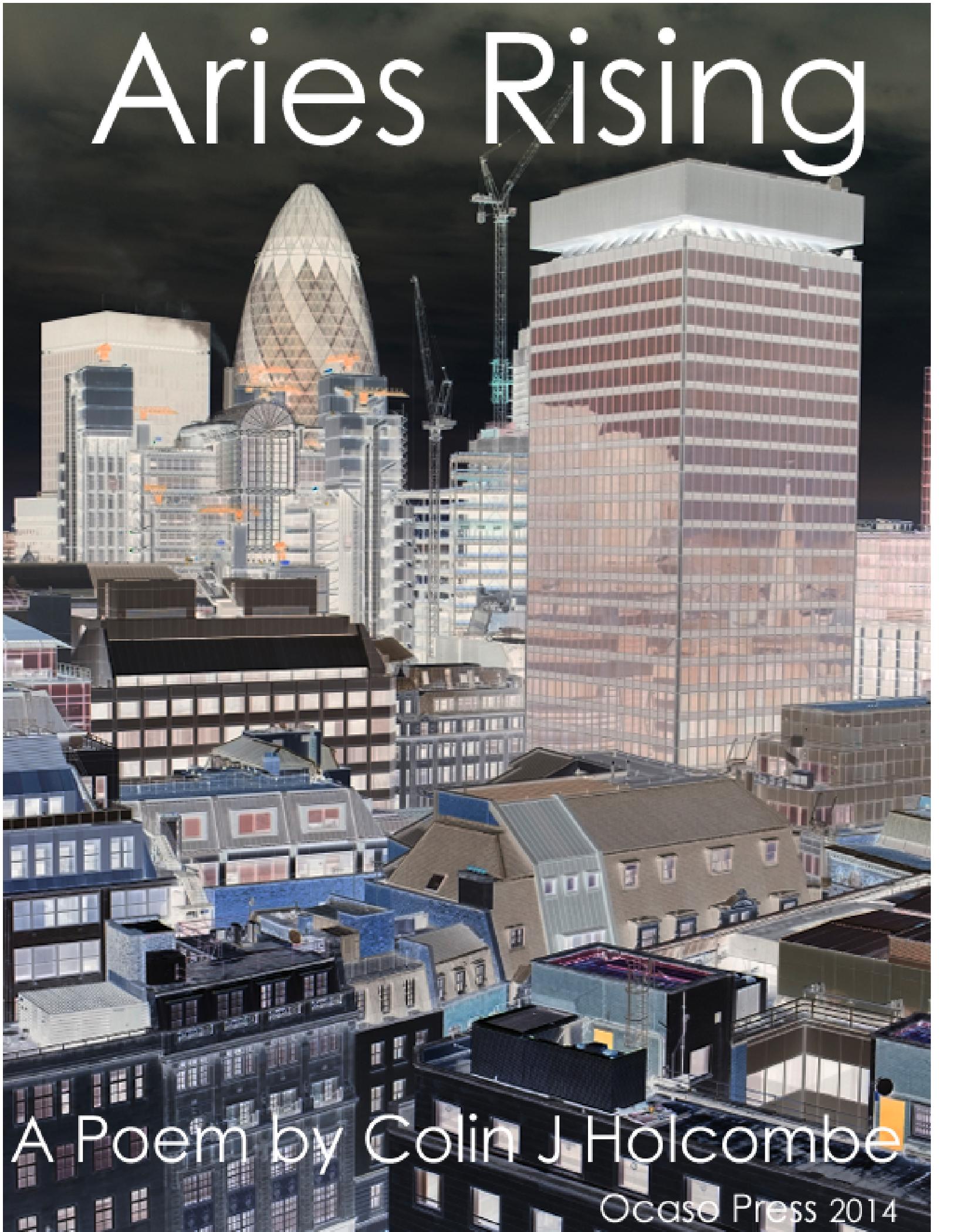


Aries Rising

An aerial night view of the London skyline, featuring the Gherkin and other skyscrapers. A semi-transparent architectural model of the city is overlaid on the photograph, showing a grid of buildings and construction cranes. The model buildings are in various colors like blue, brown, and grey, and some have orange and blue lights. The background is a dark night sky with city lights.

A Poem by Colin J Holcombe

Ocaso Press 2014

Aries Rising

Colin John Holcombe

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Aries Rising: A Poem

by Colin John Holcombe

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Aries Rising

A Poem

by

Colin J Holcombe

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Introduction

Most of us like to look back to our early struggles, to some happy period of marriage, children or business successes, or simply on the strange course that family background, career needs and fortune have taken us on. In my case it's from a quiet suburban street through the wilder parts of the world to a small flat in Chile, from a fairly solitary childhood to overseeing construction gangs in Iran, to a management role in a multinational company, submissions to learned societies and finally to literary work that is read across the English-speaking world. In itself, the self-indulgence represented by this poem will be of little interest to anyone, I imagine, but in these chapters I have tried to create a poetry of a novel sort out of various phases of life and relate them to astrological features of my natal chart. Those who can read such things will understand matters at a glance. For those who can't, or would dismiss the notions outright, it may help to read the quatrains that introduce each section and take them as simply one way of making sense of our perplexing and often chaotic existences.

