



Wessex

A Poem by C. John Holcombe

Ocaso Press 2008

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Colin John Holcombe

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WESSEX

Tell me not here, it needs not saying,
What tune the enchantress plays

A.E. Housman

One

*Would you retain me in our few letters,
reduce me, laughing, to some purblind dream?
The paths in the sunlight are not the same.
Ours was a falling into headlong waters,
a bewitchment further than the earth again.*

*Why reiterate that every chit of stone
brimmed with a music that now is silent?
In the torrents of spring we yearn for attainment —
for the yielding, the belonging, the outward turned in:
how fast that epiphany is put away.*

*Say what you want to, exactly: I shall not care.
Enough were the words once to clothe the heart.
But now I am part of all the inanimate
small and the suffering. Does the circling year
return with the scene where our own bird sang?*

*Pretend to yourself—why don't you?— I shan't be long,
what with the sun up, the air soft, and the leaves warm.
There is no one to hear you. It will do no harm
to hold me awhile though the summers bring
tangible wonderment only once.*

*Why the incessant indulging of old regrets,
playing the martyr? We have done our stint.
The fields have reseeded; the little that went
on from us soaring to a famed romance
is burned out and sintered, the first child spilled.*

No, that's not true. There is an inner weld
where still I may find you and feel the stone
warm with your touch, and the doorway creaking. Lean
out of absence a moment and I will build
stairways to rapture from a patchwork song —

that flumes in the telling as an underground spring
irrigates later when the great storms are gone —
inwardly always, and my hooded skin
is smooth and persuasive as the lawyer's tongue.
Smile, disbelief: yes, they are best.

*What's it to me then, this all-conquering past,
these townships, these Downlands, while burning May
holds parley in woodlands, at road stops, where cars skim by
counting the road miles, the coupons, the crest on crest
of skyline warped into silent stones?*

Here are the chieftains, the Romans, and rough Saxon thanes
knitting to leaf-mould, where the Chalk-land breathes
of fume in the springtime, of the garnered lives
heaped up in tumuli, enclosures, in the turreted bones
of the polecat, the otter, the rabbit's spoor

blanching in hillside, tranchet, in air-brindled moor,
or the high beeches sighing over ochred flints,
the potsherds and the frost on the implements —
of all that is nothing in the tier on tier
of the long so encompassed, and now always here.

With these I have paced out our Maiden Castle where
we two went laughing through the night's advance;
I have held out my hands, and the inheritance
fell far beyond me as the evening fire
glimmered and drew down to the friendly west.

A cottage with a garden, among folk who crossed
briefly to speak to us in the rain-dressed streets. Not
laggard nor kindly so much as that
old way of customs, observances — at least
so we then hoped, and so it was.

You do not know how your absences leave me. Is
this then the upshot, a thermometered heart,
to be wheeled up and down in this tremulous state?
Delinquent and splendid, the past years progress,
dilatatory on their antique spindle.

*Dear man, you are changed. Your very hands tremble.
Come, let me hold you as you once held me
in the footpaths and tangles of past kissing places — I
laughed as you lifted and on my own back thimble
set me to reach out for all I dare.*

Where is it written that the years must grieve us? Are
there not runes in the wind-sifted trees?
Must I cast fortunes from my lot of tears?
No, do not preach to me: I cannot bear
even a breath of that upland place.

I am nothing but sunlight on the wet-cut grass —
succulent for the instant, then a heavy listing
to darkness, to discharge, not even lasting
to reflections, excuses, the saying because
of this matter, that — just the light wind idling.

A leaching to nothing, to the indolent sailing
out in all weathers as the whistling jays
burst from the hedgerows, and the cumulous trees
soar and dissolve, and with the seasons are curling
and colouring and ever diminishing daily.

*What's the strange quandary that you wander so slowly
about these grey quarters in these solemn towns,
long-sashed and elderly, where the ponderous stones
are eye-holed with sockets and smugly lie
prebendary to the plain, always the dull*

*flat of the brickwork, cheap lavatory stall.
The small, the ungenerous, the never-kind.
Beneath, when I'm silent, comes the bricked-in sound
from corridors and basements, as though the pull
of earth on its kinsfolk returned again.*

What am I doing in this lace-doily scene
with a waitress beguiling in your pride of moving?
Why am I seated like an old man perceiving
how the past unravels, that the tea leaves spin
for him as for others, that I appear

but aged and spent, with the odd coin to spare
for someone to humour this white-haired creature,
smiling and shambling while the inward rapture
rises, and shakes him, a recusant fire
that laughs as I go, and am vacant under

a tumult of cumulous, which is water vapour —
that and no more — without length of purpose.
Days pass, the rain. Will nothing possess
the past as it was, and will no one keep her
alive in the lift that the soft wind has?

