

SMALL TALK



colin john holcombe

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by Colin John Holcombe

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POEMS

1. Agua con Gas

Sunday morning, and I'm sat at peace
with coffee and an 'agua con gas'.
The rising silver bubbles never cease
to fuzz the clarity the surface has
with a bristling, steady movement: tiny blink
as each arrives and opens and is gone,
as though the fervent inwardness would link
with calm transparency I'm gazing on.

Sights recollected in tranquillity
as Wordsworth almost said. I think of how
the great technicians made us see
by painting miracles of this world now.
Velasquez most of all, whose hog-hair brush
picked out ebullience of silk and lace,
Sargeant and Boldini even, once the rush
to finish sitting settled into grace.

All tiny objects, mundane, trivial things
that are, and of themselves, not asking why,
where consciousness a moment spreads its wings
and asks for nothing but the wide blue sky.

2. Café Time

A café, jotting pad, an hour to kill:
I watch the summer beauties drifting past
in fashion statements that they largely fill
though doubtless borrowed from an older cast.

From bulky schoolgirl to the well-dressed wife
and sales assistants on their thick-soled shoes
to legs still buoyantly adrift in life
and perfumed legends that can pout and choose —
they all are going somewhere, and will leave
some image on the air, each shape intent
on having mischief in their looks deceive
us with an indolence that's only lent.

The most compelling then is lightest worn:
a casual word or laugh, the shuttered glance.
And all that is not said is through this born
to bonfired vanities in which their dance
patrols the territories imagined ours.

Soft and imperial, they flit about
in rapturous plangency of all their powers
till radiant sunlight in them gutters out.

3. Another One

Another one has gone, our maid who cooks
a bit and weekly does this modest flat,
although we're easy money, by the looks
of it, and I'm a gringo, come to that.

But all too obvious the reason why:
the country's changing, as I tell my wife.
No start in education, still they try
as others do to get a better life:
attempts not news or reprehensible.
Across the world fresh millions ply their fates,
with many more increasingly incapable
of doing so in Europe or the States.

In fact our energetic, cheery lot
have taken new employment roads urged on
by illness, families, or drunken sot
of husband come back with his savings gone.

I sit here in this café with the sun
across the world now sinking on the life I lead,
one difficult but answerable to none
but those who worry how such small words read.

4. As It Was

He comes each Sunday with his antique prints
for you to ask about, and purchase, frame:
the city as it was in sepia tints:
decipherable though not the same.

Nor such a gracious age for all that men
could saunter in their polished shoes and spats.
Another photo shows the street again
with workmen in their waistcoats, boots and hats.
They're navies, laying tramlines. You can see
the muscles glistening in the summer heat,
also the gritted jaws and stale despondency
in gangs on quotas that they have to meet.

My neighbour, smiling, contradicts this view,
and waves a thick-ringed hand across the lines.
They did, I tell her; even now they do
on country roads, in quarries, in the mines.

Criminals, she says, for no man living
becomes mere animals as much as that.
What can I tell her, that as unforgiving
run all the thoroughfares to where we're sat?

5. Fragrant Air

In enervation trees withdraw their sap
and leaves fray out to skeletons and fall
to a limp collapse at each cold snap,
as though the winter here came more on call.

Our bodies smaller in the shirt or vest,
we feel expectancy in morning's chill,
a sense of daring when we stand undressed
above the bedroom's frosted windowsill.

But not the Chileans: the slightest drop
in temperature brings out the thickset teens
in muffler, overcoat or knitted top,
the boots to thigh-length over padded jeans,
and not as demonstration, but release
of autumn's subdued jazz notes fading out
into a badly-written, rained-on piece
with legs and bodices half written out.

Yet all that's promised is a wavering frieze
of aqueous mirages not here nor there,
but in the haloed street-lamps and the trees
become embodiments of breath-soft air

6. Rain

What differences a change in weather makes:
dark skies, the shut-in faces, muddy ground.
The workmen pull out matted leaves with rakes
from drains and gutters with a rasping sound
that bites into our thoughts like scattered grit
beneath a wheel that otherwise would spin
upon a yielding softness, holding it
as fit for purposes and pasted in.

A grim determination, raw and cold,
has gripped the capital: the streets are bare
of dogs and beggars, and the shop-lights fold
into their inner-circulated air
that gives out nothing to the gloomy streets.
The traffic lacks its famed exuberance
and boasts no racing lights or ribald bleats:
each change of lights an orderly advance.

And then it rains again, ragged, thin
and nondescript as rooms in tenements
show cold opprobrium the poor are in,
and doubtless will be to their going hence.

