

# The Comrades Marathon

*in memoriam Victor Clapham*

Well Vic, I wonder what you'd make of this,  
I mean the flag-hung square, the jostling crowds,  
a helicopter clattering through the dark,  
runners in their thousands, massed down the street,  
and someone famous being interviewed  
in a bright white glare on the steps of City Hall.

I wish you could be here, right here with us,  
dressed in your baggy shorts and tennis shoes,  
smelling the wintergreen, the nervous sweat  
and feeling strange pricklings in your skin  
as speakers boom the anthem down the street  
that shifts the day from normal into epic time.

Look at the scaffolding, the tents, the bins,  
the marshals with clipboards and yellow bibs.  
They do this for nothing, year after year.  
It's a bit like a local Olympics now,  
all sorts of money-scheming hangers-on  
but still, somehow, decency on a podium.

Isn't it much, much bigger than you thought?  
At times I've wondered what was in your mind  
when back home from the war to end all wars  
you'd sit in the hot steel cab of your train  
swabbing your neck and chest with cotton waste  
and slowly swigging a bottle of cold sweet tea.

Tell me, didn't it churn you up inside –  
watching each day across the shunting yard  
the salesmen on the platform in white shirts,  
the women in high-heels and fancy hats  
saying goodbye with a kiss and a wave  
as if their dads and uncles hadn't died at all?

Didn't you really hate it when young blokes  
with slicked-back hair in the Railway Hotel  
would turn away from you, beer-mug in hand,  
and switch the talk to Saturday's races  
the moment you even mentioned the war  
and passing round the hat for a memorial?

That must have got to you, as if your pals  
who'd marched their youth along the street  
in row on row of boots and bayonets,  
on their way north, to mud and death in France,  
weren't even worth a few words in a bar.  
Is that why you dreamed us into this marathon?

Well Vic, each year, out of that dream emerge  
not just the rugby types you started with,  
that group of balding friends in boxing vests  
trotting off down a farm road with a laugh,  
but men and women of all sorts and shapes,  
the black, the blonde, the bronze of our humanity.

Does hope, a marathon of hope like this,  
you make me ask, remind the heart of grace?  
Look, Vic, at what you got going with joy,  
a huge, jostling ritual of human decency  
whose athletes set off down a cheering street  
then toil across the landscape of South Africa.