Aries Rising

*With Aries as your rising sign you'll take
to arduous journeyings no others make:
alone, intrepid, faring on to where
there will be very few to know or care.*

I've lived with millionaires, the starving poor,
discoursed with holy men, and had my thoughts
thrown up on science's hard threshing floor.
I've worked with ministers of various sorts,
in foreign embassies have played some role —
as many have, of course, but may allow
for life seen steadily and seen as whole.
It speaks of common purposes that plough
what else is lonely in the hearts of men
albeit pointlessness of lives condemn
us make the same commuting trip again.
But yet there's something other, far from them,
which here and unmethodically has come
to this unsettled but not zero sum.

In looking backward now it seems that all
was unexceptional, as though foretold
in end of term reports and held on call:
what jobs apply for, what positions hold,
the girls we'd want to go with, marry, house
that we'd aspire to, moving on at each
new incarnation of a job and spouse,
that grew by increments more out of reach.
I cannot tell you how I hated it,
the cramped respectability, the grubby
getting on towards the wedded bit
of bedroom loud with pummelled bride and hubby.

I opted out and as a late recruit
to corporations took the paid-for route.

Long years would pass, and I would know the high
Iranian plateau with its cragged ravines
that fissured outward to a capstone sky,
the desert lands with their unchanging scenes
of sour-faced destitution, sun-split rocks,
the watercourses twisting flaccidly
to nests of pebbles and their scattered stocks
of sheep or goats, that vast vacuity
we can't encompass, not in one. A land
that once was paradise, a traveller said,
its paths with fruiting boughs so thickly spanned
scarce daylight filtered down from overhead.
So is the world, both mutable and rare
that needs our husbandry and human care.

It was world retreating into swathe
on swathe of emptiness, with scarcely thorn
or settlement or rough-ploughed field to save
the scene from desolation, ask we mourn
for what rode through, the great apocalypse
that stripped the ground of every good it had.
For where were variegated fields and strips
of green along the rivers in their woven plaid
of willows that of evenings gave their shade
to families that took their well-earned strolls
were now parched wastes where ill-clad children played
till parents sent them on more urgent goals.
How much of untold misery would cease
were men to cultivate the arts of peace.

Moon Quintile Jupiter

*The moon that rules the mother's house
is quintile Jupiter, so think of nous
in higher learning, history, where the mind
expands to what is better unconfined.*

I knew the mintages with caliph's name,
the ornate laqabs of their kufic pasts,
but more than that, the simply written claim
that God's compassion for us ever lasts.
Across those Asian lands from steppes to shore,
from tundra south to coral seas was one
community within one common law;
a living force that living faith had won.
How different that was to the life I led,
forever trucking, camping, packing, moving on
and, like the desert wind, but seen and gone.
A brief effulgence in a foreign land,
like morning's blaze upon the dew-wet sand.

Such were marauding Turkomen who fought
for each emolument or gift in view,
who, licensed out by local court,
became the empires that they overthrew.
The Samanids in stony Badakhstan
poured out their silver dirhems, casting forth
ostensibly for Caliph, king and khan
what served the nations of the frozen north,
where even Offa would repeat the forms
in silver pennies that emblazoned claim
to his inheritance of Viking storms:
the line, the moneyer and sober name.
A new-struck consciousness that hardly knew
how strong the purposes of those fierce few.

And even Arab traders ventured on
towards the latitudes of lateen moons,
to where at night strange constellations shone
and wheeled about them as the warm monsoons
fell round in rain. The ocean currents, coral reefs
and tides' conspiracies ensured there sprung
up vengeful gods and treacherous beliefs
to which their ornate customs ever clung.
And such indecorousness: they went abroad
with swelling bodices and looks undone:
their dark eyes flashed, and it was not for nought
that beauty's dalliance was fresh begun.
No hours of prayer or council kept
these savages, but feasted, loved and slept.

Some courts converted or by slow degrees
accommodated to the foreign claims:
some coin or stupa or a broken frieze
records a sura or the unknown names.
So were their histories lost into the wind,
the high-piled cumulous that ever looms
in messages the drenching rains rescind.
Continually would rich, exotic blooms
astound the opening warmth of daylight hours,
when bud on bud in slowly building fire
would reach magnificence in musky powers,
but, once burst open, prodigiously retire,
as though extravagance should never cast
itself too recklessly from out the past.