7. Autumn Outfits

A late, unsettling autumn's in the air,
and pavements dazzle with a chilly fire
that frames the Chileans off to work, who wear
the wraps and thickest of their warm attire.
It all this while has been as good as dead:
the winter's warm and bodily impress
consigned to hangers and to drawers instead,
mere phantoms draped on nothing: emptiness.

No doubt they still saw outlines through their minds'
clear incantation of each flounce and look,
but learned that latency which absence finds
is winter's habitat in winter's book.

And when you think about it, we all fare on
attired in habits and contrivances
not ours, and though the day for them is gone,
past all the season's proper licenses,
must still push regardless through our make-
belief that what's to come must still be best,
as though our very actions built the stake,
and hope's down-payment furnished all the rest.

8. Blind

Blind, and out all weathers: can't be stopped.
He plays a cheap wood pipe, and waits, and when
the box is shaken and no coin is dropped
will play the soft and faltering tune again.
And so for hours on end: it doesn't change.
He hears the footsteps and the traffic's roar
as something elsewhere, and it's nothing strange
to hold this one thing he is aiming for,
which is but contact, contribution. We,
in short, all matter, and are linking through
to what remains, a settled constancy
of being part of, always, this small view.

The world goes past him and he cannot see
what looks are offered, taking things on trust.
He didn't want this life or even choose to be
the thickset figure piping as he must.

But are we different in our larger scope
of adding something to the general din:
of laughing, talking, praying — giving hope
that someone hear us, and will let us in?

9. Cántico

Bowra, Paz, MacLeish and Madriago
add the scholar-poet's words of praise:
'which stands as refutation and embargo
upon the horrors of the present days.'

After forty years I don't know what to think,
except to add the verse looks dreadfully thin,
reprise of Valéry, a mental blink
to use the metaphor we're rhyming in.

'The greatest living Spanish poet', Jorge
Luis Borges writes, 'beyond dispute.'
Perhaps he really thought so, and this porky
is not hyperbole the words refute.
In fact, as is so often with translation,
the editor is passable, the big names bad:
in none of them a wider revelation
of what the mere words earned or ever had.

Is there not a country built on fact
where poets need not climb the greasy pole,
perform their vaudeville or their vatic act,
but see life lengthened out, and bright, and whole?

10. Window Cleaner

I watch a window-cleaner at her task.
Day in, day out, professionally the same
she does the fronts in turn and doesn't ask
to be excused the awkward café name.

You think she could do better? Maybe not:
for all I know it may be best to go
on unobtrusively with what we've got
than try for something that we just can't know.

Indeed it can get worse: complexities
pre-empt our lives, or any worth the name —
like medicine perhaps, which, as it is,
becomes more strategies to spread the blame.
Each step's computerized, and sections glow
with staged proceedings on a lighted screen,
where you can turn the image round to show
how closely inter-penetrant have been
on parts we took for granted through the skin.
Yes, all mechanical, and made to fit
the vibrant envelope we're living in,
that still renews and cleanses, bit by bit.

11. Chilean Politics

Of all who'd think to come here, one request:
they, please, will never sink to politics.
This land of chatterboxes functions best
with enmities their kinships cannot fix.
In this and many things: no middle ground
but centuries of bloodshed. Never try
to sit in judgement on them, or to sound
the fount of gringo wisdom, asking why.

Remember too that all will lie, be hard
of hearing, understanding, won't agree.
A point of honour not to yield one card
but sit there smiling, and inscrutably
decide the trumps that count. Some book you've read,
a fact you've checked and double-checked? 'Gross lies,
pure devilry: the worst.' Please leave unsaid
the understanding in your pressed goodbyes.

I speak with some authority, with friends
on both sides of the spectrum, people known
for years — when commonly a party ends
with comments on how Chilean I've grown.

12. Clothes

On the whole, men's outfits simply clothe, give respectability, a guide to trade, profession, class, or where they live — but hinted at, identikit, down-played. And if their better halves will ply a course towards a self-promotion — new-done hair, neat match of shoes and handbag — it's a force that's wholly natural and always there.

In short, we do not look on through, but take as one the hemline and the bodice cup, the swagger of the hips as those hips make a point of swaggering and fronting up. But more than that: the body's deep unease resolves itself in radiant sunny weather: it's sublimated, fused, and no one sees how truth and subterfuge consort together.

So come the manias that the fashions send in millions window-shopping, trying on outfit after outfit as though the dress would lend entrancing shape to where their prospects shone.

13. Dog Days

It is the dog-days' heat we notice most
among the miasmas of the bodies sweat,
as though this sweltering stickiness must host
our comfort somewhere, in the sense we get
of being of and out of this closed space
with trees and awnings and the welcome shade —
this long, long falling headlong out of grace
towards extinction, though it's much delayed.