Who can be sure that the years don't deceive us?
Who can shake tears from the prescient air?
I can, and I do, and around me are
the emboldened and ever more certain as
the sunlight turns golden through this Hardy land.

Here you were standing: where does it end?
At times I still see you and I hurry on
fast to the car park, the café, small country inn.
But no, it's not you, someone different, and
I do not know if you are far or near.

I've toured our two counties but find nothing there
but banks and small businesses, a fast food chain.
How can it be they do not rise again
the sturdy, the undeserving, the resentful poor
opposed to the bailiff, and the enclosure acts?

Throughout these long Downlands, though it may vex
me, still I come back to in these rain-scooped acres,
to trees half in mist as though they might lead us
on with that journey when with shovels and picks
they cut their way to the frontier castles.

A strange business then. Where the heathland jostles,
and the birch is sfumato in the evening light,
there was haze, thick presence, no end of it,
impenetrable dead furze, and stiff stands of thistles.
Bristling to the sea's edge, wind-shaven, sheer,

it dropped like a bird to the sheeted roar
of the sea out in harness, the continual spill
up the shingle of pebbles, the weltering fall
in beacon after beacon to the dwindling weir
of a far land, rain-misted, that is the west.

Two

Hardy, he knew them a little — that at their last meetings with frock coats and with getting on. They were brazen, curmudgeonly, taken in by nothing and no one, and never on trust took word of gentry or the new addresses.

How can it be that this countryside raises such abundance of giving and such deepening eyes? Velvet in appearance, but then they pass to the cottage, the pay-cheque, what the cheque addresses: what they must live on, the hopes and whys.

So to the purpose that their warmth endows, that seasoning fragrance of their sunlit natures. From grange, hill and croft the delinquent creatures may wanton but look to inclement days — ageing, with child, and without a name.

They are bivouacked out in the wintertime and sometimes I can find them when the grass is thin. 'Late of this parish', the lettering plain, their last port of call on the long drift home from tramping the roads to the hiring fair.

Made up at last to a twelfth-month year,
an adjunct to the weather that turned the skin
potatoed and leathery, their whole lives run
from alehouse to spinney for a fourpenny hire,
for somewhere and someone to take them in.

So I still see them leaving coppice or barn,
waiting, child-burdened, on unmetalled roads,
wandering indifferent as the unkempt weeds —
sturdy, ever present, and bereft again
of the law, its protection, abiding care.

I make no mistake: this was a surly poor.
Would strip you promptly as take your pulse,
and leave not a tale but the wayside grass
flattened, blood-speckled — nothing there
but the spoil of the fox, and the wind's dissensions.

Yet these are my people, not the long generations
tall in their topiary or in flowered stone.
No halls, no portraits, no quartered line
of embassies, statesmen or of invitations
in coronets crowding the mantelpiece.

Yet is there not memory in the vales of trees,
in the brooks, in the Downlands, in the bare, ploughed fields,
where the sun at first rising still lingers and folds
on the green hill its gladness and, glittering, lays
the elixir of morning on the brilliant lake?

In rain that is spendrift in the long-raked Chalk,
then summer returning to the warm dry slopes,
to corn with its burnishings, to soft grey oats,
where appear and continually the simple folk
 who come in the evening when the light is thin.

Their call is in undertones. 'Countryman,
attend to the gate as the cattle gather
adrift to the wind and to the rainy weather,
to what is known and apportioned in a faraway heaven:
 whoever the bailiff, whatever allowed.'

Three

My kith and my kinfolk, a full century away
from the clerks on stools in a gas-flared light
flat-spreading to ledgers where, propped up late,
they toil on in Clerkenwell under a sky,
 gothic and muddy, with a heavy breath,

pregnant with soot, with wetness, with
smells of frying and of lunch in boxes,
the air spitted, then fraying with the sound of taxis:
sticky, unending, like the rough-cut cloth
 on which they are printed, all of a piece.

