

Selections from

The Arms I've Loved & other poems

**Each instant
is a stepping off, a departure
from things irretrievable,
a new life beginning.**

**I knew that, later on, there'd be
two memories, of a life,
and of a death.**

**The old man moves slowly on
concentrating upon his steps.**

**The beds were numbered, and so
were we. Each numbered orphan
had its place, its bed.**

With six illustrations by the author

MARTIN PROBERT

SELECTIONS
from the Paperback Version of

**The Arms I've Loved
and
Other Poems**

The Poems of Martin Probert

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The Arms I've Loved and Other Poems

Martin Probert

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Text and illustrations

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Contents

The Sailing of the Mayflower	7
Lost on the Mountain	9
The Arms I've loved	12
Travelling Companion	13
Disobedience	15
The Orphanage	18
War Memorial	20
Death of a Goldfish	21
The Journey South	23
Pietà	25
Thessaloniki	27
Survival	28
Autumn Wait	29
Lizard	31
The Weasel	33
The Art of Communication	35
In Spring's Bright Ways	39
Poor Mary	40
An Answer to Galileo	41
The Waiting Will Be Over	42
A Spell	43

Haiku	44
Flood	45
Down and Out in Paradise	46
The Garden of Eden (without the nakedness)	49
The Future of Planet Earth	51
Ghost Feud (Blueprint for a Movie – I)	54
I. All Over	54
II. A time for reflection	56
III. Incidents of no importance	58
IV. Haunted by memories	59
V. Mutual concern	61
VI. The presence of the past	62
VII. The pleasures of boating	64
VIII. Flotsam	66
Devil’s Grass (Blueprint for a Movie – II)	68
The Bypass	81
Death on the Moor	89
Conversation Piece at Bedtime	95
Other Books by Martin Probert	101
About the Author	113

The Sailing of the Mayflower

Step this way, through this
anachronistic aedicated opening
of Doric columns and frieze of triglyphs,
and what you see
is what the Pilgrim Fathers saw
the 6th day of September (Old Style) 1620.

Well, almost. The jetty has gone all posh
but the ocean, 66 days wide, is as it was.

You've reached a semicircular platform
fenced in with information, quaint decorated plaques
embossed with logbook entries, accounts of pilgrims
'compact together in one ship'
blessed 'with a prosperous wind'.

There's a flagpole on either side where herring gulls,
above flags British and American,
sit and scream.

The original Mayflower Steps themselves,
last points of contact with the Old Country,
have long since gone. So too, of course,
have those who sailed, and the good
(*'baking'* and *'unwholesome'*) ship itself.
Even the point at which they disembarked,
New Plymouth, has been renamed.

But step *this* way
(between no anachronistic columns)

and leave the past behind
and in the here and now, your Mayflower,
sail on '*among dangerous shoals and roaring breakers*'
for the unknown.

Each instant
is a stepping off, a departure
from things irretrievable,
a new life beginning.

Mayflower Steps, Plymouth 2020
400th Anniversary of the Sailing

Pages 9-17 not included

The Orphanage

Through curtains
they'd watch us pass,
a crocodile, two children wide.
'The orphans on their way to church.'

We saw little of the world outside
as little as it saw of us.
Did it know we slept on the topmost floor
in a vast communal dormitory?

The dormitory could have held a row of terraced houses
but what it held was three long lines of beds,
the beds identical, iron-framed, a boy-sized space between,
seventeen in every line.

The beds were numbered, and so were we. Each
numbered orphan had its place, its bed. The dormitory
held the beds, orphans, windows, beams, a door
at each end of the room, a picture, and that was all.

In the after-lights-out silence, gazing wide-awake
at the Cyclopean trusses holding up the roof,
gigantic beam-shadows drifted across the ceiling
projected upwards by the headlights of cars driven by.

Those dark-stained trusses, made of tie-beam, collar, rafters,
struts and queen-posts, were the stuff of nightmares.
Attempting to trace a path around the massive timbers
without going twice over any beam, I'd fall asleep.

On Saturdays, equipped with great drums
of wax, and waxy rags, a kneeling line
of us would polish that dormitory's huge
wooden floor, plank by plank by plank, from end to end.

'The Courtyard of a House in Delft'
was what the picture was, but what the misdemeanour was
for which I once stood staring at it
is quite forgotten.

The orphanage was pulled down long ago: the stairs
to the upper floor, the long corridor, the dormitory, beds,
beams, windows, picture, all gone, as if they'd never been,
surviving only in the memories of those who knew them.