But then there is the thought of Thomas Browne
amazed we last a single day. How soon
from their high equinoxes lives run down
to that loud ticking in the depths of noon.
And trees will cast their seasonal burdens down
and be as lifeless sentinels, then clothed again,
and from a field, a house or thriving town
will take on markings of the lives of men.

So brief mortality, like passing heat
that plays with us, and passes, then is gone:
it leave us tables and the busy street,
the traffic roaring past us, heedless, on.

14. Dogs

Exhausted, muzzles on the paving stones,
the dogs lie stretched out in the heat: an eye
opens, an ear twitches, but still the muzzy bones
take in but warmth and looming passers by.
A mother wheels her pram up. They must shift
reluctantly an inch or two, and poke
their dry snouts out from under chairs and drift
thence off to where they were before they woke.

How do we know what makes the canine sight
receding upwards from perspiring feet,
the forms that sway above and block out light
in lofty silhouettes where these forms meet?

The streets for dogs have dark and pungent smells
and rank enchantment where the welcome spread
of evening's coolness in their shadows wells
in memories that fill each bony head
with fibred sinews while these present days
must pass for them in soporific tediousness:
past litters they remember through a haze
their eyes' benevolence will not confess.

15. Friends

As with friends we haven't met for years
we all turn older suddenly, with hair
ablaze with worry's sad and brave arrears,
that asks importantly just how we fare.

We think of Proust's narrator near his end,
beguiled by some young, pretty, flouncing thing
who whispers: 'Can't I be your little friend?'
and laughs to hear the tittle-tattle that might bring.
And more of Yeats' dying animal, its wealth
of love, both sad and pungent, to impart
to all who'd read him, while the battered self
retreat to rag and bone shop of the heart.

Bizarre, preposterous and obscene,
so dies the body as the sense bloom
beyond imaginings, and what has been
becomes as perfume of a shut-up room
that in a moment is compressed to grief.
So youth, that blooms on further out of reach:
riotous and disposable in the brief
bewitchment of this autumn's temperate speech.

16. Florist Boys

They walk on past so solemnly with sprays
of lilies, laurels, and the odd white rose,
reminding all of us to pause and play
respects to families when all hope goes.

At every moment, one of us is dying,
and doctors think we all are, bit by bit,
but this is different, and there's no denying
that here's a flaunted, public end of it.
And not just that, but maybe who we are
is not that fully known until our ends:
that daily converse doesn't take us far
on what we really count for with our friends.

A sobering recollection, knowing my own lot
with whom I'm hardly present: a partial ghost
who, mute, still broods on nothings and has got
a fine distaste for therefore playing host.
I think of those obituaries I had to write,
not wholly honest, but with good points first,
and hope with mine in looking back they might
say life to him was bravely unrehearsed.

17. Geoffrey Hill

The craftsmanship is clear: the rhythms fall
it seems haphazardly but leave their gaps
in such a melody that words and all
lacunae adumbrate a large `perhaps`.

Nonetheless I wish I liked the pieces more:
the range of learning and the razor skill
with which the thoughts provoke and shift before
we grasp the essence in this overkill
of sculpted commentary on non-events.
How far the probing scholar's thought goes back
to pluck the arcane from the obvious sense
with deconstruction's guard dogs on attack.

I'm comfortable with deep allusions, find
it quite unworrying that words deceive,
that we can never know what's on our mind
until of common sense we take our leave,
but must it be so dark and recondite,
these well-mulched sowings in a wintry mind:
no glad awakening with the sun's delight
or passing happiness a word may find?

18. Heat

Water splashed out under flower stalls
gives misted respites from the summer heats,
though there are shadows where the sunlight falls
outside the blooms in blue and white retreats.

In fact the temperatures are not that bad:
it's far, far hotter on the pampas plains,
and of course the Atacama's never clad
with trails of cumulous and passing rains.
Besides, it doesn't last. Four months and then
the sun throws lengthening shadows from the trees
and high developments, which then again
will fill with headiness that no one sees.

But that's the rub of it, these afternoons
when heat and dark become uncoupled, pour
with stifling incoherence out of shaded rooms
that wait with windows open and the door
expelling colours that are always heat.
We cannot look at them or watch the cars
push tremulously shimmering through the street
now tiger-bold in blaze and shadow bars.

19. How Far We Have Come

How far we've come you'd say to see the grim
old photo albums of the time before.
Each household had its patron, he whose whim
was made by custom into written law.
Just what he earned he wouldn't say, or how
he'd spent the bulk of it, more his preserve,
except the little bit that did for now:
so his to order it and hers to serve.
A demarcation that the church upheld,
observed in courtesies, a hundred rules.
Man was the stronger partner, would not be gelled
by lies the socialists dispensed for fools.