High on the skyline, tilting place to place,
bundles of the elements and piebald at evening
with a vast inner longing, and the horse plumes waving
as they came in their wagons and took by force
 chattels of the landlord and minor gentry.

There is a family of mine in the midwest country
that held fiefed possessions before the Normans came.
A good name among many in that broken time,
a blur at this distance, hardly an entry,
 but a start, an event, an erstwhile home.

For a century or so, till that Doomsday time
ushered in records, and their rendezvous
became the thickness of night in the flinty shires —
segregating into the us and them,
 small, a contagion, and running on

to woods and high pastures. Not a vigorous clan,
not breeding that much, a tight-fisted lot —
forever mistrustful, bristling, yet
seamless as weather or the wind to the vane
 advancing, scattering and in retreat.

Sometimes in summer at the fall of night,
when doorways are open and the warmth spills out
there brims such a crinoline, such complexioned thought
that yours was the feminine, that this or naught
 was the frankness of knowing beyond all want.

There are thigh bones, their sockets, the nodular flint —
indomitable, incalculable but always large.
They build up the wall and the bedroom ledge,
roughcast but solid, though the dream is spent:
 the breath we remember and the going under.

And then there is nothing but the evening's tinder,
a tree that burns red, the brushed hedgerows cut
with a circular, flaring, incandescent light
that makes the heart darkness, the memory blonder
 under teachers, with schoolbooks, a forgotten aegis.

Only at evening when the shutters in pages
close on the day and the wide sky glitters
with a thousand sharp points, and the leaves in tatters
are waving, long-gloved, and the far wood smudges
with the returning, red-brown, of the autumn tide,

does the fox sniff the fields for the sharp days ahead.
The badger has its scratchings, the leveret twitches
at the first chill of winter, and by it hatches
windings of straw, in warm burrows conveyed
to the new world at springtime, where soft green grass

is fattened, thick-planted, where the wet stones hiss
in the sunlight, and even the rain-doused air
breaks open with a lucence, and the mud-caked fur
is cast off in patches, and the mottled sky
patterns with storm-clouds and will never stop

from lifting in consort, as passion's own sap
into April quiddities, to flagrant jest.
Who is the gambler and who the host?
Whatever the stratagem, the lattermost step
has hot tears only out of focus.

Four

Still I go back to those unturned acres,
to the whaleback swallow over the late spring wheat,
tousled with day's end but breathing out
a warmth, a contentment, something to hold us
in a contour of keeping to a quiet land.

Here we began and it is here we end;
the temporary steadies to an allotted place.
The passion disassembles, dissolves, and a gentleness
at last stands proxy for the common bond
born out of fervour that is put away.

The grave holds the bones, and the grasping yew
fragments what was and there are none to tell
how the lichen knits thickly in the churchyard wall
and the past days are real as they ramify
into us vaguely, for some remark

which brings it all fervently, shamefully back —
that here we stood silenced, where the stand-around sights
were bus-stops and houses, proprietary streets:
each place where it happens has an ordinary stake
in the past continuing until it's shut.

You did not know how the ending would hurt
me; you are not troubled the ascending stairs
still rise to your footsteps and the lightness hears
the timberwork trembling and calling out:

'Where is that tumult and you alone?'

There are shadows in the house, and a certain line
to the curtains that crumple towards the floor.
But wait in these cisterns and you will hear,
if you listen, heart mute, to that hidden train
that hangs on the air like a distant tune.

And this not of me, but of generation, generation
dropping through the house like the empty rain:
outwards and ever demurring again,
vibrations of a bell that is pregnant to thin,
echoes and dustily till they tire.

Five

*Why must you track me wherever I fare
as slowly the evenings reach out in March
and the couples form up and from church to church
rings out the happiness for all to hear,
the lives continuing and passing on?*

Vast and withdrawn, they are silent again —
the forest and the Downland, not now sending
to an old man bewildered, trembling and handing
on from a patrimony hardly his own
what is shadow even of erstwhile fire.

*How can you say that? My successors are
abroad in my purpose, and even their clothes
extend in my walking. The story book leaves
surely a wonderment. What is the fear —
that you will not find me, not here or far?*

As a man traduced and disfigured by joy,
dwindled to misogyny who knows not why
but must cancel your syllables and on his cue
behave as a stranger and, as you draw near,
ever go sauntering, carelessly on.

