



Loose
Change
poems 2022-3

colin john holcombe

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Poems 2021-24

by Colin John Holcombe

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Remembering the Fifties

A sense of manhood when we came of age
in hard-won attitudes, where history talks
of generations living on from page
to page in castle and in hill top walks.

That what we once had been, we'd always be,
would rule our colonies with God's good grace;
we'd go to war if forced, reluctantly,
for still the English were a fighting race.

We pooled our efforts for the common good,
and in that currency were therefore paid,
an undisputed plus like motherhood
were manufactures stamped with *Empire Made*.

In time that changed; those beckoning other lands
were won by thievery in all but name;
our very sugar came from shackled hands,
with us, a hard-pressed people, much to blame.

Our forebears turned a foreign race: they talked
in a strange, stiff way denoting birth and class:
responsibilities that were not hawked
about, but happened as a special pass

to pole position, treaties saying so.
That new mass start was in the 'also ran',
where even my father, barely passing *Go*,
would call the conscience of the common man.

And so our lives trailed out to unknown ends
as packs of sterling crises struck and went.
In time the science 'economics' lends
a greater depth to what our labour meant.

And one quite different to the tracts before,
not built by effort, trust or fortitude,
respect for others' rights implied by law,
but simply as the shiftless time construed.

Some took to music, literature, the arts,
the great imponderables of human will,
but even poetry was not the heart's
display of feeling or linguistic skill,

but bleak imaginations set in prose;
rough-hewn and forthright, banning rhetoric:
our lady beauty sat without her clothes
where glass and concrete posed for homely brick.

And in the language of the thinking man:
it wasn't character that got you through,
and certainly not courtliness of rhyme and scan,
but brutal honesty, which all could do.

That truth is simply what we say or do,
however limited, or relative.

Truth travels with us as a point of view
with how we choose or do not choose to live.

It would continue in the rainfall sound
of other lives around us, in the steps that fall,
awkward and dissembling, on the future ground
that held some mystery for us, after all.

Martha Hall: A Maternal Great Grandmother

I walked these rough-tarred roads long years ago,
as though these Cotswold scenes held deeper wealth.
Up, down and forever I have been gone as though
the very industry would find itself.

But, no: nothing. The fields sit broad and square,
sprinkled in springtime with white parsley stands,
all cleansed of remembrance: things not ever there:
these are the not-conceding-a history lands.

Where did you go to find an unblemished name?
What was the county of that new-made life?
Men, my Victorian forebear, are ever the same;
I do not know if you were made a wife.

Your daughter, adopted, found her farmer's duties
the chores of milking, cooking and farmyard done,
where even the most laughing of pert-eared beauties
will come with the years to be meek and dun.

Where could you linger, or could lay your head,
if by shame pursued, hard choices led?
Where is the hostelry with the eiderdown bed?
How can a housemaid lost be claimed and wed?

The Persia I found was of burning faiths,
dark djinns of worshipers at holy shrines:

mere men burn out their time to desert wraiths
if words are not permanent and holy signs.

Next was the outback where heat-crazed trees
scattered their silvery leaves over red-daubed creeks:
a landscape so ancient that the dryness sees
inversions of seasons where only silence speaks.

So to Sumatran highlands where the soft rain falls
endlessly on paddy and on bamboo groves,
where the deer walk warily and the gibbon calls
and the sea beats endlessly on dark-rimmed coves.

I am an old man now and must make my peace
with these mirages of corn-lands and honeyed stone:
there's something impermanent in that summer's lease,
and of the sad propriety that makes my bones.

Demobbed

A drab, war-wearied world returning men
could always sense if not declared by name:
the world before was all-too different then,
but held in common, where you couldn't blame

the power cuts or rationing, that men in pubs
to virtual strangers still might talk about,
one hoarded needlessly like coupon stubs
ensuring always that no truth got out

of what they really had to do, who lied
about the casualties, the good men lost,
that they survived when sundry others died
needlessly, pointlessly, at a fearsome cost.

Would an Empire, resurrected, deny the truth
of the reckless innocence they called their youth?

Post-War Britain

A world accredited by postal codes,
by brick and pebble-dash, each built the same:
suburban crescents, cul-de-sacs and roads
that went by circumspect but rural name.

It was an England forged and given birth
by war restraints, by debts, by making do:
and one the less exalted of the earth
would learn in practice still belonged to few.

A privileged world indeed, where country folk
had kept their cottages, and titled wealth
sent sons to fathers' public schools, and spoke
disparaging of Techs and National Health.

Until, like Ascot winners put to grass,
the years were winnowed out of wealth and class.

The Festival of Britain

A pre-determined, ringing, brave new start
in rain-drenched Britain — made contemporary:
by new-spun honesty, a raw-edged art
against the well-positioned adversary

of inbred Britishness, the blight of class
distinctions, retro styles in literature —
the old addresses, titles made to pass
good humouredly, of course, in miniature.

Millions came to it, were mesmerized
by bulbous concrete, thin-stretched glass and steel.
It was a pick-me-up, and one devised
to put new attitudes behind the driving wheel.

But when we see the photos now, we're struck
how well-behaved we were, the men in suits
the women wearing hats, all those who stuck
to middle class sobriety, the attributes

of which were life as was, and calmly went
on past in earlier homilies. It's true
that rationing was still in force, with prefabs meant
to be but temporary, but yet more making do

would see us turn the corner, at least in time,
where you were kind and decent, honest, played
the game wholeheartedly: there was no crime
when all was Clydesdale built and clinker made.

Lipstick, powder, heels and stockings were
obligatory for any errand. I
can see my mother dressed in coat and fur
to get odd groceries from shops nearby.

A world of middle class appearances,
to know what's done and clearly what is not.
I can think of occasional instances
of falling short: the deprecating looks that got.

Our stance was wholly British. Foreigners
we didn't know or talk about. You'd think
the learning of a foreign tongue incurs
some obligations speaking it, a missing link

that stretched beyond us in the seaside blue,
the distant blur beyond the tidal pool.
No. Over there was France, a different view
where strictly France was France and school was school.

And so we hardly knew of countries carved
from wretchedness, injustices, the drive
to build a fatherland where no one starved,
or Fräuleins sold themselves to stay alive.

These, if known about, were swept away
by war as moral duty, a crusade.
The Guns of Navarone, The Longest Day
went on to sanctify the blood of those who paid.