In this small corner of the Spanish crown,
however, far and lacking obvious wealth,
it was the women laid the first floor down
declared, 'I keep my name and am myself.'
And so it grew, and does so now, an ever
swelling animated talk: it's all
by women, of them, for them, which, together,
now keeps their men-folk distant, meek, on call.

20. La Traviata

We queue, then climb up from the hint of rain
to these, the highest seatings near the dome
of our old opera house, where I complain
once more of quarters which were second home
not long ago. We settle. Lights grow dim.
Conductor. Overture. The curtain lifts
to show a party, in the evening swim
of which is one who takes us through the shifts
from spot-lit happiness to grief's dark court.

We know the scenes, the words, each singer's part:
how love will flare, be dashed, how each one's thought
portends the music that we have by heart:
impetuous Alfredo in his violent rage
and Violetta with her fervent pain.
The fire and brio sadnesses the stage
pours out as consciousness is given rein
to be the TV soaps we grew to age
with, seeing them assume some long lost part
of us that's inaccessible, a page
where all the notes we took will one day start.

21. Labour Day

A warm, contenting, shadowed afternoon
that rounds off International Labour Day
here in Providencia, where too soon
we'll end our idle chit-chat, go our way
as friends who had to fill an hour or two
before the restaurant or the cinema:
a day on which there's nothing left to do
except some duty visit out by bus or car.

There were the televised and bright parades
of Socialists to mark the battles past:
Allende's death, the rise of guilds and trades
but even those were peaceful, failing fast.

The country's like this afternoon, between
the fire of summer and the winter frost:
equitable, not one nor other, seen
progressing slowly over what was lost.
And that will no doubt take its many forms
and can't today be guessed at or delayed,
but brooding on those landscapes, blood and storms,
it's hard to think of what its martyrs paid.

22. MBAs

Sensibly they like to start from scratch,
knock down the brick-built buildings, and erect
their airy, glass-wreathed palaces that match
the inward glitterings the walls reflect.

A world that I knew well, where lady luck
patrols in power-suits and eased-in clutch —
impregnable until the downturn struck
but still not teetering, or not that much.

What do they make, these smiles in business suits
but groups that congregate, are in the know?
Like client brochures or the fashion shoot
it's done professionally, and done for show.

In outline it's a sort of first estate
above mere trade or servile business thought:
to pay bills grudgingly and settle late,
but know, correctly, that their name is sought
precisely for its well-occasioned cost.
Their very cachet holds them in the air:
unwavering confidence they never lost,
nor ever need to in the lives they share.

23. Winter

Winter's now established with an absent air,
to make the autumn's riotous desolation in
the streets a bruising thing, a conscious stare
at lighted shop-fronts dull, withdrawn and thin.

It's walking through the fallen drifts of leaves
the thousands of them, thrown as coloured hands
down on the sidewalks that the mind receives
its intimations from those spectral lands.

Eternal summers which the Greeks, that most
contentious, sceptical of people, saw
as needed by their gods, though rootless ghost
was what the great majority had for
their own inheritance, as like as not.

Yet walking through these coloured drifts,
these heaped-up counterpanes the streets have got
as though too readily, the spirit lifts
to what we doubtless never lost, although
it form an obvious, repeated theme
in things we never till then felt: the flow
of lives protected by the winter's screen.

24. New Starts

They hang about in streets, these raw new starts
that promise journeys out to jean-clad truth,
to things that are themselves, whose knowledge crafts
a bluff embodiment of regal youth.

How easily we'd go with them, and taking
bare necessities, and not that much
in clothes, but more in resolution, making
sure we stayed untainted, out of touch.
Our lives would bloom in bright ascensions, spun
of youth's high longings, such as soar about
in lofty, brilliant-feathered days of sun
upon the shimmering highways, speeding out.

Of course we'd have to learn new skills,
be much more humble, wary, know our place,
and find which esoteric creed instils
our being different then, in every case.
But still, as dawn itself on new-made roads,
to be our wholesome selves, just who we were,
lest things habitual turn heavy loads
we pledged a lifetime past we'd not incur.

25. Obituaries

I shouldn't have read the thing, obituaries
the 'Economist' has gathered in a book.
Half the names are pallid memories
that coyly beg us for a second look.

How elegant the lives are here, which flowed
as effortlessly on to that high ground:
so prodigal of gifts they never owed
to birth or circumstances, but were found
just what they made the lottery of life
become, and not capricious in their case.
We take a ticket to the job or wife
where they moved purposely, from place to place.

Myself, I wonder how I got here, see
my course a sort of pinball, where I fell,
and still fall, headlong, curiously
into a self-inflicted urge to tell
that all our conversations shrink to one
on one with still more abstract company,
each pestering to have the phrases run
to someone answering who's not quite me.

26. Office Blocks

Bland, unthreatening, more blanking out
if anything, with panels, wafer-thin,
of breathing sky and clouds and all about
that's registered, absorbed and taken in.