*I am dust on the roadside and the first breath of dawn,
the frost that holds fast to the pinnacled gorse,
the faint line of green in long-travelled grass.
I am this and am nothing but the notice sewn
in a thousand small touches of temperate pain.*

Who would not feel for the terror I'm in,
when every dead creature and each small thing
is around me attending, and insistent and long
they call to me, speak to me, that the solid stone
dissolves in the patois like emptied smoke?

On some days, some weathers, I'm heedless and take
the paths through the forest, which is restless or still.
The stands have their rituals, which is admirable.
The sycamore, beech and the heavy oak
are nodding their heads and turning and caring

for me not at all. Was my gift of hearing
by you then encouraged, or my double sight?
My learning is slow and is naming by rote
pubstops and roadstops, and the churchyard staring
hard at me passing with my course near run.

You do not know the afflictions I'm in.
You do not know what that absence sends.
It is silent. It is listening. Even my hands
are flayed with your touch, and the small parts sewn
on my skin are leprosy and a loss.

I thought the refusing would further contain us,
I thought in enchantment you would hold me where
retrenchments would make me even more
reverent and truthful, content with less:
 but no, there is only hiss of the tapes.

Six

I have walked up bewildered through steepening slopes
that pass into hawthorn, then nettles, to stunted oak,
the path growing broader into gleaming Chalk
until there is nothing, just grasses, and the windy tops
of the high beeches tossing: alone, cloud-cropped.

What stays, what passes? Through the deep-mired yard
the cattle are plodding, the gate lies adrift
to the weather, the sunlight, the ever-soft
rain of the springtime, however viewed —
still I am chastened and only chose

to be nothing in this, not the nights or the days,
but only the pistil in the small hopes springing
like poppies from the seed-drill, opening and flowering
in gardens, allotments, the terraced rows
where the lives are still parcelled by the simple laws.

I know them, I like them, they have battered cars,
are kindly, hard-working: they come to the door
smiling, hands wet, as though to adhere
to a "take us as you find us", as the daylight steers
round and again the cluttered room.

All have their habits, their workmates, the same
sequence of moves on the checkerboard
outings and shopping and breakfasts in bed.
A start and return, following a dream
heartlessly etched on the daylight's skin.

Seven

I want on such occasions to be walking again
with the wind in my hair and sauntering free
of thoughts, of long hopes that whistle away —
that whistle to nothing, to the frequent, inane
repetitions of the tame and small.

You do not know how this endless recital
of grieving will stricken and bring me down.
You do not know how forward would burn
your looks, your soft laughter and dancing till
the darkness turn dawn, and the last volunteer

turns and turns helpless till the body tire
in the bones and the fretwork: did you think my breath
but beckoned you back to a brutal hearth
to be emptied of passion, discarded and sore,
fragrantly entered into no accord?

Why should you censure what is simple need,
to be yoked in tempest to some other being,
but then not knit tight, but outward and straying,
open and playful: have we not stayed
a testimony to all the summers lost?

Like the finest denier, the early mist
curdled around us as wet with dew,
aching, unconfined, and stretched out we lay,
entangled with the seasons, by those seasons pressed
 into the pregnant and yielding turf.

Lengthily extended and in the sprawlings thereof
of the body, decorum, the unclothed heart:
brought all together this meeting at
one woodside, one summer, when the scampering laugh
 of the wind was the witness and would not tell.

Much then about me I did not will,
much that I hoped would securely last,
but you have undone me who, deliberately, first
were my ignis fatuus, my dropping well
 into silence, introspection, to simple being.

Eight

Such was my offer: no kindness, no knowing
eventually how even the session might end:
only the insistent, the envenomed, and
not incantation but a steady fraying
of myself expended and opened out.

Why not commemorate a hint of that,
the nightfall of fingers in the perfumed air,
the weaving of that which was always near:
a gladness in the yielding, the golden knit
of the limbs, of the being, the final rapture.

So the haunting of that most single nature
be a wraith like myself, whose unmuddied breath
pauses on the hillside, through the gorse-strewn heath,
troubled and unshaping, a dishevelled mixture
of laughing and calling and nowhere found.

Further than ever is that final land
which sometimes is inward but as it were
continues on outward and as the air
is vagrant and miserly and in the end
is nothing and no one and I forget.