Still less was hatred that our conquests earned
across the pickaninny continents,
that water-melon-smiling children yearned
to rectify our stir of history-book events.

And so the post-war world began in trials,
in cities levelled, H bomb tests, from which,
miraculously, the devastated British Isles
emerged victorious and proud, if not that rich.

And all the curses that would come in turn
from changing governments, the pound's decline,
were brought by aping what we didn't earn
though well-intentioned, no doubt, and benign.

Like buried corpses that would come awake,
the old injustices, the industrial sins,
became a surly people on the make,
undisputed that the good man always wins.

Those promises the Skylon held in place
by tethered hawsers, half invisible,
were far indeed from any state of grace,
nor would we find them long commendable.

The War

The land beyond was where one never went
except for films on old world decency.
My friends read wartime paperbacks, each meant
to show how much was risked till recently.

But no one spoke of it, not my friends,
their fathers, and returning servicemen.
A vast *omerta*, where omission lends
a fear insanity might come again.

There were the bombsite craters, unmarked graves,
the one way tickets, with their names then lost
into the cheerful, busy radio waves,
as though to compensate for lives it cost.

It was an empire pummelled on the ropes,
where deference to a erstwhile ruling class
included obligations but with hopes
of something better, fairer, that didn't pass

in things put by, as Proust would later say,
but was of time itself, with all its ills
pressed into us, and in some obvious way
was made commensurate with British wills.

A Fairer World

A mix of desperation, fatigue and hope
looked up from grime-etched faces in the crowd:
election rallies on the murky slope
of change at least said something right out loud.

A country run on empty, and with its industry
Victorian-founded, if it worked at all.
No captive markets, competition free,
no empire now to run up, play the ball.

Each district looked back to an unknown past,
from Celtic depths the present called them forth,
Welsh coal had raised a high vainglorious caste,
though dull the steel and coal mines of the north.

The Midlands mostly neither this nor that,
light industry and certain, specific skills,
an ancient, pink-rimmed land, but never flat,
with pike-filled reservoirs and factory spills.

Yes, quite specific, known for such, a place
each for cars, woollen goods and cutlery.
Leicester leather, Nottingham for lace,
each working lass opposed to prudery.

Each place strange tasting as the local ale,
as were their characters, the way they spoke,
a place of bustling factories, and shaded vale,
of myriad treasures still but stony broke.

As for that older land, unchanged and wild
imbued with ancient wisdoms of its own,
that realm lay smiling like a trusting child,
but also far away, and stood alone.

A fairer world was promised, sternly one
without advantages of birth or class.
Brute masses served the war but, victory won,
'a country fit for heroes' came to pass.

But somehow didn't. The patch and mend, repair
that built on empty fumes. The winning Yanks
alone had thriving factories, cash to spare,
a sinecure on trade, on troops and tanks.

Governments are not fools, and knew all this
but kept the matter out of public view.
The latter had their pageantry, were not amiss
to having meets and open seasons too.

And so the great nostalgia for a way of life
that most could not remember having led,
and one of snobbish attitudes a knife
could cut quite clearly, and unmerited

for nations launched upon that larger stage
of world-wide competition, price for price
in new technologies and well-earned wage:
so said the well-patched snake of Paradise.

Pride in Empire and the British way
remained pre-eminent, but underneath
the ancient fabric all but fell away
from old men's notions of inspired belief.

In this our lives were quietly undermined
by sovereign powers, and great events abroad,
a hidden treaty we'd already signed
but learned belatedly we'd not afford.

And life's a mystery, hard like Sisyphus
who rolls a heavy boulder up the hill:
to stop is fatal, worse, superfluous
to wonder who or what exerts its will.

As if in British soil there was the sediment
of blood-drenched victories and black defeat.
Life's a pantomime, and what is meant
will find you failing in each childhood heat.

This is the world you're born to. In it
you can't be long complacent or upset.
All things are as you find them. Do your bit,
and take misfortune as an even bet.

A Life Reduced

A life reduced to one small Chelsea flat,
a modern motor-car with no reverse,
though friends, or many of them, met with worse.
And then? Good breeding closed the door on that.

So where was Gertrude now, or Tuppy Scot,
the dinner services, the polished row
on row of glasses and the gleaming show
of silver cutlery in their green-baise slot?

Retired to nursing homes, no doubt,
remembering, if distantly, what times they had,
where all-night parties now seemed slightly mad,
when she and Henry still could get about.

And more than family do's were somehow lost
from meets, the summer ball, the annual fetes:
no more the manners and the grand estates
but scrimp and caution, paring down the cost.

Which, frankly, was diminishing, to be
as others were, to live those careful lives
of work and cut-price shopping, hair-net wives,
for all their old school pals still came to tea

It was an England purged from history book,
from pomp and ceremony, proper dress:
where all that's individual will progress
into an inoffensive, modern look.

What governments in truth still tussle with
in race or class relations, that disease
which counts it best that some disarming ease
attend accomplishments in fact or myth.

It's not the work accomplished, or the profit won,
but manner of its doing, its ease or grace,
those telling details followed lest we face
the falling into what is never done.

These were their prospects, and they knew the school's
old motto: future is to chance returned,
that life's a playing by unmentioned rules
at games the worth of which they hadn't learned.

Verities

That other self that we've but barely seen
perhaps at evening when the sun's rays mark
the end of some long walking tour, a screen
of light above a lane that turns off into dark.

By churchyard gravestones where a rim of moss
will catch the evening sunlight, phosphoresce
a moment till our very thoughts must cross
the other lands with names we can't suppress.

A shelf of Kipling stories at some vicarage
we put up for the night in, for some trifling fee
obtain the run of others' lives, an edge
of happy empire days we now can't see.

Redecorating some old room, the paper stripped
until there's only lath or plaster lying there.
How much we sense that old-style radio script
of families inhabiting that homely air.

It's all around us still, but which we feel
the more in some frequented tourist spot:
how many generations make their presence real:
how many aspects has that visit got?

Half-empty old cathedrals have that sense
of long desuetude and stiff decay:
The stalwart pillars rise from great events,
nor will that inbred sadness go away.

There are no clear demands or requisites,
the visitation has its own dictates,
like some long sermon when our thinking quits
the here and now of blundering present states.