And so the isles of long forgetfulness,
the evenings draining into sumptuous night,
were also enervating listlessness

until the moon came out, a wondrous sight.
A solemn majesty was in that land
where breakers softly crunched and forward crept
in long white ruffles loosening into sand,
while all the time an unclothed people slept
in open naturalness, nor yet foresaw
how fruits about them led from bartered trade
to outposts, empires and colonial war:
from cowry pittances in which they're paid
grew slave plantations and the modern state
where man's employment sets the interest rate.

Moon in Libra

*Moon in Libra gives a gracious air
to women served or sought for. You will fare
the more in vain imaginings, and feel
most fervently for what is scarcely real.*

I knew those tropic regions, Indonesia's
many islanded and leaf-hung undergrowth
of verdant graves, those vast amnesias
of millions dead. And more, for I was loath
to think how many empires of the wind
that bore the clove and nutmeg to the west
must lie with tangled roots and humus, twinned
with lapsed plantations that surround their rest.
Each one was fabled, held a silk-hung court
where drum and metalled gamelan would beat
whatever messages it was they wrought
from midday interludes of cloud and heat.
Now only gibbons and the rain-etched stones
remain of Shrivijaya's splendid thrones.

And women's voices and the latest song
that blares out from the grimy market place,
in certain courtesies and how sarong
must fold and faithfully to body's grace.
The words that speak of preferences imbued
within the sprinkled taste buds of the tongue,
dark palms and sunsets gaudy-hued,
indeed a preference for colours flung
unmixed from paint pot, and those deep blue nights
both damp and cosseting, that hold within
their no doubt dollar-paid-for, brief delights
a rich magnificence of sun-warmed skin,
by which voluptuaries we're always with
will give us kingdoms where we yet may live.

Saturn Midheaven

*Gloomy Saturn rules the heaven's arch,
and under these your reigning passions march.
The courts of love and servitude must all
beneath his rectitude and caution fall.*

I doubt if anyone so thinks it through
that they will recognize if there were plan
or not in all the addled things they do,
but more the hopes that happenings overran.
Yet looking backward through the fenced-in years,
the spiked perimeter and high redoubts
in which was little happiness, but tears
and pained recrimination and still doubts
as even here concern me as I write,
I find a vague, intuitive and twisting course
to old conceptions, to an out-of-sight,
regenerative and homely, backward source
when I can be myself, and try to find
the vague geographies that serve the mind.

To start: I was a war-born baby, one
in that immense and self-admiring brood
of briskly educated: first-born son
who wanted home and presence, warmth and food
within what seems a distant, rain-soaked place;
another country where all shopping trips
would see my mother dress and do her face,
dab face with powder, richly gloss the lips
as though it were a meeting royalty day.
The creak of corsets and of high-heeled shoes
should guide her through the words to say.
And yet those snobberies did not excuse
the small-town, sensitive, quixotic boy
from bringing disappointment more than joy.

If man's a voyager then this one was
most certainly, forever taking bus
or train to stop, get out and walk because
of some imperative he'd not discuss.
Nor could he ever: it was always on,
behind some cooling tower or distant hill
which, soon as got to, was as quickly gone
but left some absence there he had to fill,
compelled as surely as that state of mind
held promises of some embodied grace.
Though now ethereal, he'd one day find
a warm benevolence and smiling face,
some home or features where he'd stay
in one eternally contingent day.

The smell of train upholstery returns,
the sunlight filtering through the yellowed glass,
suburban stuffiness, suppressed concerns
of small-town dreariness we'd have to pass
in back-to-backs, allotments, cluttered yards,
of children playing as the day went on
oblivious about them, and the broken shards
of a life quite different, scattered, gone
as morning sunlit in some gardened plot.
He saw the chimneys marking earth's wide rim
smoke on in happiness he had not got,
or plain contentment not so made for him.
Wherever it came from, it arrived from far,
impudent and unsettling as my people are.

I think of that far voyager, that faint
recalcitrant and no doubt feckless man,
impelled by Calvinism, where no saint
need come between him, nor the artisan
and priest depict for him the face of God.

He was his own-built self, and all the ways
he took to were by heartfelt conscience shod,
where king and commoner to his keen gaze
were not so equal as constrained by laws
which man had made although referred above
to things eternal, when, from new world shores,
that far Elysium, and not with love,
his eyes looked backward to the Europe left
where justice withered and all pity slept.

Where Catholics murdered Protestants with such
solemnities of torch-lit savagery
that Hell's own fearful torments couldn't touch
the roistering throughout the Holy See.
The Protestants outdid them even: ripped,
flayed, raped, and stretched them out in pain,
for hell's own devilry was so outstripped
that Lucifer himself could not complain.
As for hags of witches, they were burnt in tens
of thousands, as were Muslims, Jews and Moors.
For so was Christendom that sought to cleanse
itself of foreignness or tainting cause.
The millions more that faiths could not affect
were left to wholesale hunger and neglect.