What's to be accounted in this autumnal glut?
As I walk on the towpath and the river glitters
with a thousand distensions: it elongates, fetters
itself on no season, condition, intention, yet
is all of itself, a resplendent oblation.

Tough and encased, each scattered addition
is hurtling to a completion, eyeless and dumb.
At a loss, not heartened, I meander and am
quartered again within an older convention:
that the world is a corpus continuing on.

That inert as it may be, the hard small stone
shimmies and drops. I try one more throw:
ripples widen, diminish, are swept on by
the current's rough eddy, intertangled in
a sunlight that dazzles and darkens, deepens again.

Is there purpose beneath all this travelling on?
Where, beneath glare, do the seared glances heal?
Not in shards of hard daylight is the wide day whole:
say you are singing and listening and almost can
fathom from silence what I cannot speak.

Such then my patrimony, all I shall take
from the forest of evening, from the vast shift and lean
of the sun spreading outward, past the warbler and crane
that scratch in the shallows, past the red-brindled oak
shedding last leaves — as a gambler will pay

what he owes and pack up, though the others try
vainly to suborn him, in the silence aware
of the emptying of status, of wife or car.
Yes, it all died too quickly, like a noise in the ear;
 he leaves, and looks wistful, and has his reason.

The scenery now darkens, and on the horizon
the colours coalesce and then drain away.
The hurt in the eyes and the sharp rings of fire
combine, drop deeper, as beneath them, unchosen,
 continue the keepsakes and all the letters.

Nine

Sell up and be done with these emptied quarters;
in other ways now I shall take your arm.
Our lives weren't in consort, but only by blame
were woven together in such hearsay matters,
 though you turn the past over, much and again.

Is this the whole purpose, to cancel, atone
for a whole world forgotten, for friendships, a home
that now is mere nothing, a country, a name
returning with evenings and seasons, and there remain
 but shadow and dusk and nothing at all.

Reproach that tags as a distant bell,
emptying the sunshine and of what we're saying?
The colours of absence inhabit my being.
I am last who was first, and the changes fill
 with the call of springtime the barren copse.

Past these I inhabit the rounded slopes:
the ragwort, the speedwell, the thick welts of thistles.
With these I am bending as the warm winds jostle
the scabious and knapweed. In the wind's gust and lapse
 the harebell will hold to its wiry stem.

Ten

*Let me return as the Maytimes bloom
in the sharp thorns of hedgerows, in chestnut spires,
in tempests of cherry and the chaplain rose,
through air splashed with petals, as the evening brim
with candour and innocence, as I was.*

*To be conifer dark in the late summer days,
or sunlight, coarse-spangled, under foliaged trees,
in the coloured regattas of clouds through the skies,
in crispness, and stillness, in settling peace:
when did I say I'd be sweet stay-at-home?*

*Who would desire me if I could do no harm,
be tansy and milkweed and the leopard's bane?
I am regal, need loving and tillage again.
May wander, return, yet time after time
stand witness to all that was you and I.*

*Would you humble me further? I have melted away.
No more can my antics delight or disarm you.
Nor can I hug you as the evenings must hurt you:
I am gone, am dissolved; what you construe
as my shadow is a furthering on from you.*

*What is then conjured as the springtimes throw
off mantles of wetness, when the white slopes shine
with a canopied brilliance, each Downland stone
is glinting and singing, and will hurt the eye,
 holding its richness too near the heart?*

*Wolfbane and bugloss and the bewitched dark state
of the legs going forward in the long night's weight,
passion and exhaustion on each storm-drenched sheet:
this is my turning from such intolerable height —
 a falling and heavily across the floor.*

*If you would detain me, entrammel my ear
as you turn about in my summer mansions,
retain in your palms the subtle declensions
of jointing, of limb-build, each threaded hair —
 though the touch of me now can be only wounds.*

*Adopt my occasions: I have for friends
such as walk lightly in the daylight's wake.
Even your forebears, the high-country folk,
take out the locket with its fingered strands
 of hair that is treasured above all others.*

*That and no more are the troubled matters.
Think and work late in the cluttered room,
saunter in the summer to the world's far rim.
I am breath and a passing on the jewelled waters,
 a darkness and dimpling of the daylight's skin.*

*I am warm wind, the swallow, the stopped light of dawn,
I am laughter following the first things I say.
In all my presumption will you deny
me presage and radiance when I return
walking again these perpetual matters?*