A dream world, rather, every writer makes
in finding names for place and characters:
a few, well-chosen words is all it takes,
and less the better: make it tense and terse.

And we are back into the world we knew
before our families, these chores and cares,
that endless list of things we have to do,
as though we clambered up the narrow stairs

towards that distant, ever cloud-topped land,
that none know much about, although it stand
forever in our thoughts and brightly manned
by memories that do not seem too loud or grand.

Echo

The still-enticing, warm, familiar name
remembered still throughout our thought-on lives.
We grow older, sadder: she stays just the same
beyond our girlfriends' names or steadfast wives.

Would it have worked? Worked! What word is that?
A one you still can fancy, has your kids?
Looks after you, and cooks and cleans the flat?
Still bears you love beneath the shadowed lids?

Another entity that fills and moves
the enterprise that is our breathing limbs,
that everywhere is waking, one that proves
the inset pilot-light that never dims.

The laughing bare-back ride we never had,
the stretch of bare-skinned linen through the bed,
the rich intoxicant that's nubile glad
in sights we dream of till we're dead.

Without her belt, of buds of ivy bare,
or stunning beauty that Rossetti wed,
the queen and huntress, chaste and fair
or her the stormy eighties took to bed.

Eternal woman in her breathy pride,
who by her own entrancing looks is led.
The dark enchanter that is sombre-eyed
at half repentances that lie ahead.

And more, the lives we almost had, but were
accounted not enduring, where the heart
pushed through frivolities to more incur
the humdrum earnestness where real lives start.

Buddy Holly

Always through our earliest lives
there ran those weaving, bobbing jives:
America, not close to hand:
a fabulous and wished-for land.

Its Buddy Holly rhythm there
would pull our body through the air.
Will your kiss and hold me tight
carry through the farm tonight?

In your fragrant cotton frocks,
your ribbon bow and bobby sox.
So are the rich Americas
of two-way streets and coffee bars.

In retrospect what goodness haunts
the drive-ins and the restaurants?
After co-eds come the slacks,
the swanky styles and Cadillacs.

In smoke-filled dives the clarinet
becomes itself a silhouette,
still the fragrant bodies press
in their frankest kind of dress.

Long, long will the dancers lie
out beneath the muddy sky,
and loud, beyond imagining,
the Vietcong bullets twist and sing.

So went that rural innocence,
the world just like them with a sense
of home town going endlessly
into a best of kind infinity.

And all the while we heard the songs
as that for which the body longs,
instinct with life, with rhythm, all
that innocence before the Fall.

Songs of my Father

My father's songs were in his bones
where he could bring the wayside stones
to dance upon the prairie.

His life went odd ways from his youth,
where all was hard enough in truth,
although opinions vary.

So what he chose was second best;
in consequences, he did the rest,
and faced the problems squarely.

So came the magic that he sought
that every month a record bought,
in sugarplum the fairy?

And youth with hope that soon is wed
must come itself to life instead,
be of the future chary.

Tunes of my father, they all are dead,
so do not come into my head,
and gone his highland Mary.

Golden Girl

How much we hated her, the golden girl,
smooth-limbed and beautiful and no one's fool,
a certain cachet in the social whirl:
was hockey captain first, then head of school.

She won a scholarship, her father said,
at Cambridge was considered quite a catch:
she'll make a brilliant marriage, and was wed,
again quite brazenly: game, set and match.

The other one — we liked — was called a dud,
the careless, feckless one, the also run:
he dragged the family kudos through the mud:
no trouble, said his school, and taking none.

The first one's star rose glittering and fell:
the other one at length did rather well.

Cousin Alfred

Not quite their class, but once a year perhaps
they had us over, briefly family
although no picture of the splendid chaps
of Oxbridge offspring theirs aspired to be.

Or were. But looking back these sixty years
across the wheels of fortune, welfare state,
I see the welcoming behind the fears
of joining us and others, second-rate.

He bought the house his wife insisted on,
the best for miles, and then my cousin dies,
and she withdraws, is silent, mind quite gone,
the son who called she couldn't recognize.

When we, the sturdy ones, and in the know,
were not invited and so didn't go.

Tiny Tots

All those needless, empty, posturing dreams,
the toast of rowing clubs and college dorms,
of gossip columns and their endless reams
that overflow the pink official forms.

The conquests and the glittering careers
urged on by everyone when all our days
were spent in competition with our peers,
to acclamation and continual praise.

And all that we were not. We plain poor men
who to ourselves are left at daylight's end,
who tried and failed, but yet must try again,
with faults of character we couldn't mend,

to be the sterling people that we claim
to be most righteously in names we bear.
Beyond all hardship and as deaf to blame,
the children of our children boldly fare.

Imagine that! It is our line shows through
in scholarship or new athletic sports.
How soon the first in everything they do;
in pride we scan their end of year reports.

The boys with chubby innocence, the girls
as fey as storybooks have painted elves,
till year on shining year, beneath the curls,
emerge the same poor echoes of ourselves.

School Assembly

The school assemblies, cold cathedral choirs:
how clear the echoes come to me
and down the flood of years the music is
neglectful and consolatory.

But still across the vacant space of years
I seem to know the words by heart.
It is the same recital that nostalgia hears
where all our hopes and follies start.

Of course I know the misconceptions, each
diminutive in pinafore
were not the blue-eyed beauty blushed in peach
however much the anthem soar.

And know that in those well-groomed lines,
the school socks ending at the knee,
and on the hair those healthy lustrous shines,
the voices rising soft and free,

there was no innocence but chafed restraint,
indeed a stubborn mulishness,
and what is common to them is complaint
on being held and banded here unless

they wanted more detentions, teacher's notes
that hold the youthful body in,
those wild and fragrant scattered oats
the preacher calls undoubted sin.

And yet and yet: where did the creatures go,
our angels on this earth below,
that teased and set our childish hearts aglow
without those heartaches we were soon to know?

Status Won

How slowly, slowly is our status won:
a time, a little time to make our mark,
then, inexorably, our years are done,
and out we go, hard blundering into dark.

Who sees the shifting wonders, the nights of pain,
exhaustion, the early starts, the desert heat.
The long days' tramps through sand, and then again:
how endlessly we're tethered to this dull repeat.

Beguiling and beautiful are all things here,
as flesh delights beneath rough melon's skin:
does not a subtle sweetness haunt the ear
however far the music, faint or thin?