Yet from that effervescent cauldron's rim
escaped the brutalized and rabid scum —
deported, emigrated, sent on whim
to penal settlements or kingdom come,
where deep resentment and ingested rage
at courts and institutions only brewed
a dangerous fervour to fulfil the age
of brutal chivalry their leaders viewed
as plainly given them. So was the hill
that rose before them in the setting sun,
ablaze with challenges they must fulfil

as patiently as saints who also won
a citadel that under God's good grace
could be a born-again, forgiving place.

A world where tired humanity could start again
and live in simple plots where grape and yam
were given on asking, and where honest men
could say: I came, I worked and so I am.
Rich acres beckoned them, moreover, gave
good profits from the meanest strip of land.
a buoyant livelihood where men could save
what they had gathered with their own good hand.
Sometimes the Indians helped them, sometimes not,
or sparkling frosts came early in the fall
or blizzards blanketed what springs begot:
a hard land always, but beautiful, and all
was promising, a new deliverance come
with evenings deepening into maize and plum.

And what a grace that was: the rivers poured
out trout and sturgeon in their three foot girth.
All manner of rich eating flew abroad,
and surely Providence had marked this earth?
It was a blessing from the Lord's own hand
whose own continuing was guarantee,
and when the sun went down a fiery brand
of angel rose from furrowed corn and tree.
A wealth of miracles extended on
to where His benefice securely blessed,
and that great light of heaven blazed and shone
far over an illuminated, golden west.
Despite the Indians and tribe of Ham
so was God's promise made to Abraham.

I know so little of him. He survived,

begot a family and achieved his ends.
Indeed that family of mine has never thrived
though having presidents as good as friends.
But land-rush, factory and the railway age
all passed them by, and should, for modest folk
should know no carriage, ball or curtained stage
but act as frugally as plainness spoke.
Work the admission ticket, ceaseless toil,
that each should willingly cooperate
and be themselves, just that, when from that soil
would grow a sturdiness that made the state.
Yet from the second garden that they built
they were expelled in ignorance and guilt.

Theirs was no scholarship in musty books
or tongue's felicities to get them through.
The wind's complaint, they heard, the croak of rooks,
and creaking harnesses they woke up to.
No more was needed and each vain excess
of sensibility could come at cost.
The old world castes they spurned, and saw noblesse
oblige could ruin men, real men, who lost
the day's entitlement when thinking strayed
beyond the needful. In that book of life
they set down blessings as they would a trade:
their land, their health and children, house and wife.
For earth is hardship and the vale of sin
a place that we poor men must wander in.

Virgo Sun

*The Sun in Virgo brings the craftsman's touch
of practiced honesty, and not too much
of fire or vengeance, but just that part
that charms with modesty the virgin heart.*

Of course in time they grew more prosperous,
built schools and Senate houses, seats of learning:
a true republic, not of them and us
but what's companionable but yet discerning
the good and wherewithall to live each day
in fellowship and modest happiness.
Unassuming, most of them, the way
was ever uphill till the sun's regress
would flood the fields with shadow, rim each hill
around with God's own promises, and through
the local stockyard, factory, shop and mill
the light grew thickly made with evening's hue.
It was a promissory for time well spent
and rich tomorrows still, to which they went.

Perhaps some cheated, did not all they should,
sang hymns but lusted after others' wives,
but God was merciful, and understood
that peccadilloes should not hamper lives
with what was only marginal to thought,
and much repented of, erased from sight
as devil in us all, for life is fraught
with bestialities a man should fight.
And fight they did. No people under God
were quite so righteously exceptional.
With truth and holiness their ways were shod
and He in turn was surely bountiful.
What else had currency when such a view
was all too evident and must be true?

Besides, the tribe of Ham could do the work.
For, otherwise, what was that continent
to serve? Those purposes that none could shirk
said talents unemployed were gifts misspent.
They came by hundreds in each fetid hold,
cramped, chained, half-starved, immured in filth,
these dark-skinned countrymen that then were sold
to gather goodness from the Lord's rich tilth.
All such was necessary. Long before
had disappeared the indigenes, removed
by sickness, slavery or acts of war.
Nor were they diligent, as facts had proved.
Still, what their faith put in, they would export
whatever those damn fools of Yankees thought.

It was a trading empire from the first.
King Cotton sent its snow-white produce out
and Lowell's spinning energy rehearsed
what still was hidden, though lay thick about.
A country's wealth was in the numbers pent
in mines, in factories and the cropping fields.
The rest was modish idleness that spent
its time on abstruse matters, lacking yields.
And that in turn, their status, meant to choose
a better life and outlook for their sons,
who, being educated, need not use
the threat of posse or of hired guns.
For, like their old world forebears, men at last
could draw a worthy income from the past.

And so there came the oldest sin of pride,
that some walk differently, are not as one
within our animal and breathing skin,
but more exceptional, have therefore won
the rights to rise above the norms of men.