Indeed, it's all been plotted up — each part
by thousand miles of cable: nothing lost
or double-counted: can't be. Here they start:
the anonymity and added cost,
an architectural ur-accountancy
of girder, concrete panel, flooring space —
the last particularly, since all's to be
apportioned to the average selling pace.

In fact they're not that regular: each pane
reflects an oblong, partial shade of sky
and shimmers differently as evenings wane
to bluish iridescence and the colours die,
to go out in a strange forgiveness.
A Leggo-land of money hardly there,
tall piles of numbers that must slowly press
the life both out and into city air.

27. Old Gentlemen

I shall join them soon enough, my slacks
neat-pressed and pacing with a white-topped cane:
a trace of dandy as the sunlight tracks
me through life's slower and more kindly lane.

A panama that barely keeps my head
such are the many names I have to greet
and go off on a measured, sprightly tread
down boulevard and leafed suburban street
in coat or jacket still not thrown away,
though quite unsuitable for daily use:
a jaunty cut about it, brushed each day
for some old, pampered tomcat on the loose.

And one you'll say has paid his entrance fee
to that strange carnival we call a life:
has paid in full indeed, as you can see
bereft of offspring or a doting wife.
As though in being spry and self-contained
were not a moment failing in that practised part:
a recompense, no less, for what has passed
inside this well-contained, indulgent heart.

28. Victor Hugo

I should do better for him: underneath
the piled-up bombast he was sane enough.
At least his dreams were true, and would bequeath
our academics much intriguing stuff.

So: that madman known as Victor Hugo,
their greatest poet still, as Gide well knew,
with name that only seems to rhyme with 'jugo'
except that's Spanish more, and will not do.

And so I try. I really try, and jot
down various openings for well-known lines,
but how they go on, page on page, and not
like this: the alexandrine also rhymes.

Suppose I parsed him well enough: I'd hear
the muffled thunder of those phrases build
to lofty citadels of childhood fear
with God now speaking as the poet willed?
Besides: where do you stop? Or start? It flows
as with a Janus, double-headed look
at truth and towering falsehood. On it blows
through all eternity in book on book.

29. Passing

Always, though I knew them slightly, they
were off to vague, preposterous districts — vast,
beyond what post-codes or new maps portray,
where all but ambulances drive on fast.

But having seen my wife off, coming back
at six this morning, in a train packed tight
with watchmen, nurses, labourers, each man jack
of them paid pittances, kept out of sight,
I look at each unhealthy, sweating face,
the lipstick much too thick, the jawbone blue,
and am ashamed to find this swarthy race
shows all the management we're paid to do.

And in an accident with someone hurt,
where helping made some trouble with the boss,
they'd go at once, and stain with blood and dirt
the clothes for decencies they couldn't cross.
Myself I wouldn't speak for, but my class
I know too well would dally, be the last
to hold a hand out, but display the farce
of cell phones ringing and their stepping past.

30. Propertius

I sit here writing in this open street
with passing crowds and traffic far away,
to hear again the chatter and the sandaled feet
and what the man I'm reading now would say.

The Chilean is not the easiest speech
to be precise in or be beautiful,
and even on the TV is more screech
than syllables absorbed in cotton-wool.
Perhaps the Latin round you was as bad,
and marked by ugly patois, flattened vowel:
you saw the essence in it, what it had
behind a street-wise, raucous howl.

I do not know. We live and have our seasons
continued after us in clumsy speech.
Perhaps the heart has always added reasons
beyond what aptly pumiced phrase can teach.
Why write at all, unless each passing word
is promissory, and points to something more
that all our lives we strained for, never heard
beyond the tenderness it's standing for?

31. Razor

We finish, wash the razor, flick it dry
and hardly notice it, though day by day
it grows less useable and we must buy
another soon and toss the old away —
without a thought, although another age
would be enraptured by its slick precision,
its neat-pressed plastic and the twinkling rage
with which it goes about its felling mission.

No sword of samurai had quite this blade
or was so modest with its inch-long steel
that's hardly fastened but more pressed and laid
to be the scimitar we do not feel.

A thousand marvels make our lives, but each,
when dulled by our unthinking use, adopts
an air of false docility, as though to preach
unwonted homilies where no one stops
to think about these small-time engineers,
for all some space-time visitor may see
in land-fill, sifting through the dangerous years,
its small, quite perfect, glittering filigree.

32. Islamic Kingdoms

The tribes are legends in themselves, of course:
the Ghorids, Qarakitay, Golden Horde.
Surrounding Christendoms have felt their force
or made entreaty to their overlord.

I know their lands, their rulers, tolls they paid,
the Caliphs called up in their prayers,
can even read their laqabs, each one laid
with florid kufic into daily cares.