In passion there is also gentleness,
a subtlety beyond the thrash of limbs:
the body's damp collapses also bless
and in the aftermath are simple hymns.

And so we're born, draw breath, grow old,
and put more pith about the slender core.
What is this? A casual story told
by all the lovelorn who have gone before.

Pray all choose wisely, that the toss of die
reveal a world of love that's never past,
for otherwise what howling deserts lie
beneath the tenderness our futures cast.

County Treasurer

Predetermined, fixed, ordained by God,
so spoke my father's childhood friend;
it was the proudly self-improving path he trod
and stayed there broadly with him till the end.

It was a way of thought and diligence
to local office, kept abreast
of changing legislation and events
becoming attitudes his skills addressed.

He had one like him, a venal, grasping son,
and, beautiful but mercenary,
a daughter who had clearly now begun
to make her own ascent in life. I see

him rhapsodising on some holiday:
'It's such a hopeless state they're in,
but all so charming in the things they say:
our Irish friends who neither toil nor spin.'

And he was thoughtful, I remember, there
reflecting on the life he'd made.
'I'd give it up, I would, be free as air,
if life's expenses would be thereby paid.'

'And all those creature comforts we rely on more as native strength goes out. For what?' He looked quite blank. 'Unless to die in ways that we were born, in sin and doubt.'

He stopped. The lights came on. He saw his life as was, where each thin wall had local quaintness he'd have breached before except that life beyond was pennies small.

Remember Him?

Good luck to him, of course. I now look back on sprawling Surrey home, his own large room set out with maps and samples, a well-filled rack of Survey publications I assume

his prosperous father bought him, keen to show that work and contacts bring their just reward. In life there are two types: those on the go, and those, the other ones, we can't afford.

Men form their constellations, know the cost of doing this and that, and so associate, that nothing striven for is ever lost if chosen wisely with supportive mate.

All this my fellow student had to win, where each position brought a new attack. To quote his words: he went through thick and thin to get to well-paid job from working vac.

Yes, his mind was not a lightning strike, exams he passed but on the second take. He married someone whom we didn't like that much: well-groomed, ambitious, on the make.

And so he worked, and I'd imagine, hard:
petroleum exploration in the frozen north,
with wolves and beavers in your own backyard
where very hardship calls ambition forth.

You know the rest. A growing family,
the car changed annually, three children too.
A section chief, then company's V.P:
his yearly letter told me what he'd do

to gain a recognition rightly his,
and so, by implication, what I lacked:
a raw, instinctive energy for things like this
where mine was inessential, something stacked

out on the sidelines, shunting yards where trucks
go back and forth all night but never far
enough to make his sort of megabucks,
or where the friends in leafy suburbs are

doubtless planning that the kids make good
in schools and residential colleges,
who go from preferential nationhood
of 'can do, maybe', to a 'will do, yes'

in all life's challenges, and soar on through
high-octane passages; against the sky
the vapour trails are lost into the blue,
and more compendiously, not asking why.

What can I say? He burned out in the end and lost his wife, the job, the rationale of being far too busy to acquire a friend or stop for ice cream in some shopping mall.

The children? Decent jobs. They did quite well, but all stayed single, though. How odd that is, as though their inner inclinations spell out 'secret renegade' from lives like his.

Happy Days

I think of Devon, one long Easter break
with friends, their friends from various embassies,
acknowledging I have no obvious stake
in lives and their more brilliant destinies.

Life's a pantomime, a game of chairs,
a book of parables that's now been read.
Our host fell down his gracious Tudor stairs:
at once was paralysed, a year thence dead.

The others have retired, indeed are quite
well-off compared to us with our small flat,
and many too, of course, have dropped from sight,
or think that we have more so, come to that.

The jewel-hung begum's back at princely courts
and we've no entrée to that social scene:
nor to the worlds of fashion: our small thoughts
but brood too much on what has been.

The artist settled, married, rather well
if well means status, money, better life:
the painting faltered, stopped, it didn't sell,
and death removed his famous second wife.

Two couples married. One is or was P.A.
to someone wealthy, titled, in the news.
I do not know what stellar rates of pay
can justify the life she couldn't lose.

One now is rather rich, if on her own,
but flies to properties on villa shores.
I think quite often how the past has grown
so far beyond originating cause

that on the world itself exerts a claim
to property and self-admiring praise.
As to us, we have, I hope, an honest name
in lives unlike them but with happy days.

Castle of the Assassins: Iran

For anyone who knows his history, this
was fabled, recondite and haunted ground,
and only time itself could come to miss
the echoes falling darkly far around.

We help the donkeys on with bulky loads
and they are difficult, not over-keen
to climb these rocky slopes and broken roads
encompassing the threadbare, present scene.

Eight centuries ago, and much the same
were these dry hills and distant mulberry trees;
but everywhere the blood-soaked Mongols came;
they made short work of any sects like these.

And had to. These the famed Assassins, feared
in court and castle through the Middle East,
produced the well-trained men who volunteered
to be from this poor world at once released —

past all its sorrow, suspect hope and sin
that we in erring know, to pay a price
for navigating shadowed depths within,
but were dispatched as once to paradise.

Which we can picture through the miniatures
that have a melancholy résumé:
bright-coloured images, where each abjures
the tawdriness that is our common clay.

For these are old lands here, where thoughts decay
to well-honed scholarship and piety,
and kiln-fired brickwork only fines away
to wind-borne dust and enmity.

We found the castle: there was not much there
but caves, rough masonry, a tile or two,
and all about a pregnant, pain-filled air
that evenings float before a heavy dew.

And those who came, the British Council staff,
a colleague like myself, reluctantly,
found pain-filled centuries, on whose behalf
there grew one deaf and blind small poplar tree.

Rural Poor

I often think of them, the men I never knew,
those generations of the rural poor
that tilled their acres, and, with prospects few
enough, were laid in churchyards as before.

A faltering cycle of them, going on
through cottages and ever thin-scythed land:
allotments, holdings, that as soon were gone,
as seed that's scattered from the ploughman's hand.

I've never really liked my family, and these
would not, I think, have been too welcoming:
singular, tough-rooted as the trees,
suspicious, as like as not, of everything

that I absorb and take in readily:
the growth of trade and cultures, varied reigns
that go to fashion each new dynasty:
all names familiar, with their loss and gains.