Yes, they quarrelled, married, worked and lent
their proceeds lavishly, though asking when
the world would recognize the wealth they'd spent
in simple goodness, have it there pronounced
as living witness that their heart was true.
And if for arrogance they were denounced,
reviled most bitterly in all they'd do,
then God, aware of how injustice smarts,
would touch with wisdom their unwanted hearts.

Throughout the long, hot summer scarcely stirred
the flags and cotton trees about the ford
and men farmed on, in local faith preserved,
at one with their great compact with the Lord.
But as the circumspect where all have sinned,
or fire that crept unnoticed through the grass,
both sly and innocent, there came the wind
that tugs at topsoil as wet seasons pass.
A dense, dark cloud appeared, that sauntered on
until whole states lay black beneath the sun.
One storm: a hundred million acres gone
and all the produce that the years had won.
No act of God, but just the usual greed
that won't adjudicate for common need.

That scanted duty which debases love
is action monetized at market rate,
that legislating envy that above
all else demeans the function of the State.
So plain humanity, that tended plot
in which we grow and nurture our frail powers
to be ourselves, becomes a marked-down lot
of so much capital or land or hours.
So breeds abstraction where the words themselves
become the arbiters, and grammar's needs
must take priority, and each one shelves

his thoughts on who or what the system feeds.
And that blest charity by which we live
requires the poorest find the means to give.

So money came to be the god imposed
in concrete, glass and tightened steel:
no large construction company supposed
that here was any more than business deal
to benefit the many, those who spent
the daylight locked within their office cells,
the dormitory citizens who went
by rail across the lake and forest dell
from purposeful suburbias, each house built
with lawn and three-car garage, swimming pool
on hopes, on prospects, mortgaged to the hilt,
and children portioned off to private schools.
A small man's planned Elysium, where all
were placed at capital's fast beck and call.

The miles of curving railway lines that take
them through their strangely disinfected lives,
where all is cleanliness, and no mistake,
in malls and offices and downtown dives.
America of commerce, that which talks
from wind-swept Maine to Mississippi scenes.
America of crack-head slums where no one walks
with brand-name trainers or designer jeans.
A land without restrictions: coast to coast
the talk is forthright, honest, in your face,
hospitable and glad to play the host,
where history's otherwise, some other place.
Earth's richest country where no history reigns
across the Navaho and Pawnee plains.

Western Planetary Emphasis

*Planets clustering towards the west
make you reflective and reserved at best.
Never will you rise and take your chance,
but through the work of others must advance.*

The story's all too typical, where parents went
from scrimp and save inside a modest flat
to lush suburbia, not Heaven-sent
but some beginning: they were pleased at that.
How many neighbours made tight-fisted ways
the source of businesses with household names,
yet not for him, whose strangely inward gaze
would look past bank accounts, substantial claims
to be respectable and worthy folk
supporting charities and local church —
what even circuses and funfairs spoke
of later, what the restless mind would search
for endlessly — a place to call his own
that he was not confined to, nor alone.

So you must picture our small family,
akin to many others, faring on
through dull, long streets, the drab sobriety
that marked a country with its empire gone,
indeed a world quite changed, although the press
still spoke of destiny, that sacrifice
did not mean toadying at any price
to brash America: the bulldog race
was tough, resilient, and though now poor,
had manfully and rightly earned its place —
which even I, in simple fashion saw
but hard, most bitter, and for little gain
where every breath was often drawn in pain.

Our memories view it otherwise: the few
hot days that swelter by some blue-tiled pool,
with far-off sports day when a prize or two
was treasured endlessly, although the school
has gone, and with it teachers, classmates, all
those echoing, bright childhood voices,
the boys they represented — fat or tall —
who made the usual sorts of choices,
safe careers at some such rates of pay,
those grim-faced certainties our parents said
were each obligatory, that we'd obey
with manners drummed into each wooden head.
All, all are gone, and playground grey
records no fervours from an earlier day.

New names, new reputations, decencies:
each house now tidied up, repainted, grown
a shade inveterate with families
that sojourned there, their memories sown
with long, hot summer days we ran and played
so heedlessly with nothing in our heads.
That toy-strewn wreck we children made
of lawn and patio and flower beds:
how pitiful now seem those honest hopes
of being just as others were, plain middle class.
How belligerently we'd spurn the ropes,
ignoring all that read: keep off the grass,
and worst that restless and erratic son
who rarely finished what he had begun.

The local deities of street and field,
of woods we ranged on through, where truant hours
made something numinous, and so still yield.
What is it that we saw in wayside flowers
produced so variously from shade and soil?
How was it grasses seeded carelessly

but in their kernels held what men by toil
continuously would cultivate and see
spread out to slave-based, vast plantations where
the laughing summer-lands of wealth were born
of vast injustices where common air
drained off to sunlit private sheaves of corn?
History to me was still a distant joy
though time worked closely with the growing boy.

