

TALKING TO MY FATHER

You are not the man in the photograph

looking at me seeing myself questioning.

You sit there on the wing of your Spitfire,

your eyes looking past the camera at the horizon

maybe cloud formations smelling the breeze.

It looks like quiet confidence the peaked hat jaunty

uniform made famous by the Battle of Britain forays

and graceful sky dancing by young silk scarfed men

still wet behind the ears

making V12 motors lift ovular wings up air shafts that defied imagination.

You are younger than my son barely ten years older than my grandson

whom you never met your neophyte moustache

adds charm and sophistication to the innocent face of a village lad

whose acreage became immeasurable,

the world opening up slowly on take-off

revealing itself to a young man whose new

wide-eyed bird's eye view almost

swallowed you as you tested gravity

its hold on your sense of reality the boundaries of your fear.

I cannot tell if you are swinging your legs like a young boy

Fair Isle jumper bright in the sun, doting knitting mother

your only care being your next meal soon to be ready

your bluff father ceremonially cutting the crisp loaf held to his chest

sizzling Sunday Roast in the basting dish the sharp knife shining.

You never told me your stories how you felt when the War was won
leaving your plane on a newly desolate airfield waiting for reassignment
or decommissioning.

I can only guess what it meant to you when you finally fell from the sky like a crow
with a wing bone broken by thunder. Was my existence an
encumbrance what was it that brought a tear to your eye what was it now that
would make your blood turn to icy resolve wings clipped news of another egg in
the nest the joystick pulled back the clumsy stirrup controls for steering
the horizon lost in awkward take-off.

I came to know you carried a fragment of ordinance, with you all of the time
an intimacy I did not understand,

‘chased by ME 109s along the deck,
plane shot to pieces,
blinded by the oil sprayed from the plane
a shrapnel wound in my elbow.
Forced landing in the desert,
Looking for friendly Arabs,
blood, shock, disoriented’.

Why did you not tell of rockets bombs bullets fractures flying windward
that ball bearings shatter and shear metal rain rains reigns moral lessons escaped
as the shrapnel shifts in the minds of those who look through cross hairs at the world
fingers not itchy or trigger proud but purposeful trained not to think
or smell the roses gunpowder cordite
death.

You are seeing through me past me to the misty bleaky moors.

We all learn to live with mystery.