And yet I have no roots, essential home,
no childhood haunts in which I'm gladly lost:
hard stone, the desert sands, the mulch and loam
I find the same, as though the world I've crossed

is some place other to me, some address
I've lived at quietly but found scant friends.
Indeed their names I can't recall, still less
the girls they married or their hurtful ends.

The land gives birth, supports and covers them;
and thus the seemly landscape holds its dead.
Reflect, be kind to memories, do not condemn
the ones, no less than you, when sound of head.

Life is a grievous journey, and we go day
by day towards whatever else will be.
By effort, fortitude and chance we may
at last attain our blessed maturity.

To jobs, opportunities, peoples, lands:
we, never for a moment, even sought:
the prize of centuries is by many hands,
like raffle tickets that we never bought.

Bevis

A roundabout, two streets to cross,
a bridge of smoke-stained double span,
odd trees, abandoned golf-links: at a loss
our once primaeval Middlesex began.

Beneath enclosures this was Saxon ground,
and unregenerate, where every tree
or boundary post or funeral mound
arose from some much earlier entity.

And not suburbia of solid gain
and regulations where plain order shone
in ranks of mimicry, each honest aim
in safe conformity and getting on.

And of my library books not one evoked
the new adventures pressed at every hand.
It was the grown-ups' world but thinly cloaked
with childhood's chatter and so partly manned.

I sensed what none of my good friends could smell,
the warmth and sweetness of the summer rain.
I heard the murmur of the running brooks, could tell
the hour precisely when the light would wane.

The world that was mysterious, of hidden ends
when we would stir abroad, and, stoutly clad,
engage with strange adventures, new-made friends:
that golden childhood that we should have had.

With no fake standards made for other boys,
no lists of head of school, no sporting cup,
no drone of names that like fly annoys,
a path that's various, not up and up.

It was of course a landscape shaped by man,
who'd turned the feudal strips to open fields.
Enclosures did what open profit can
from common holdings got the greater yields.

But that was far beyond me as a youth,
I ran companionable with grass and trees.
These were the gleaning lands of sad-eyed Ruth,
that swelled eternity that boyhood sees.

Or should see certainly – that goes on past
his small fraternity of school-yard games,
the whole community where boyhood fast
decays to manhood and to manhood's claims

I have in humdrum acres afterwards
a whole life seeking what was latent there,
the lands, as it were, of lost accords,
where disappointments clothe the evening air.

My friends were hatched and matched to one
bred locally not if the girl next door,
someone appropriate as is gently done
to people bred in duty to the core.

I trust that they were happy, found
the buried gold where all those rainbows fell,
their families secure, in conscience bound
to go beyond the usual kiss and tell.

This is not disparaging, in fact
their faith in humankind is admirable,
both in and of itself, beyond all tricks
that turned the unloved lands to arable.

I've seen the best die first, great beauty lose
the attributes that set the world on fire,
how shamefully will men corrupt, and use
the shabby plays of which they never tire.

So wear your disparagements with well-earned pride.
In disavowal of the things not right
you have your own grave faults you cannot hide
where your compatriots have lied and lied.

A land unplanted comes to pasturage,
to what it was the once it will return.
The soil is soil, it does not shrink or age:
in each of us a calling we must earn.

Geological Survey: Kabul

He's welcoming and sports a huge black beard,
alert and personable and Harvard trained.
"They come and go," he says, "or have appeared
with large joint-ventures, but have not remained."

In time the coffee comes, and so we chat.
I add my anecdotes; he does the same.
Assistants get me prints of this and that,
we talk of new proposals worth the name.

And so across two continents we're bound
by common disciplines and enterprise:
you don't get here unless you're pretty sound:
hard fieldwork days and well-known families.

'And all these faults' – I tap the large, framed map –
'look pretty serious.' "They are. In fact
they're still quite active, cause no end of flap
to all our seismic boys, to be exact."

And so it's shoptalk, honest: men who care
to be precise and friendly to the facts,
who had the fieldwork and the long years there
to make connections that our work exacts.

I'd like to think he has survived the change of government, the war, the bombing raids, that his own family was out of range of the small fire later, mortars and grenades.

It seems so far away when we two sat in simple honesty that governments confound with lies and mission statements that will flat out stake the obvious that is common ground.

So ended one career, while I must plan for this more fortunate but lesser man.

The Great Collector

The great collections that we didn't make,
or not in total as we planned to do.

That fabulous behest that will now take
the form of catalogue or brief review.

A simple list beneath our proper name,
the honest exercise that time can't spoil;
no exploitation here, colonial blame,
at worst a waste perhaps of midnight oil.

Whatever the Hephthalite and Mongol hordes
left in their frenetic depredations
lies as it was, that hail of stones and swords
becoming only neutral acclamations.

Men live as best they can. The blood burst passes.
Survivors hug the holes with lands stripped bare.
Wind-buffeted, they stand as do the grasses,
and unavailing go the conquests of the air.

With afterwards but memories: the burning pile
and bone limes scattered into sweetened earth,
the girls in marriage go in single file
and the lands are rich again in tumbling out of earth

in which they have forbearance and occasion,
where coins as were are cleanly struck again.
the caliph must be named, and in taxation
returns the inevitable: these are the laws of men.

Funeral of H.M. Queen Elizabeth II

The pomp and circumstance of braided rhyme
in court and cavalry, parades of regiments
that represent the continents a far world hence:
a blaze of pageantry recapturing time.

The palace garden parties to which friends went,
and were presented sometimes: a fragrant grace
attending them thereafter, a time and place
remembered always in that framed event.

We saw the photographs, the TV news:
however distantly, that was our queen:
whatever happened, she was always seen,
adept at roles she no doubt didn't choose.

It was a distant part of her that made
the larger fabric of our purposed lives,
the repetitious, small-town thing that thrives
within the great professions, crafts and trade.

We all in sunlight have our golden day
and pass from marriage into fine careers,
but time is waiting with its late arrears
and some small part of us goes on its way.

So winds the cortege slowly on; we see
the carriage diminishing and into grey,
when long, long afterwards we queue and pay
for what seems certainly no warrantee

that each bright heritage is in our bones,
imbibed as with our mother's milk, and we
can no more abrogate perpetual loans
than turn the heart's once good to heresy.