That said, what now remains but dust and air,
a ruined mosque, a dirhem, faience tile?
Of silk-robed conquerors there's nothing there
but steppe and stony desert, mile on mile.

And yet I read about them still, and look
up mint and ruler on the coins I've got.
The child at Christmas thinks his latest book
completes the jigsaw, lot by lot.
It doesn't, can't of course: the quest goes on
and by its very nature is the place
I'll never get to, ever, being gone
into a world that left this shining trace.

33. Royal Holidays

Our fault entirely. Yes, we should have known:
the salesgirl laughing when she'd half begun,
the polished voice that bubbled down the phone,
Please come at once. It's true: You husband's won.
Reluctantly, still doubting it, we went
and met the others on that large prize bent.
Good suits, stiff drinks: the hotel foyer lent
some misplaced glamour to this non-event.

You have to take to them, admire the loyal
sales employee battling through the vacant look
of those who only want their gift, as 'Royal
Holidays' displayed their picture book.
It was too obviously a scam. We knew
immediately but somehow didn't leave.
A nice guy, needing work. What would you do
but make the best of it, and smile, deceive?

So there we are. We stuck it out and got
our prize, quite worthless, as the rest.
Greed, stupidity, the human lot
of kind complicity where each is blest.

34. Attack

The same old crowd of workaholics, cast-off wives,
who now are teachers, lab-technician, nurse.
It's clear, whatever complicates our lives,
for most here chatting it's a good deal worse.

I trot the old tales out: they nod their heads
and add a chance example to my wares,
then quickly pass from lives as newly-weds
to things now separate, a his and theirs.
They ask about our children. None, I say,
and turn the talk to theirs, who've all done well.
I smile, encouraging my conscience pay
its entry money to some private hell
and think that's patronizing or bizarre
although they pick it up by silent phone.
*You just get used to it, they say. We are
by preference happier on our own.*

Amen to that. Besides, I do not care
and think of nothing till the sharp attack
I get from cripple with a teddy bear
she nurses fiercely on the same bus back.

35. Same Old Stories

With coffees come the stories. His I know
beyond the outside hazard of a chance
he'll not know mine. But still it's round we go
like weary partners at some local dance.

I wonder why we meet, and go on meeting,
complain of taxes, bosses past, and wives —
who get on famously, and go on beating
us in varied interests all their lives.

And that's the secret of it: not to stop
at any place or person, bustling through
itineraries of meetings, parties, talk to drop,
when all that energy wins others too.
As though our pasts were endless library books
and our society were out on loan:
always to keep chattering, attracting looks
with no accomplishments to call our own
until in Births and Deaths an inch or two
of standard newsprint in the local rag
brings all our small attainments out on view
to others in this game of touch and tag.

36. Careers

A smart address, and concierge rings through
before we take the lift up, find the door.

A large room opens to a stunning view.

My wife's old boss: *You haven't been before?*

he asks, half smiling, and we take our place

among the other guests: none navy men

it seems from each complacent, settled face

that likes long lunches and will start at ten.

Later, when we talk and I've begun

to grasp he doesn't like his guests, I ask:

But, admiral, if you don't make number one?

but find he stops me, face a subtle mask

of mischievous good humour. *Hope I don't.*

I'm being frank with you. As does my wife.

I'd be much happier with some job afloat.

A river pilot maybe: carefree life.

Perhaps I half believed him, saw a ghost
of Chinese diplomats retired from fame
to farm and fishing. No. He has a post
that takes him on and upward just the same.

37. Shoes

How differently our footwear treads the streets,
in playfulness or grim sobriety.
Through winter's consciousness or summer heats
it's all laid down for us, just how we'll be.
Some women, true, prefer the outdoor things,
and men make choices under other heads;
it's only women go for straps and wings,
and keep the unworn dozens under beds.

Perhaps it's fantasy their owners love,
the body answering to what they feel,
a leather thong supporting thighs above
and tapering muscles fitted with a heel.

The fantasy is ours. How can they tell
who live by outcomes neither good nor ill
but steadied, conventional, though that as well
must clothe the quotidian, general will?
And so we see them set out on the shelves,
the women's matching outfits, while the men's
are set aside, important: very selves
drawn up by effort through each shoelace lens.

38. Wheat and Tares

So here I sit, a gringo: easy touch
for passing vagabonds and scamps of course.
To them I am a friend, though not so much
to make them pass me up as earnings source.

At times I've had enough, though still I give
the odd few coppers that I have to spare.
*This is the sorry world in which we live,
for which, despite its faults we have to care,*
I say to friends who disapprove, think life's
a casual lottery where some lose out,
can see no conscience prompting, less a wife's
continued worry that the kids make out.

