

Hey, look at this!

Neil Richardson writes 12 articles about his own poetic work and what people, ideas and influences led him to write some of his poems. The series will last for the twelve months of 2010.

Memento Mori

An acrid blue haze,
billowing from the chimney stack,
falls over the Crematorium car park.
The air is dampened by the rain.

In white hair and best coats,
the old wait with painful panic.
Children skip and scuff their shoes.
The middle-aged hover,
trying to enjoy today and wondering
just how long its sweetness can survive.

The professionals conspire.
Smiles and warm words try to disguise
their cold production line.
Exuding tactless competence,
Funeral Directors work uncomfortably
with clerical patrician confidence.

The mourners look conspicuous,
with men in last summer's wedding suit
and young women wearing the black stockings
normally reserved for nights.

Furtive smokers light up while waiting
for the coffin to go in.

Hymns limp along. Vaguely remembered,
God is praised like an elderly, obscure relation.
Guilt stalks the chapels and memorial rooms.

Those who know
try not to breathe too deeply
when leaving the Chapel.
Death gets on your lungs
and makes you cough.
Now its over, leave the flowers to rot
and get away.

Relief invades the limousines
sweeping swiftly back along the motorway.
A respectful laugh is allowed,
only to be quelled by memories of the mortgage.
Cold chicken awaits, and whiskey,
thank God.

In the distance
a lighter shade of grey sky appears.

The rain stops.

Who can remember death?

Memento mori ...is a Latin phrase meaning to put the reader or viewer in mind of their own death. It may, at first sight, appear rather grim and unpleasant, and in its origins was probably meant to sound a warning note about Judgement Day! But if you look at it more positively, it is more like a spring-board to launch the living into an ever better life of service to others and fulfilment of their skills and abilities. It is a means by which the dead speak to the living with words of encouragement whilst pointing out the inevitable. It is a clarion call for us not to waste our lives or spend them on worthless things, neither to waste our time and emotions bearing grudges and holding unpleasant thoughts.



Here is a memento mori sitting in Holy Cross church yard, close to the south porch. The skull and crossbones represent the reminder of mortality and are not indicative of piratical activities in the vicinity of ancient Greenford.

The same device was used in art with the same intention. Here you see the portrait of a young man with a skull by Frans Hals. (1580-1666)
The message is the same.



This handsome young chap will before too long, bear the resemblance of the skull. Do something positive with your life!

The poem Memento Mori was partially written in a hearse on the way home from a funeral at Breakspear crematorium. I reflected on the fragility of life and how the smoke from the crematorium chimney could be breathed in whilst in the car park. (The dispersal of smoke has now been dramatically improved and this inhalation of smoke does not happen anymore.) This was a memento mori of quite outstanding proportions for me personally, and I found myself scribbling words down as the vehicle was "sweeping swiftly back along the motorway."

I have been officiating at funerals since the summer of 1974, thirty six years of dealing with mourners and their grief. I have observed their reactions, at home, in the church and outside the crematoria, "waiting for the coffin to go in." I feel very deeply for the mourners who have become detached from a religious tradition and now face the death of a loved one either on their own, spiritually speaking, or find themselves grappling with their childhood memories of hymns and School and Sunday School and wondering what to do for the best. I try to advise them appropriately and they are mostly very grateful for any advice they get. But what I most want them to hear is that this coffin is going to be theirs in due course, and none of us knows how long. I encourage a new approach, a letting go of the old and an embracing of a fresh lifestyle of love and generosity. Often, there are things in the life of the deceased that can be used to support this message.

The sense of relief which "invades the limousines" after the funeral is a dangerous moment. Back we go, back to the life we have been living, back to the same cares, quarrels and casual living. Having turned away from the Crem we are back to our old ways again and the lessons of death are quickly forgotten. The pain is too great, the inevitability of our own death is something we decline to consider again until the next funeral of some elderly relative.

Outside the Chapel, people do tend to fall into three groups. There are the children, who don't really understand what is happening. Then there are the middle aged, who are a little edgy because they know they have a lot of life ahead of them and they don't want to think too far ahead and spoil the present. Then there are the older people, those who attend increasingly painful funerals as friends and family die. And they know that their turn is only a short time away. Perhaps it is the elderly who need to take up the message of a full and fruitful life most. Their days may be fewer than the young, but they are just as precious, just as important not to waste and just as full of potential.