But let us for a moment take some pause,
a silent moment in our busy lives
to stop and see there is sufficient cause
for what we hoped for once yet still survives.

High Time

It's time, high time, I settled my account
and spoke of whom I owe the greatest debt,
in whom misunderstandings only mount
and does not fully understand me yet.

You who do not read my words but see
the world in simple terms of black on white,
who have no time-recounted legacy
but founded forthright Chile's left and right.

You most loved, who doubtless never know
how much I live within your quiet sway,
that calm and much unquestioned slow
accommodation to the varying day.

Perhaps the largest blessings are the most unsaid
and things not now regarded yet must speak
of small routines, the ways we've quietly wed,
unchanged, unchangeable from week to week.

And you in whom all splendid musings die
for whom it's not been such an easy life,
the wealth and standings that have passed you by,
the femme de peintre, caring wife,

will know I have no tenure still or claim
upon the fields of scholarship, nor does the rain
revitalize or nurture my unpractised name
or plump the harvest with new stocks of grain.

All is small, provisional, and with me ends
the worlds of learning, and what crops will grow,
and doubtless how I'm seen among my friends,
though few they are, I think, but cannot know.

How hard the road is sometimes, and must go
with no more urging than to plain believe:
inveterate and limited and always so
and, being personal, must at times deceive.

And no doubt has and does. For every day
we give up fiefs and castles held before,
the high forts of our learning to the fray
of being wrong, misguided, still at war

with immaterial, incoherent scholarship
in books I read and often annotate,
indeed correct at times, where pages slip
into some other not congenial state

of being here and elsewhere, that far grace
of living, knowing that the air we breathe
belongs to all the generations, place
that's foreign to us, which we cannot leave.

And so we look back through the centuries
of coin collecting to that baffled boy,
bewildered, seeing what a wise man sees:
that steadfastness in things and sudden joy.

Club Providencia, Santiago

Back home, this would be middle England: bluff
and square-cut citizens who pay their way,
at which my milksop principles are stuff
of dreams encountered in some earlier fray.

Accountants, doctors, managers who read
the informed comments the better papers print:
what an upright world it is for those who need
no prompting here to do their honest stint.

So, in this world of well-bred men, ensure
your world conforms to all these careful lives.
Look on to what you're really living for:
your friends, your family, adoring wives.

Age, illness and bereavement come
assuredly as does the winter rain.
Be wise and make provision, have the plumb-
line fate prove otherwise in early gain.

Take all that's given you and only bless
the Lord our Saviour who has been so kind
so furnish us so well where others press
unsparingly on those who fall behind.

Bromley

A down-at-heels suburban funeral where friends
remember rambles that he'll now not lead:
the fields and woodland haunts we never heed,
the heartless, witless nature that survives our ends.

That old, tired metaphor the voice reiterates,
with parish duties that he must perform
the sermon takes the obvious, easy form
that goes on slowly darkening down its threadbare straits.

But still my father worshipped here occasionally
and we must honour this, his last request:
the homilies and hymns, and all the rest
of things he would have hated, yes, decidedly.

But there we are: he was no great one of the earth,
but one to ask of life and not compel,
and from a blighted start did rather well,
astounding really given his such modest birth.

And one that I was pledged to carry on
and climb up slowly to the chevron ranks
of serving men and institutions, banks
and major corporations, even, more anon.

And one that didn't happen. I confess
to diffidence at best, though only he
had quite that mix of pride and modesty
that got him through the larger day's unhappiness.

Which we must chart in ways he never did,
who had no need for subterfuge, or know
that what was evident to all would show
how vast the world his trusting nature hid.

The Birthday Party

My niece's thirtieth birthday party where
she's calm and placid, one who's never riled:
Who knows what thoughts are passing there
in this best-loved of Down Syndrome child?

Who at this moments acts as smiling queen
with far more family than those around:
the length of Chile makes this festive scene
from town and vineyard and from stony ground.

The boys I last played ping-pong with are grown-
up men with marriages and fine careers:
unbidden, unwilling even, as they've shown,
there goes the silent passage of the years.

She opens presents: money, a colouring quiz,
a low-cut dress, some underwear, bright party gear,
who clearly to her lights and custom is
the happiest of all those clapping here.

And I have grown much older, the gringo now
who moves unsteadily, his hair half white,
where time, the ministrant, will take its bow
and transformations happen out of sight.

Lalo's Funeral

Cold and draughty, and the mourners here
are mostly half my age or even less:
my time for going on is drawing near,
self-willed or otherwise and nonetheless.

The children here can boast of good careers,
well-educated folk who play their part
in middle-class existences: I hear
the stock responses that I've learned by heart.

But what an undistinguished group we make
who note each meeting hence how old we've grown
and gaze on this same path as one we'll take
ourselves, and all too presently and on our own.

We'll each be in that polished box out there,
beneath the viewing flap and heaps of flowers,
beyond this pantomime of hope and care,
just us ourselves and where the heavenly powers

can curse or bless us: we are carried on
the uncomplaining, unreflecting on the whereupon:
an entity on which the sunlight shone
obediently and briefly, then was gone.

And those perplexities stay much the same:
the blooms that issue from a foreign loam.
One had a zest for life she couldn't tame;
one wandered, yet the same was brought back home.

And one I greet now after many years,
a little heavier now, a twitch about the eyes,
a baffled, sullen look in which appears
vexations, disappointments, vague surprise.

Another here who left her spouse, or he her,
walks proudly with the latest substitute:
a quiet, caring man, who won't confer,
alas, much status in that ill-cut suit.

Here one I called Diablo once has now
become more comfortable, inclines to weight,
and at our own far wedding table, how
young he looked and not this shambling state.

And so the shadows gathering will close
about the precipitous descent ahead.
He pours abundant mercy onto those
who die before their scattered wits have fled.

God keep us from such mischief: ill content
and quarrelsome, remembering no one's name,
from being housebound and incontinent,
as all those persons missing here became.

So give us presence, hope and decency,
and cause to look beyond what comes anon,
to be no part of clique or coterie
but tears of kindness when we are gone.

Old Clothes

Each year our working wardrobe thins a bit,
and out go jacket and the overcoat,
the one thing more from that sartorial kit
we once would monitor or more promote.