Besides my purblind journeys country-wise
grew unaccountable and unconstrained
by courses anyone might still advise.
I went, a solitary, and so remained
withdrawn from that vast busy world, the drum
beat of a getting on. I heard the leaves
re clothe the trees, the breathless morning come
as moths that flutter round the lighted eaves.
And every evening when the sun went down
and shadows filled the plain suburban street,
a sense immensely sad spread through the town
of something unfulfilled, which by retreat
made misty outlines and a distant hill
to flame in splendour, as it does so still.

It was a brand-new school, in every way
superlative, and meant to be. Here each
short-trousered acolyte would learn to play
a role defined by blazer, tie and speech.
Elitist definitely: it would not do
to congregate in gangs by bus or rail:
street games and loitering were much taboo,
and news-wrapped fish and chips beyond the pale.
The uniform enrolled you in that middle state
and even now I'm rarely impolite,
but lay my knife correctly on the plate,
and keep my raw opinions out of sight.

All this was conscionable, and even now
are standards none I think will disavow.

But I, the heir of all my father's trips,
from country house to churches, dates and styles,
knew also factories, wastelands, builders' tips,
though on to Harrow loved the leafy miles.
But, dispossessed, I was a stranger made
by intimations there was something more.
I turned on inward, thinking, undismayed
by marks so secretive, that semaphore
of ghostly entities in God's design.
I learned to love the smell of new-planed pine,
the rows of glassware, sinks, where taps would shine,
proud-necked and solitary in line on line:
research, then, certainly, where I could choose
a quiet identity I would not lose.

At last that proved an unrewarding quest.
Each day brought miracles, and would reveal
what strange dimensions kept me from the rest
who sat in schoolroom, learned, but did not feel
the rain gash window glass, the powdery stench
of blackboard chalk, the thick black bile of ink
however corralled in its inkwell clench
of shimmering porcelain, where you would think
it would be settled, obedient and never pain
the small boy's fingers with that Prussic blue
that comes in time to be a deeper stain
and goes on colouring the larger things he'll do,
that wide 'because' with which he's never daubed
but in the same is silently absorbed.

Retrogressing Venus

Combust and retrogressing Venus, square with Uranus and Mars. Prepare for disappointments, pain and sorrowing in heart and all your partners: everything.

Love, passion, marriage all require embodiments to complement our own small paths and purposes, unless desire would seek to occupy an empty throne. How many lives I'd venture on, but then hold back from, citing this and that, though all quite true. How many times must I again apologize for that far deeper call? The urge to procreate and have my name applied to business deed or plot of land, to found a worthwhile family, or claim my due inheritance — were not to hand. I moved continually, and married late to come to this small, quiet, abiding state.

The names are lost, and yet I see again their sauntering down the endless corridors when I was on to who knows what or when, past various closed but still inviting doors that led to this or that, become assured in time, if dutiful, if things worked out, what boards and institutions could afford. And they the while were shopping up and down, the parcels burdening the splendid legs the length of frayed and tawdry London town with most combustible of powder kegs: brilliant, imperial, their beckoning gaze evocative of strangely other ways —

to be themselves, or more so. It's not wrong
to see the mission one of deeper care
if one unwanted, more an echoing song
along forbidden footfalls of the air.
What gifts or family or vast estates
were not in prospect then, that largely saw
the dynasties of wealth at market rates
built up by those svelte bodies, that deep core
of social duties, one that underlay
each shift in register or tone of voice.
A world of scent and music filled the day
when all around, and pressing, not by choice,
each cab or office chair or tube train seat
exhaled its memories of body heat.

Mercury in Libra

*Mercury in Libra, that most airy sign
gives speech that issues out like fine dry wine,
to be sipped, to be savoured, but the next day find
how much the imaginary makes up the mind.*

Illusory, of course, for women live
as we do, largely, where our truth and lies
are judged proportionally, by what they give
to long advancing under foreign skies.
For so the world is, when a certain look
or smile achieves much more than lengthy days
of calculation in good reason's book.
And yet the gift as much misleads, betrays
us into gilding an uncertain haze
which in itself is not a well-marked route
but strange imaginings, that distant land
of Goethe's Italy with golden fruit
or pasts of Asia with their shifting sands
that raise up spectres that will haunt the mind,
which no far travelling will ever find.

I do not wish to see each stooping crone
whose looks once brightened every stranger's glance
nor them to know how passing strange I've grown,
who stops, bewildered in his trembling dance.
The hands that clasped me, and that sudden fire
of eyes that pierced on through the sad charade;
the suddenness of bitter, rough desire
that comes at last to be a game of cards:
old bones, drab skin. The mouldering tediousness
of thoughts that occupy this white-mopped head,
contemporary dreams that these same thoughts address:
the malted milk before he's put to bed:
though one who still remembers them the same
must doubt they ever held for long his name.

