
smiles opened like roses
babies kicked off their shoes
and sun kissed their toes.

All those new babies
all that new sun
everybody dancing
walking but dancing.

All over the world
sun kicked off his shoes
and came home dancing
licking and tickling

kissing crossing-ladies and fat babies
saying to everyone
*Hey you are the most beautiful
dancing people I've ever seen
with those smiles like roses!*

Helen Dunmore





Over the Green Hill

Two boys, a girl in a red coat,
a leaping, dancing, spring-mad dog
fighting its leash, released
to run like water over the hill
the green hill, with mystery running after.

Where are they going and why so happy,
why the red flag of her coat flapping
like poppy-silk against the green,
why are they all running
like water over the top of the hill,
the green hill, with secrets running after?

What is the country they are running to,
is there peace there, is there freedom
to jump and play in the spring air,
why are they all running, why do they look
behind them, and laugh, and run faster,
why are they holding hands as they run
over that green hill with the wind running after?

Helen Dunmore

Heimat

Deep in busy lizzies and black iron
he sleeps for the Heimat,
and his photograph slips in and out of sight
as if breathing.

There are petals against his cheeks
but he is not handsome.
His small eyes search the graveyard fretfully
and the flesh of his cheeks clouds
the bones of heroism.

No one can stop him being young
and he is so tired of being young.
He would like to feel pain in his joints
as he wanders down to Hübers,
but he's here as always,
always on his way back from the photographer's
in his army collar
with a welt on his neck rubbed raw.

The mountains are white and sly as they always were.
Old women feed the graveyard with flowers,
clear the grass on his photograph
with chamois leathers,
bend and whisper the inscription.
They are his terrible suitors.

Helen Dunmore



Don't Count John Among the Dreams

Don't count John among the dreams
a parent cherishes for his children –
that they will be different from him,
not poets but the stuff of poems.

Don't count John among the dreams
of leaders, warriors, eagle-eyed stalkers
picking up the track of lions.
Even in the zoo he can barely see them –

his eyes, like yours, are half-blind.
Short, obedient, hirsute
how he would love to delight you.
He reads every word you write.

Don't count John among your dreams.
Don't wangle a commission for him,
don't wangle a death for him.
He is barely eighteen.

Without his spectacles, after a shell-blast,
he will be seen one more time
before the next shell sees to him.
Wounding, weeping from pain,

he will be able to see nothing.
And you will always mourn him.
You will write a poem.
You will count him into your dreams.

Helen Dunmore

(i.m. John Kipling, son of Rudyard Kipling,
who died in the Battle of Loos in 1915)

Out of the Blue

Speak to me in the only language
I understand, help me to see
as you saw the enemy plane
pounce on you out of the sun:
one flash, cockling metal. Done.

*Done for, they said, as he spun earthward
to the broad chalk bosom of England.
Done for and done.*

You are the pilot of this poem,
you speaks its language, thumbs-up
to the tall dome of June.
Even when you long to bail out
you'll stay with the crate.

*Done for, they said, as his leather jacket
whipped through the branches.
Done for and done.*

Where are we going and why so happy?
We ride the sky and the blue,
we are thumbs up, both of us
even though you are the owner
of that long-gone morning,
and I only write the poem.

You own that long-gone morning.
Solo, the machine-gun stitched you.
One flash did for you.
Your boots hit the ground
ploughing a fresh white scar in the
downland.

*They knew before they got to him,
from the way he was lying
done for, undone.*

But where are we going?
You come to me out of the blue
strolling the springy downland
done for, thumbs up, oil on your hands.

Helen Dunmore

The Bones of the Vasa

I saw the bones of the Vasa knit in the moonlight
I heard her hull creak as the salt sea slapped it
I smelled her tar and her freshly-planed pine,

there were rye loaves slung up on poles for drying
there were herrings in barrels and brandy-wine
and every plank in her body was singing,

off-duty sailors were throwing the dice
while the royal flag cracked at the mast
and the wind grew strong and the clouds flew past.

Oh the Vasa never set sail down the salt sea's stream
down the salt stream for a second time
where the midsummer islands waited like secrets,

the King's Vasa flew down like a swan
parting the waves and the sea's furrow
parting that long road where the drowned roll
and the tide rules the kingdom of no one.

Helen Dunmore

The VASA was a royal Swedish ship of the sixteenth century.
She sank on her maiden voyage.