The shoes we wax and polish once a year:
what streets they walked on, carpets graced:
in self-reflecting mirrors, tier on tier
of us is there reflected on, and more displaced.

So what we sometime were or hoped to be
declines at last into some kindlier self,
and one that smiles at us, the rational entity
alive to now some other kind of wealth.

In reminiscences, in memories,
in friends and keepsakes which are largely gone,
unfathomed, unfathomable but lifetime quiz
that even now resists our brooding on.

And yet become instead our very selves,
the who we are, or talk to, or become,
when the mind refutes and dallies, delves
into the facts of some quite other sum.

Mother's Day: Santiago, Chile

Foremen: well-built, muscled working men,
who populate the vast construction sites,
who, at this eating festival, again
assert their healthy, rough, blue-collar rights.

As they continually, tough year on year
will stamp their sweat and effort into sand
and boulder clay that forms a thin brown smear
along the rivers in this fire-formed land

of hard volcanic rocks, of glacial wash,
of weathered valleys in the rainy south:
this is a hard land, known for grift and dosh
only to immigrants, by word of mouth.

It is they who built the State, who scarcely read,
but pack the bars and beery football clubs:
of the world's unhappiness they took no heed
as years accumulate as torn-off stubs.

Their lives, though going nowhere, see no blame
in wake, wash, eat, work, procreate:
their lives are filled with tumult just the same
at families, taxes and demands of state.

Given they live with relish, take their fill
of simple pleasures, timed to TV screen,
are plainly ignorant of larger will,
how more of these stout builds I should have been.

Parque de Recuerdo: Santiago, Chile

A whole four years have passed since we've been back:
still well laid out, the signposts few but clear.
Long lines of cars, the latest models, pack
the parking spots to overflowing here.

How solid, quiet and prosperous it is
as if the trees and clouds were loath to pass.
All wealth and worldly pomp must come to this,
a small plain tablet set into the grass.

Vast numbers of them stretch across the well-cut lawns
today with flowers, from last week's Mother's Day.
How very strange it is until it dawns
on us how many death has snatched away.

The flowers in pots across the lawns, so bright
and fresh they seem but fountains of the dead
that lie about not wholly out of sight
like tunes that sometimes echo in the head.

* * *

We're misdirected and must spend some time
searching fruitlessly through other lives,
both known and unknown names then come to mime
a world of frailty that yet survives.

How pretty the names are in their Spanish way.
I see their first few steps, each lace-filled dress,
the petticoats and whispers, each strap and stay,
the body bountiful in frank address.

And then there's this: but bones and skulls with teeth
that glisten in the thick imprisoning clay.
A yawn, dark and poisonous, lies beneath
the world of sunshine work and holiday.

And at this sudden thought I'm brought to tears
at words I haven't said, nor ever can.
What is it that makes the untold years
but preparation for the end of man?

* * *

So here's the place that I shall occupy
beneath the pitiless, indifferent sky.
How uncomfortable it seems. Already I
can feel the loneliness, the inner cry.

For all our striving, there is only this,
when star-born elements return to earth.
How emptying and sorrowing the feeling is,
and far away our parent's love at birth.

I stare bewildered at the likely spot:
how self-effacing plain and small it is
where one that was awhile must now be not,
with small day triumphs only he will miss.

The loss is all-encompassing and whole;
there is no lingering here; we only pass
with all the countless others, one poor soul
who folds as shadows into tufted grass.

* * *

A cold mortality afflicts the earth,
and life but small-town purpose on the make.
Even ceremony has not certain worth
on paths self-chosen that all others take.

In which we look, each of us, down a long
diminishing of who we were, each
step is on as through a dancing throng
to some still certainty we never reach.

This is the world, my friend: stay, pass on,
it makes no difference when at every stage
a little brightness in the air is gone,
we're bowed by sadness, illness and by age.

When we will see what every stranger saw:
how thin and bitter are the lives we live,
a vision that, striking, hurts us to the core
and has no friendlier truths to give.

That all our dancing here is self-induced,
or self-imagined, the band gone long ago,
a grim self-mockery that fear induced
that, with our friends, we will not know.

A certain wintry look is my face,
a hard, chipped flintiness about the eyes
of one who's stopped his searching. In this place
is end to pretence and our earthly lies.

On a Certain Day

And on a certain day, we take a train
and for some trifling reasons sit beside
a girl we barely glance at, or again,
in usual thoughts still lost, preoccupied.

Perhaps we talk to while away the time
that falls too heavy on us, and we say
vague empty things that somehow chime
with what the idle papers print that day.

And things that from that conversation flow:
new jobs, and marriages, a life-long friend
in bustling lives we lead and do not know
the hopes in prospect or their end.

Or nothing happens, and we go on past
the rendezvous with fate and destiny
most happily. In this world where hard things last
they're not as pledged or wont to be.

For common fear, or faith, or cowardice
as year on year the beckoning stops flash by,
existences that have that special her and his,
trajectories we're pledge to till we die.

In this, of course, exemplary, much
the pillar of our church community,
those blameless lives were never put in touch,
of simple, outdoor, freckled decency.

Good friends, I toast this life of yours,
so free of error as of hurt and blame:
the lift goes flashing through the sun-filled floors
towards the cut-price basement all the same.

My Favourite Spot

I'm sat now in my favourite café spot,
and hear the sixties numbers endlessly.
Perhaps on earth this is the best we've got,
where what is past reflects on what's to be.

Beyond the pavement pass the silent cars
relentlessly, their heads down. Each one drives
remote from us as do the glimmering stars
their occupants engaged on separate lives.

Which everyone can well imagine, each
of us experiencing what words will do.
Friends push their anecdotes more out of reach,
though still believable, to them and you.

There are no great events, no turning points,
but simply dull, repeated things like these,
and later in the smoke-filled drinking joints
a strange momentum fills the interstices

of surly otherness in little things.
We spend a lifetime knowing someone with
good friends like us that go to jail: it brings
a yet more convoluted and diluted 'if'.

I now recall the funeral words of those
who suddenly give up, go on alone,
that, however bewildering our own life grows,
there's precious little of it that we truly own.

And also there's a young man we have seen
the last with perfect, military courtesy.
This rector of a famous university has been
by turns a student, balding husband, divorcé.

How many, many others. An unbroken stream
of God's good plenty, clearly trained and keen,
that those who'd call this world pure dream
must at least admit how strange it's been.