But there we are. I give. They take.
I smile, they smile, and so the world goes round,
and if we're cheapened by it, the mistake
lies not in giving but that age-old ground
of trumped-up differences in us and them,
that our disasters are as hard as theirs,
and manners, always manners, that condemn
each class to toil among the wheat and tares.

39. Experience

And so they talk the last of summer through
in shade from café awnings or the trees;
reminiscing, quietly coming to
in small refreshment stops down memories
that always get to them: when they were young,
unmarried, carefree, till the kids grew up:
the same sad melody we all have sung
to champagne bumpers in the small-stemmed cup.

Scandals, heartaches, losses: they survived,
a touch diminished but of strengthened mind,
or so they told themselves, and there arrived
the raft of troubles age is apt to find:
the hardening arteries, the dickey heart,
increasing deafness, both the sugars high.
Stoically, they play their walk-on part:
with pills and exercises: life goes by
in santo days they'll drop in time. The eyes
can look preoccupied but in their depths
will know life as it is, which never lies
about that much-smudged entry age accepts.

40. The Neighbourhood

I took some photos of our neighbourhood
one Sunday afternoon to show a friend,
and found the 'thirties residences stood
around as though their kept-up airs would lend
a touch of graciousness to towering palm,
to red-flecked maples and occasional larch,
though orphaned, isolated, kept from harm
by high wire fences and by gated arch.

In various styles they have their balconies
and trellises fresh-painted white or green,
both matched as well-dressed dignitaries
or women sweeping from some ballroom scene.

Except that's long been over, with the flock
of nannies, full-time gardener, maids and cook.
From settler to Allende years the clock
ticked steadily to close the ill-starred book.
Now most have gone: adapted, modelled, made
the corporate offices or new HQ,
with only concierges, white-haired, and paid
the grace and favour sums their forebears knew.

41. How It Goes

No one notices or even hears
the echoing everywhere of passing feet,
those emptying sadnesses as autumn nears
the windows, wooden hoardings, bricked in street.

Like them we're planned for, measured, built
on this broad amphitheatre called the earth.
Like them we have the morning gladness spilt
a bit more grudgingly each day from birth.

Ill-bred to notice now the faint sensations
of sweated palm from workman's plane or last.
We practise lives of wry, off-pat evasions
and on the other side walk smartly past.
The hum of looms fills out the clothes we wear;
a bitterness is stitched in Chinese shoes.
Soft hands in fashioning are always there,
their toil is part of them we cannot lose,
though much we'd want to, add 'it's paid
for', 'life's unfair', 'that's simply how it goes.'
All true, most certainly, but made
the more intolerable in heartless prose.

42. Trees

Battered, indifferent, apart from us,
the trees on traffic-pullulating streets
have upper stories not conspicuous
for being shaded, airy, green retreats.
But still they grow on past us, living lives
at best tangentially akin to ours,
still rooting in a different soil that thrives
as on a slow fuse through the buried hours
of Carboniferous and humid heats
that down millennia make the thickening green
of vegetation folding into watery peats,
to glower later with a soubrette sheen.

Yet once it was not so: the ancient world
heard deity in spring and woodland dell,
could feel the hope as every stem unfurled
and Minos sighing as the first leaf fell.

All that is past, but walking back at night
through groves of soft, unshuttered, prescient sound,
we feel our bodies fill with slow delight,
as though in kinship with the common ground.

43. Flamenco at La Fragua

That meld of tenderness and breathy fire,
the shaped voluptuousness by which is bred
those elemental forms we never tire
of watching, as each lifts her flowered head.

All these are suppositions, gestures won
of endless practice through the months and years,
bequeathed to us in looks, but more begun
in vibrant inwardness a dancer hears.

I meet them afterwards: poised girls who go
to offices and safe, parental homes,
to domesticities that never know
how Yeats' trotting madam stamps and roams.
Yes, far from these derivatives are those
whose heady passion of the limbs was worn
by hearts at once too warm and kind to close
this deal on life They stood apart, still-born
in tittle-tattle, slander, only sad
that all their fire of nature had not burned
to splendour, only what a meek world had
delivered to them in the steps they learned.

44. Visiting

The small eyes glimmer in the thick-rouged face:
a mannequin with new-dressed plume of hair.
She frowns and stares at me, and then a trace
of that fond, gracious and once kindly air
that made her latterly my favourite aunt,
at least by marriage, till her mind quite went.
Again she takes my name, repeats it, can't
connect with what the card and greetings meant.

At tea I leaf on through the family snaps.
Two girls, both beautiful, smile out at me.
Her only daughters, these are, and perhaps
the most entrancing that we mortals see.
So tell me loveliness affords its fee,
and women's warmth shall be its own reward,
that there is love, happiness, true fidelity:
by husbands one was murdered, one divorced.