Sir Josiah Mason's Orphanage
(demolished 1964)

Pages 20-27 not included

Survival

‘O tell us, mister logger,’
the forest creatures said,
‘where will you find some wildlife
when all of us are dead?’

‘I’ll look at films and photographs,
in books and in museums,
that’s where I’ll find some wildlife
when all of you are dead.’

Pages 29-32 not included

The Weasel

From the dark hollow
 between twisted root and boulder
 watch this slim rippling body
 make an entrance,
 sniffing warm air, detecting
 subtle scents,
turning, stopping,
 bounding among bracken,
 hind paws falling in fore paws' prints,
 agile acrobat,
 fighter of foes bigger
 than itself,
courageous killer with
 blazing eyes,
 nemesis of hook-billed
 buzzard
 and vanquisher of sharp-toothed
 rat,
with a partiality to young
 rabbits
 though mainly a
 hedgerow hunter,
 slayer of
 mouse and vole
insinuating its long wiry form
 through tiny tunnels

and now,
 having spotted us,
 standing bolt upright,
 head dipping,
belly snow-white,
 swaying sinuously,
 this mercurial sylvan deity
 dancing upon points,
 pirouetting, then scampering within safety of
 root and boulder
and disappears.

But reappears,
 inquisitive,
 bobbing up and
 down
and is gone.

In places wild
 tread quietly,
 do not talk.

Baltscheidertal, Switzerland

Pages 35-80 not included

The Bypass

I

There was a path of sorts, but too narrow
for easy walking. A child of course
would have managed it well enough,
but those with years to carry
found it harder going.

A fish darted beneath the bank:
resisting the slow pull of the stream
it hung there in the dark waters
unsuspected. At length however, reassured
by the shadow's passing, the fish edged back
into the dappled timelessness of the morning.

II

Twenty paces upstream, where tinkling waterfalls
cast pearls of moisture on the mossy banks,
and with one foot upon an uprooted trunk which some great
storm had brought down many years before,
stood the land surveyor. It was pleasant to stop at last
and look around. The job
was wearying at times
but it certainly had its compensations.
He wondered what the little blue flowers were called

that half tumbled into the water; a precarious place, that bank, to fix one's roots, or so he would have thought. Strange how he'd never found the time to view the country through anything other than his theodolite. And strange too that he wasn't quite at ease in the presence of all these flowers and things he couldn't name.

But why then had he got his foot up on this old trunk? A rum thing, that... Mind you, it was a rum place altogether, untouched, though there were goodness knows how many houses just over the hill. What was the place called now? Something rather curious if he remembered rightly. He smoothed the map out over his raised knee. 'Hermit's Bottom' - yes, he remembered now, quite the oddest of odd names, almost too peculiar to be quaint.

Catching sight of a fish a short way off he leaned forward over his map to get a better look at it: in an instant the fish was gone.

As he looked up again he met the eyes of an old man watching him with quiet curiosity from across the stream. The man's garments seemed strangely out of fashion. Behind him was a modest but well-constructed hut: it too was a bit unusual, in good repair yet dangerously lop-sided to a surveyor's way of thinking

and put together as far as he could tell
out of nothing else but branches.

**The remaining lines of 'The Bypass'
(pages 83-88)
not included**

nor pages 89-112

About the Author

Martin Probert is the illegitimate son of an Estonian parlourmaid who worked for Colonel Jack Speed, Silver Stick to King George VI, at his country estate near Leamington Spa. Martin's only known relatives, besides his mother, were in Estonia, which lay behind the Iron Curtain. He was not to meet them for 26 years.

For his first eight years, Martin had the run of the large gardens surrounding the subsequent houses in which his mother was employed. The years from 8 till 13 were spent in an orphanage (see 'The Orphanage' in this book). Much biographical information about the author's subsequent formative years as a poet, writer and illustrator will be found in *Love Letters of a Swiss Doctor and English Poet*.

Martin and his wife Veronika have three children. Weekends and holidays have been spent hiking on Dartmoor, in Wales, and in the Swiss mountains.

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For detailed information about these and other works by Martin Probert, click [here](#)

The Arms I've Loved and Other Poems

Inspirational and soul-stirring poems
of love,
of betrayal,
of loss,
of death,
of people met,
of animals observed,
of waiting,
of art and science,

of journeys by foot, by train, by ship,
of mountains, of moorland,
of deafness, of disobedience,
of the author's memory of an orphanage,
of a drunk's memory of paradise.

The Arms I've Loved and Other Poems contains poetry in many forms. They range in length from 3-line haiku to the 348-line mini-epic 'Ghost Feud (Blueprint for a Movie)'.

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