Neptune Square Saturn

*Neptune with Saturn in a hard aspect
betokens fearfulness: you may expect
to find no boundaries in the mind's dark breadth:
still treading water far beyond your depth.*

Aloof, most beautiful, whose sombre eyes
were ever open to my dream-tossed sleep:
from green to grey would go those lash-rimmed skies
of inner weather that all bodies keep.
The warm felicities that underlie
the slips and articles of small attire
I knew small pleasure of, or even why
from dreams to verities the days retire.
Women were splendours, borne aloft
in beauty painters with their strokes bequeath:
the taunt skin's fall to bone and to the soft
parts opening to the underworld beneath —
to trawl the depths as passing liners do,
imperturbably, till lost from view

on courses I could only guess at, lost
within the multitudes of kelp-like lives
that lap and fret against imagined cost
of keeping mistresses or casual wives.
All come to berth at last, however, wild
for their redemption, peace, their rigging torn,
and looks as pale as the abandoned child
or at a lying in with curtains drawn.
All need their restitution, unconstrained
by hopes or attitudes or things on loan,
those doubtful reputations not regained
so much as stirred by passions not their own.
Such they learn in leaving us poor men
to travel perilous, high seas again.

I'd learn that one can no more rein that will
than wrestle with the cold, wild moorland brook
that falls continually, is never still
beneath its sunlight-sprinkled tranquil look.
A need inherited, as salmon turn
toward that distant breeding place, to part
with pebble-tinkled rush of shaded burn,
the warping falls of river flies, and start
a tough, bull-headed buffeting through brine
of endless distances, the least degree
in error disallowed them as there shine
no shafts of sunlight through that dark, vast sea.
So are we sent, and what was hoped or sought
for is impenetrable but still our thought.

Venus Square Mars

*A Virgo Venus that is square to Mars
makes fire with modesty forever spar.
How hastily you'll fall and fast will find
the latest conquest has but fled the mind.*

So women moving through the city fields
of pub and nightclub as through standing wheat:
the plain, the ordinary — the gleaning yields
but merely promissories from each brief heat.
So flames the interval of zenith sun
on arms and shoulders as each tasselled head
must bow to ripeness when thy will be done
in church and registry and marriage bed.
How different therefore is that older race
of lands primeval as the harvest moon
but rises sombrely, with sovereign grace,
when there is nothing here but midnight's soon-
to-be fecundities and earthy smells
no masculinity of ours dispels.

How many times when motoring slowly through
the rural twilight where the soft air yields
a sense that's comforting, a heady brew:
the smell of animals about the fields,
or frequent chilliness come off the leaves,
and that sharp bitterness of pond-side stones
whose plangent certainty deep down conceives
an answering sadness in our sombre bones,
with something called from overarching elms,
when stars come out to glimmer one by one,
and some far destiny then overwhelms
us in this journey that at last is done:
some final homestead there to take us in,
when lives once promised us can then begin.

I've slept in hayricks, fields, on jungle floor,
in sumptuous silk-edged sheets or tattered rag,
have heard all night the rain-fed torrent roar
or desert wind on canvas flap and snag.
All that was known to me, that sense of peace
that clothes the high wold and the cloud-wreathed hill,
that still-returning, dreamt-on summer's lease
we feel within us through the winter chill.
Those rights that we believe in though we're poor,
without advantages, and city streets
look down unkindly on us, to their core
composed of snobbishness and thin conceits:
as unloved beauty with her early night
goes reading on beneath the bedside light.

Jupiter Conjunct Pluto

*Conjunct with Jupiter has Pluto give
abounding richness where creations live
beside you, in you, where their powers have been
but intermittent and at length unseen.*

So were the poor within this godly land
of oaths, roast dinners and stout pots of ale,
and those who toiled beneath must understand
how much their social betters' flesh was frail.
So later London, home of Swift and Pope,
outrageous hairstyles and the silk-cuffed suit.
All crowded in until few could cope
with woman one in three as prostitute.
It seemed the produce of those foppish marts
of stitching's haired embroidery would ape
that sought-for, intimate of women's parts
in ruffled corsetry of silk and tape,
until that most egregious of old-world ills
would travel with them to the pine-clad hills.

Some found their husbands or much better work,
or moved or travelled and then changed their name,
attended high church, waters or the kirk
or laughed and stayed expensively the same.
Some took to gambling or to joint-stock trade
in spices, Indian calicoes or slaves,
or went abroad, as overseers made
the toiling workforce yearn for early graves.
So are the hurts that good men keep at heart,
the insults swallowed each and every day
the cruelties by which all mischiefs start
and old age frailties they'll not delay:
A world of class and privileges enjoyed
to keep the other orders best employed.

