

Frank
Chrissy Banks

smith|doorstop

the poetry business

Published 2021 by
Smith|Doorstop Books
The Poetry Business
Campo House,
54 Campo Lane,
Sheffield S1 2EG

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ISBN 978-1-912196-83-8
Typeset by The Poetry Business
Printed by Biddles, Sheffield

Smith|Doorstop Books are a member of Inpress:
www.inpressbooks.co.uk

Distributed by NBN International, 1 Deltic Avenue,
Rooksley, Milton Keynes MK13 8LD

The Poetry Business gratefully acknowledges
the support of Arts Council England.



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

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frank (adjective)

honest, sincere, and telling the truth,
even when this might be awkward
or make other people uncomfortable

for Nigel



Frank

In that very southern university,
we were northern aliens, experiments
in academia, mad in love with literature,
first in the family to win a place.

Winter or summer, he shrugged thin arms
into a khaki parka. His hooked nose poked
from a face pale as bleached flour. He kissed me
once, in Anglo-Saxon, rough and slobbery.

Frank couldn't do with borrowed thought.
When he spat words straight from the seam,
hard and black, his tutors' eyes lit up.
He didn't give a toss if they agreed or not.

Analysing Hamlet (*he's fucking fucked*),
evaluating Wordsworth (*that bloke wins first prize
fer turning kids off poetry*), rattling off his own
deranged and genius critique of Hemingway,

he gobbed and scrawled himself a First.
The last I heard, he'd won a scholarship,
soared off to be Frank in New York, while I
wondered what it meant to *graduate*.

What I'm thinking now, too late, is this:
I could have learned a lot from Frank.

Ola

The music is way up loud and so is she,
just back from Ibiza where she danced all week.
Today in the gym it's Body Jam, Ola out front.
She swishes her palomino ponytail. *I've missed you
so much*, she swears to us all in warm,
Ukrainian vowels. Her skin shines
like butterscotch. Her electrics are all turned on:
smile sparking, whites of her green eyes
lit up. 'That Power' is pumping out and Ola
is spreading her arms as though she'd embrace us all.
I feel so good, she proclaims, skipping from side
to side, head thrown back to the ceiling.
Her hands smooth her body from neck
to thighs as she sways. *You don't have to do this*,
she smiles. But the slender girls, the new mothers,
the serious-muscled of either sex, the young
pensioners in the back row, one way or another
we all want what you have, Ola.
Turn! she says and we turn. *Spin!* she commands
and we spin. *Fly!* We're flying, we fly.
Ola, even your name is a whoop of joy.

Whistle Down the Wind

This was one of those Sixties films
set in the black and white North.
I knew the meaning of monochrome,
of dark-eyed, dark-haired,
hungry, unshaven men.

I was younger than Hayley Mills,
but I knew Jesus was dead, knew
he would never be back,
that no-one is ever saved
by a ghost, whatever they said.

The moonish faith those kids
offered to 'Jesus', a man
on the run. I imagined him
free for their sakes, but I wanted
to wrestle their certainty into the mud.

And I wanted to weep when they stole
for him, handed their souls to the liar.
Wanted to find some word or act,
when the police took him away,
to comfort them, to comfort myself.

What's the Matter, Christine Fox?

I'd never been asked that one before –
except as a slap or silencing sweet to suck.
This was more, *What grieves you so much?*

She spoke softly, no-one else near,
end of the Art class. Shocking to hear
my name, my full name spoken. Our eyes locked,
hers amber and wise. *What's the matter, Christine Fox?*
Nothing, I said and hid under my hair.

As I went off to English or French, I looked up
at a sky dark with crows over a wheat field aflame,
Van Gogh's tortured way to give words the slip.

What colour and shape are shame? And how to begin?
For so long, I'd buried so much. If it was anyone
it would be her – but I wasn't about to give in.