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FALLING OUT OF TIME:

Jessie Kesson
(1916 - 1994)

Although Jessie Kesson is best known for her two novels, *The White Bird Passes* and *Another Time, Another Place*, both of which were turned into fine films in the 1980's, writing poetry always played an important part in her life. She wrote poems in both Scots and English.

She was born in a workhouse in Inverness after her mother had been cast out by her family for becoming pregnant outwith marriage. When free from the workhouse, she and her mother went to live in a slum in the small town of Elgin in north-east Scotland. In order to pay for her addiction to alcohol, Jessie's mother turned to prostitution. Jessie lived in fear of being taken away from her mother by the 'cruelty' man whose job was to prevent cruelty to children but it was often more cruel to remove the child from his parent or parents. Despite her many faults, Jessie's mother was a wonderful teller of tales and was able to glimpse the poetry of life beneath the squalor. In the back alleyway in which they lived, they were surrounded by 'tinkers' who also had their fund of tales and all her life, Jessie perceived life through the eyes of those who lived outside society, what she called 'outlins'.

Although life with her mother was often difficult, there were times when she could embrace the beauty and strangeness of the natural world, which surrounded the grim street in which she lived as she recalls in *Blaeberry Wood*.

At the age of eight, what she most dreaded, came to pass. She was

from *Blaeberry Wood*

*The sun grows warm. The moss is deep.
I'd like to sink - and to sleep and sleep.
It's colder now. I think I'll call;
The world is strange when the shadows fall.
I'm not afraid, afraid at all;
But, all the same, I think I'll call.
Now where's my doll and flowers and tin?
What can I carry the whole of them in?
If I but could, if I but could,
I'd have carried away the half of the wood
Home in my arms. The foxgloves broken,
The hyacinths limp, are just a token.
Every bit of me is blue.
Hands, face, knees, too.
But my heart has a vivid colour I know
It's so warm inside of me - a fire aglow.
So long! So long! It's been a treat.
On my way again with hurrying feet,
Half-glad, half-sad, back to Our Street.
I'll never grow too old to love Surprise,
Thank God! I can still see through a bairn's eyes.
A bygone trip, an enchanted wood -
A little girl who understood.*



removed from her family after her mother contracted syphilis and was no longer considered by the authorities to be able to look after her child. Jessie was sent to an orphanage in Skene in Aberdeenshire. She was only able to see her mother once again in her life as due to the devastating physical and mental effects of the disease, her mother was not able to travel to see her. When she died, Jessie was left entirely alone. Only in her memories and in poetry does her mother live on with every detail of the strange beauty of her life brought alive. The poem is called *Untitled* as her mother was given no identity by society.

*Not always does time cancel beauty,
Nor wars and sorrows rob it of its flowers.
My mother has not an accent,
A look, a smile, an act,
That does not sharply touch my heart.
Ah! if I were a painter,
I would not ask of Raphael his divine brush.
I should like to exchange life for Life,
To give her all the vigour of my years.*

Her radio play, simply called *The Childhood*, begins with the following lines:

*This was then my childhood. Alone
in the tall house, the lamp-lit rooms,
the long passages stealthy as
nightfall. Here, the years I recall the
years without time, condensed to one
hour, one everlasting moment; or
that fall out of time altogether, years
that flower into space -and I am
wounded by their outlived joy.*

Jessie was more fortunate than other orphans of her time, in that it was a small, relatively kind establishment that she was sent to and she had an inspiring teacher - the first supportive male in her life - in the school she attended. In fact, she shone at school and the teacher bought her books in order to prepare her to take the entrance exams for Aberdeen University. However, the board of Trustees who ran the orphanage decided that it would be waste of money sending a girl to university and like other female orphans, they thought she would be far better suited for farm or domestic service. She was forced to leave school at sixteen and worked as a farm hand and domestic servant. After years of this gruelling work in remote farms, she suffered from a complete mental breakdown and was sent to the Royal Cornhill Hospital in Aberdeen where she was a patient for a year. On her eventual release from the psychiatric ward, she was taken to recuperate in the crofting community of Abriachan which sits nestled in the hills above Loch Ness, a place in which Jessie found some peace and which she loved for the rest of her life.



It was here that she met a farm worker called Johnnie Kesson and she eloped with him and married him in 1934. Although Johnnie had no interest or understanding of

literature, marriage to him gave Jessie a rare sense of belonging. For the next few years, they moved from farm to farm to find work.

In 1945, Jessie wrote her first piece for radio and she went on to write dozens of radio plays which supplemented her husband's meagre income. After the death of her mother, she and Johnnie moved to London and in order to support her writing, she took a wide range of jobs, including working in a hospital, a cinema and in Woolworths. She later said that her favourite job in London was posing nude for classes in an art college because it was *the only time in my life I got paid for standing or sitting and simply thinking my own thoughts.*

The title of her semi-autobiographical novel *The White Bird Passes* was taken from a poem by the Scottish writer, Fiona MacLeod:

*A white bird floats there like a
drifting leaf:
It feeds upon faint sweet hopes and
perishing dreams
And the still breath of
unremembering grief.
And as a silent leaf the white
bird passes,
Winnowing the dusk by dim
forgetful streams.*

Many years after she had left the orphanage at Skene, Jessie returned and she unexpectedly came across the grave of a fellow.

pupil called Mary with whom she had once played games of hide and seek. Mary has now found a place in which she will never be found.

Although her life in London gave Jessie a degree of affluence and comfort she could never have imagined as a child in the Elgin slum or in the tied, farm cottages in which she lived with her husband when she was first married, her possessions gave her little joy:

I often look around my living-room, furnished in what I hope is contemporary style, and I remember the kitchen of my cottar house, its real fire of sweet, pungent wood, gathered from outside my door. It's homely smell of paraffin. Each bit that furnished it a real personal triumph with its own story. It seemed to belong to the kitchen, to be part of our family. Now, myself and my furnishings stare coldly at each other, like strangers.

In death, she had her husband did finally return to Abriachan where they first met. Jessie died just a few weeks after her husband, and their ashes were scattered in a bay of Loch Ness, just below the steep brae which leads to the hills and crofts, to be become part of the restless motions of deep water.

Elegy

*I did not know you were dead:
A granite tomb-stone told me so,
Verified that Evelyn Mary
Died long years ago.
Too young for wine, for broken bread,
Barred from Communion with the Host,
We were released, set free to go
When voices rose to paraphrase
... 'Twas on that night when doomed to know.'
We didn't then
Yes. we were familiar with the dead.
We knew each name carved out in stone.
Played hide and seek among their tombs
While others mourned to atone.
I've chanced upon your 'Hidie' Place
But cannot find you.*