The stench of hard day's living in the clothes,
eternal weariness of shoes, the bra
that hangs but limply from the rack and loathes
the petulance in shape we creatures are.
That tumble of ourselves, the bloodshot eyes
which wake in every colour, dun to blue,
that all we are in each begotten size
that's each day stirred but never thought on through:
the torrent poured out by each steel-bound frame
or brick-built house to flights and local train
to different destinations but the same
across that far, forever, treeless plain
of first America that had no flaws
beyond inherent rightness of its laws.

And yet the clock moves on, and we can no
more live again what happened long before:
Sometimes, against advice, we undergo
a journey back to what we were, explore
that first of adolescents' holy ground:
the parks, the schoolroom precincts, corner shop
that had a subtle nourishment, to find
our life's anticipation on the crop
of traits quite ordinary, common stock
we see a thousand times about the school
yard gate, the cut-down uniform or frock
that makes a mockery of hemline rule:
how rich and profligate they seemed with hope,
with more than future planned for them can cope.

We see again the rows of gartered legs,
the smoothed-down plumage of the dress, the swan-
arched neck, that downy innocence that eggs
us on to thoughts we cannot brood upon.
And then to what, and how? To us they seem

apart and beautiful, each painted nail-
topped finger clasped about a fast and dream-
enraptured happiness we may not fail
to give. So vulnerable they therefore seem,
enticing and prohibited, we can't disturb
those small effulgences, and must betroth
ourselves to wonder that small cups still curb
the globed magnificence of further growth:
magnolias to come, but still they wait
for love's full homage to them, soon or late.

That world is too much with us. Though we make
distinctions keeping things and thought apart,
plain matter presses us; we're not opaque
to storms and tantrums that invade the heart.
We look on dusty roads, industrial parks
new lines of houses, worked-at businesses,
the shaded green development that marks
the edge of slums remade a new address,
and know at issue are our heedless souls
that do not feel the small lives hastening on.
Ineluctably the list unrolls
of women loved and lived with and now gone
to memory or fortune's roll of dice
we do not think of now, or not so twice.

Moon Trine Saturn

*The Moon that rules the mother, earth and mines
is in communication's house and trines
the old remembered ways, at cost
of old, paternal Saturn's sombre frost.*

I loved the old cathedral towns, the march
of years in retrospect, and these alone,
the effigies beneath each cross or arch
of kings, and chronicles smooth-carved in stone
that make these small-time gartered knights
who are my forbears in their spurs and plumes.
Briefly on their brass the sun alights
and then drifts onward into muzzy glooms
inhabiting retreating rows on rows
of high-arched pews where flickering light goes out
to prayer and sanctuary, which only grows
the more importunate with shading doubt.
Here is our God, His sanctuary, and He
expects from us profound humility.

And dear the hush of closed confessionals,
the tap and easing creak as leathers pace
the cold grey tiles, the long processional
of sanctity and stiffly-ordered lace
by which the small cleft bodice offered up
to God and his far ministry, in sure
and certain knowledge we shall one day sup
with Him, the highest and shall want no more.
Or so the preacher said, by candlesticks,
and worn-down radiance where window-pane
admits a flux of ruffled quietness, mix
of pomp and charity that we sustain
and must do all our lives, and pray at last
to have some portion of when life is past.

My friends were drawn from such constituencies,
responsible and seeming decent folk,
who knew the middle way, proprieties
that underlay the careful words they spoke.
For they had fathers too, and late from war
where every bestiality was loosed
that men may do, and did, and would do more
from reasons born of thoughts where terrors roost.
Perhaps these quiet men who supped their beer
and at long intervals would light their pipe,
morosely saw no truth in war, nor hear
of comradeship beyond their own small type.
The blood-rimmed verities that drown the mind
may leave but battered stumps of men behind.

Pluto Sextile Mercury

*Pluto sextile Mercury has power
to probe and look beneath the passing hour.
But what it sees may be disruptive, make
unwise the smiling courses that we take.*

Perhaps it is the frenzied scenes of wars
that loom obligatory on TV screen,
the taste for violence whose final cause
remains unanswerable, has ever been
the John Wayne test of honesty, for all
its main progenitor had dodged the draft.
Perhaps it is the subtle, corrupting fall
on advertising on our ears; the graft
and lobbying, protected, special case,
which keeps the details from the public's eyes
that army contracts otherwise would face;
the doubts, the untruths, and the barefaced lies
whose repetition leaves us half unsure,
but cynical and still expecting more.

When beauty's languorous recklessness is gone
to snapshots, wills or others' foundered lives,
all following is prurience, a looking on
to what's now closed to us, that still contrives
to make us wonder and to have our speech
take on some all too mawkish, pleading air.
But while they walk the further out of reach,
the young have other purposes, and do not care
what hopes are crushed beneath their firm-soled feet.
Infinitely long horizons lend
themselves to sadnesses where all these meet
in thoughts we wouldn't venture on, pretend
that we were otherwise, but things on trust
when this far world of ours is as the dust.