I take my leave and see her look away
as from the lives in which her beauty shone
but know too well whatever words I say
will not a moment enter what is gone.

45. What is Mathematics?

'What is Mathematics?' Not a work
to trifle with but now my bedtime read.
A book where wholesale subterfuges lurk
beneath the smallest steps that we'd concede.

On everything there hangs the question why
that's always querying the steps we'll take
to get at Euler and his proof of pi,
and infinitesimals for heaven's sake!
Yes, yes, I know: it's most abstruse,
and if it held me once, that's long ago,
though odd that things so lacking earthly use
provide conundrums that we can't outgrow.

And, by analogy, this craft of verse,
so cramped, so difficult, that even those
who stand in silence at the passing hearse
must wonder sometimes where their effort goes.
For me it's elemental, where each move
is independent of us, must be so,
where all our individual voices prove
to be the struck-out terms we need not know.

46. What Plato Meant

Sudden clouds: a lull in summer's heat
and lifting of the whole-day sun's impress,
as though the once-bronzed figures in the street
withdrew to pallor and to listlessness.

Perhaps to more: to thought and self-reflection,
things to fractious Greeks worth fighting for,
but restrained, proceeding by defection
from some inherent and long-promised core.

Such looks are absolute, were given them
with Independence and the Andean streams,
with pasturage and liberty and hopes that stem,
however hazily, from rural dreams.

Is this what Plato meant, whose ideal forms
were indissoluble and made to last?
Through life's vicissitudes and pounding storms
there would be quietness as all things passed?
How imperturbably breathes in the skin
to drink up essences, that all things meet
in supple contourings to which it's kin,
and shades enveloping this quiet street.

47. Women in their Clothes

Long days of fervid, bronzed voluptuousness,
of bodies offered in their bra-less tops,
sheer legs undone from shirt or dress
in variations from a hundred shops.

So comes this sordid empery of clothes
where fashion holds its short and changing court
and to the mind at large such treasures troves
disclose what body truckles to and ought.

It's only mannequins that lack this sense
of how the busts are high or hemlines down:
a papier maché hapless innocence
in well-formed beauty who has just hit town.
And for the rest — on hangers, thrown on chairs,
the clothes link promises of one more year
of life that's changing, hopeless thoroughfares
of what we count on but is never near.

So afterwards in gusset, wire or tape
the clothes project a naked, sheepish air,
a soft beseeching from an emptied shape
of things cut perfectly we cannot wear.

48. Funeral in the Church of the Archangel

A small church in a district now quite poor:
the mourners in their working clothes, all stood
about the woman's coffin on the hard-tiled floor,
as plain as looks that promise spinsterhood.

So there we are: the end. The widower grasps my hand
and dumbly stares at words he's heard us tell
him countless times but cannot understand.
Alzheimer's, says my wife, and just as well.

Perhaps it is. I thought of masses where
all Santiago flowered in its Sunday best,
with anthems flung as incense in the air,
more worldly triumph than this place of rest.
But here it's different: each one knows
the end he comes to: prayers and flowers —
and not that many either, all our shows
but tokens, pitiful to those great powers
through which, if truly blessed, we find our place,
the priest reminds us of in leading prayers:
in hope of resurrection and eternal grace,
the end to wandering and all our cares.

49. Quarterly Book-Fair

The venue is our local church. I go quite regularly to change my books and am returned to boyhood, England years ago of fetes and knitted things and potted jam.

The summer time is best: I work on down rows packed with books on trestle tables, one of many such determined souls, half town and gown, but adamant now it's begun to have that title someone last time snatched beneath my spectacled and furious stare. You'd be surprised at all the venoms hatched by smiles, good mornings and the close-bobbed hair.

I know these honest, well-intentioned folk: the freckled schoolgirl in her summer frock, the meddlesome mother in the voice that spoke of teas and accents from good county stock. Not dark, not fragrant: manners, class: the hint of well-scrubbed body with the fluffed and nice. If once I think of putting in an English stint some time, this book-fair stops it in a trice.

50. La Carrousel

Starched linen on the tables, glasses shine,
the waiters in their old retainer mime:
we meet to catch up, chatter, try new wine
and have a stand-up, truly jolly time.
And so we do. The women like each other,
the men are mischievous but guard their hand.
My neighbour tells me of his batty mother;
I tell my stories out of Aussie land.

Fine, marvellous. We all think back
across the years, to wives, dark continent
of work, grim days that hurt us, earned the sack,
when life was boring, flat and only went
from bad to miserable, no end in sight
from meeting mortgage with the monthly cheque:
disgraced, retrenched, retraining, only bright
spot then the tea-girl at the local tech.

But there we are: we passed: we all got through,
despites appearances, and never knew,
those dark days back, that actually this view
of happiness might happen and be true.