

A Note on *USAF Ipswich*

by

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I'm delighted that **Notre Dame Review** has chosen to feature this poem. It was written some years ago and now forms part of a collection, **PHARMAKON**, which I shall publish this August. **USAF Ipswich** will also appear in **THE ARTS OF PEACE**, an anthology coming out on August 1st from Two Rivers Press, UK.

My **PHARMAKON** collection offers a new take on the well traveled poetic journey that leads through darkness towards healing. As such, it will include many poems with strict rhyme and archaic metrical forms, through which I'm currently attempting (like many other contemporary poets, of course) to see just where those exacting old techniques might take us in a new century. But **USAF Ipswich** is an exception. It employs free form in a spirit of caprice and grows from a seed of memory.

I must have been about five or six when my father was invited to a USAF base in East Anglia. A working class Englishman with an uneasy war record and (unusually) a Physics degree from Imperial College, he was employed developing flight simulators for the British aircraft industry. 'We're going to Ipswich to stay overnight,' my mother said. All I could think of was the strangeness of the name, Ipswich—like something electrical, faulty, perhaps dangerous.

We lived three counties west of London. My father took the wheel of our pre-war, sit-up-and-beg, eight horsepower Austin car and thrashed us off through early morning countryside towards the capital. He fought in due course with the City's choked traffic and thrashed us out again some hours later into the flat wilderness on the far side. East Anglia in the early '50s was on perpetual Cold War alert; its empty heathland and still extant WWII airfields were to us unknown territory.

But Dad was all anticipation. He hated quaint, churchy England. As a fervent atheist, he felt slighted by his British co-workers both for his origins and because he was so damn clever. America was his one dream of salvation. He conjured it via *Astounding Science Fiction* magazine, a publication he had shipped over specially every month. He devoured its stories with religious intensity. They were by writers he worshipped and wished someday to emulate: Asimov, Pohl, Heinlein, Van Vogt... Through them, he'd cleverly deduced that America's unflinching application of rocket-finned technology to every possible problem was the answer to England's winding and devious ways.

After miles and miles of just such, our Austin finally made it to the air base in question. We skirted around its tall, razor-wire fence to find the gate. We turned in. Even now, that sudden wide open space, tarmacked and hutted under a huge, overarching sky, persists in my recollection. Here was Dad's dream—materialised. I can only assume I must have absorbed through my skin some savour of his visitational ecstasy, for it seemed to me, too, as if some astounding country had landed amongst us. New shapes, new horizons, new world... Right beside me, even, leashes of F-86 Sabre jets, their silver agleam in the afternoon sun, crouched by their hangars. And the folk! I'd never seen Americans. With their casual perfection of countenance and strangely well-fitting clothes, they were surely angels. One, in his huge, spongy car, drove us effortlessly to the mess, to the Base Exchange, to his boarded, one storey house. Within, waited a crisp white wife and infant child; along with, yes, a fridge and all manner of other gadgets. Here were the accents and indices of a living beyond our comprehension.

My poem **USAF Ipswich** is a reflection upon all that. If there is satire, it seems principally against us, and my family; there was no conscious attempt to reference, say, Swift's flying island. I used the word 'Starfighters' playfully, but a moment's research reveals that the Starfighter jet was only operational from 1958. So the airplanes at Ipswich *must* have been Sabres, you'd have thought, and it's tempting to put my usage in the poem down to serendipity or poetic licence. Yet I've learned from experience to trust the curious 'accidents' of memory that occur whilst writing, and it may even be that my father—in all his oddness and misfit electro-expertise—was perhaps summoned to that place to talk over a (probably extremely minor) flight control question (for example) in the Starfighter's early envisioning. And that the name then stuck somehow in my mind. Why, after all, would an Englishman have anything to say about Sabres, which the ground crews must have known like the backs of their hands? Perhaps, after all, the poem speaks a truth I didn't quite appreciate: that the child remembers with a precision we adults can't always match.