So when we thumb the pages of these books,
these recollections, memoirs and biographies,
remember, O remember, those bright looks —
and the long lives after they must predecease.

Days Out

The famous places now I shall not see,
though visited each June or Whitsuntide,
that aren't retained at all in memory,
although printed boldly as some travel-guide.

Why do we take these trips, what hope to find,
what new experience do we bring on back,
or stock our no doubt overburdened mind,
what thing thereof we somehow lack?

An immense sadness is in the hotel sheets,
the glittering mirrors in the spotless rooms:
The anonymity of business suites
where over us a gathering absence looms.

That are our loneliness, our making out
with things that do not care for us: we call
our friends continually, and never doubt
the happiness with which we both recall.

At some quite faint and marginal event
we both remember, making friend with friend
and do so, will so, till we each are sent
on that great package tour we call the end.

Daybreak

I get up carefully nowadays, and sit
at bedside silently as the dreams flood on.
Then night-time apparitions fade and it
is clear the greater part of me is gone.

And with what horror I stare at the great charade,
the homes, places, and characters I used to know,
and a sweet suffocating pain then presses hard:
where is that past, great world of brilliant show?

Sometimes they're fully real, the characters,
and not vague shapes projected on the air.
They speak to me, but something new occurs;
the world that was is neither here nor there.

An emptying numbness chills the heart;
how frail the wide world then, a troubled place,
a world of childhood where the deep fears start,
where we must ask and simply hope for grace.

Beset by grief and helplessness, I see
my parents and my parents' friends when age
befuddled them, some passing imbecility
relieved them of character, slow stage by stage.

how cheerfully we left them to their rage
their fierce bewilderment, the loss of who they were:
a sense of pride with which they still engage
prevents them saying what we might infer.

Bitter, bitter is the life we pass
in this small place, within each narrow street:
along the pavements run thin strips of grass,
of course obediently but never meet

at that anticipated far elation
when all our hopes are answered, the full race run,
but life is never that, and each occasion
becomes a catalogue of what's undone.

Scattered Notes

What are these scattered notes that life turns up,
from which we fashion a constant narrative?
We're offered, it seems, a splendid drinking cup
but take only a few spilled drops it has to give.

And think of old acquaintances that I
assumed were genuine and life-long friends.
Not so, it seems. All forged but with an eye
to profiting as some occasion sends.

Of people known in many countries not a trace
remains: They have retired, left no address.
Someone equally capable fills their place:
this is how things works, more or less.

And if they do not think of me, I still
recall the comradeship and campfire talks
in places inhospitable, and always will:
those far off places where our future forks.

We were young, of course, impressionable,
when all the years to come were profitable ways,
new, most fragrant and incorruptible:
the new path trodden, as it were, that never strays.

I write as one who knows the Russian poets,
the too sweet Persian verse, the Sanskrit tongue,
the many forms of beauty although its
through great hardships that the soul has sung.

I knew what conquerors had gone this way,
their actions towards a country's nationhood.
For you it was only procedures done for pay,
for which you stood in as some other would.

You carved out what was needful, did your tour;
the company banked your findings and reports.
What is a life scattered in such dead things for?
What is made of hammer and the ironed shorts?

It is life that passes, unslackening on,
which I hold out to you, as onetime true.
Do you not think that still some moments shone
that we remembering them may yet renew?

It's Over

Enough. The bell has rung. We've run our heats.
We go out proud or wearied from the ring
And if we've earned, or not, our just desserts,
can hardly matter at this topmost rung.

Stretched below is all the past, imagined slights
or hardships given us for no good cause,
our gross stupidities, unfathomed hates,
the quite unnecessary and furtive lies.

If we face our Maker now I cannot say,
but think that Hell or some such place supplies
a needed end for poor humanity
addicted to its needless hurt and loss.

We think of mawkish school assemblies, all
those ringing statements, grand and fatuous,
how in the race of life, our doing well
was more than putting foot hard on the gas.

We collected, I remember, stacks of quotes,
a sort of scrapbook, which we friends revealed
as more hilarious with the passing dates,
and brought them out when conversation failed.

Those charlatans have long been dead,
with what or when I doubt we ever cared,
who had much better things to do than pad
out instances of pompous phrases heard.

And so the years have passed, and we approach
those far-off portals that they pointed to,
with some misgivings, recognitions each
may see today as relevant, agree

that some of what they said is halfway true,
and those directions that they gave us then
relate to some great venture thrown away,
what all have entered on, but haven't won.

Each Day

Life's a disappointments steeped in doubt:
no cause to dally in or long delay;
each day I write to draw the poison out:
it is a deep and bitter world today

I have no family that might refute
the evidence that's looms before my eyes.
The well of life is poisoned at the root
however anyone might read the lies.

I have kept the faith, that beauty was
an all-enticing, wholesome, womanly thing,
What has happened? What is there because
of those dark pools that won't be comforting?

What hope was there in quiet, cautious smiles,
egregious were all the lies we told!
Perhaps the falsest is that which most beguiles,
that we can start again, are not too old.

I doubt that homily is halfway true;
I see a world as was which even now
backs off as it ever was wont to do
at that long lonely furrow we each must plough.

One Tree

One tree along a quiet suburban street:
its trunk portraying textured honesty,
the winter's chilly winds and summer's heat
it will resist and stay and simply be.

What is it really? Listen. You can hear
its heart beat slowly through the woody depths.
Good-natured, it is never cavalier
but slow accreting of its hidden strengths.

And this, in time, you must accept; must see
as self on shadow, many shadows, each
in self-assertiveness and modesty
evoke the memories beyond your reach

in details of a childhood picnic where
the trees like this stood round as other ranks
assembled, knew their place, but stood four-square
indifferent to us or our silent thanks.

But were the same immersed in growing lives,
in laughing words, avowals, growing threat,
in incidents that cut us, sharp as knives,
those great betrayals that we don't forget.

Or yet the tribulations old age brings,
in friends, in faculties, respected name,
and look on further to eternal things
that change forever but will stay the same.

You go in company, good company
that have their place in growth to flower and fruit,
as though some part of us accompany
those destinations by whatever route.

So many sounds and voices throng the air
that we can hardly hear but only sense;
and ours, as silent, will commingle there
and join with all things in our going hence.