



Cautionary Tales: Two

poems: colin j. holcombe

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Colin John Holcombe

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Cautionary Tales: Long Poems

Colin John Holcombe

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Dr Tom Bates: Scientist

You have a name, respectable and one attained by proper steps and practices: that modest effort is the thing you stress and not the accolades you may have won.

And is it difficult? No, not much, I think. Be fair with your competitors, and do the least to blandly force the funding through: you'll find your reputation makes the link.

Research is not one integrated whole of common ends and purposes: you'll see, despite the claims of one community, the papers published as the final goal.

All work's provisional, is hedged by doubt, and, in the usual intellectual spats, the truth is often under several hats but compromises will at least come out.

5. You plan and organise, you rearrange the steps for which your previous skills suffice: that was my father's thought, it's my advice: remember intellectual outlooks change.

So, yes, by all means, dream of things to be, the Nobel Prize, the honorary degrees, but be realistic, each new topic sees some added strain to friends and family.

Indeed it's not a simple choice you make,
at least not consciously: you do your best:
late hours and conferences will do the rest
to trace the hapless paths you'll have to take.

I wised up early when the Harvard post
came through, and talked to Beth for several weeks,
but in the end it is your conscience speaks
for knowledge is a dangerous, shaded coast

of unknown obstacles, a Janus face
of opportunity and mind's fatigue,
and even when you've made the ivy league
you're kept a prisoner of that killing pace.

10. Of course that's in the past. Beth's long been dead
and Daren may have married, I'm not sure where,
but finally I hear he's out of care,
though still the journals come, unreal, unread.

In which we're not so quoted, not at all:
research has gone on past us, as it should.
We aren't now numbered with that brotherhood
who made first bright forays, nor recall

the best of us was rumoured unbegun,
vague hopes of some conjectured thought,
nor are we early warriors that brought
a growing wonder at the things we'd done.

When every week was given us to win
new accolades, to look across the bay
at sparkling prospects that will have their say
and fresh new conflicts like as not begin

a brand new front. Each day I'd hurry on
to get in early, have equipment send
those warm, contented background sounds that blend
so easily with summers past, that shone

15. with mind and body put in overdrive,
that energy, that unaccounted joy
of all then possible, the real McCoy
of being finally, at heart, alive.

Which is ourselves when flushed with first success,
with fresh acknowledgements, the honorary degrees,
the banquets, and the bow-tied dignitaries,
the fulsome tributes from the local press.

And so I sit beneath the library shelves
with all my papers bound in gleaming rows
as though eternally, which surely shows
that work is final, larger than ourselves.

Others read them as the truth's hard grit
that spreads as seeding pearl in other's thought,
the which they will attribute, as well they ought,
that our slight name continues, a little bit.

And then it's not so bad. The way Beth died,
the all-night vigils, morphine, constant pain:
how helplessly that small dear hand had lain
alone, untrusting, at some stranger's side.

20. So early too. Just fifty-six, with all
the lives of children and their children not
as yet reflecting family traits they'd got:
her gaze but fixed, unmoving on the wall.

And then the fights with Daren afterwards,
the drinking, drug dependency, choice of friends,
supposed new starts and then the different ends
of police reports from diverse neighbourhoods.

Which all seems rather pointless now, a life
that's unremarkable but for my work:
honest, open, where no shadows lurk:
a son, suburban home, a car and wife.

And more the sense of family, careers
you've helped to further on their famous way,
an enterprise your thoughts can't overstay,
with solid pleasures down the vanished years.

Where has it gone, that promised life so full
of life and enterprise, of things well done?
Research is simple; like the wholesome fun
of family weekend breaks should be its pull.

And just as natural is the heavy cost,
in things you didn't do, the family hours
you misappropriated, where the flowers
heaped up around you spell out what is lost.

Bob Kucinic: Construction Worker

To you it's so much concrete, brick
and steel, raw men who meet the elements
with work that brutalises; much too thick
it seems for anything but pub events.

But then you do not know us, have not worked
day in, day out among the manual trades,
the heavy lifting stints that can't be shirked,
with long apprenticeships applied in spades.

Plus all the times and schedules that apply,
the shuttering two times checked and concrete poured:
correct procedures or you won't get by
the architects, inspections, standards board.

Some work to order, some less so, but each
will square the work off, stubbed and neat:
none doubt their foreman has the mental reach
to know where well-taught craft and effort meet.

5. Each carpenter detects his handiwork, can tell
by his own pencil mark which tool did what:
it's not the case of doing something well,
but individual more, whereby it got

into a rhythm that pertains to work,
with things done naturally, with clear intent.
Do otherwise: what hesitations lurk
to make a hotchpot of a natural bent.

You see but joists and stairwells, flat doors hung,
a certain air about them that's their due;
it's like the lyrics of a song you sung
without much thinking of what words were true.

They come from unknown, hidden depths, and come
unwittingly as though on cue. And so
inherent practices and rules of thumb
will demonstrate to all how plain things go.

But Ranier didn't. There was something odd,
always, about the work he did. Not wrong
but somehow measured out by guess and God,
like casual words we say to get along.

10. And that is quite infuriating, means
that all you do will not be up to scratch:
some vague approximation intervenes,
like boards that cross-ways sawn that never match.

Complaints, snide comments, it was just the same.
We hid his tools, confronted him, he looked
quite blank as though we were the ones to blame,
or by the management were falsely booked.

It was a freezing, raw February day,
with all the warnings out, the barriers, the grit.
A day for accidents, and none could say
what happened, really, or the whole of it.

Or where we were, indeed: the incident report was inconclusive, had to be. We knew how furtively the foremen went up quietly after him, and secretly.

We'd keep our counsel too. Why should we snitch on mates of long years back, though others may. But sites are not that clueless as to which of skills is doing well and pays its way.

15. But someone had to go, and it was me they chose to represent us at the wake, and there I am, in suit, appropriately the whole thing counted as an odd mistake.

What did I say? Dumb, stupid things, on how her Renier worked hard, was popular, the one we all looked up to, and would clearly now be loss we felt the keenest. I had begun

more nonsense when his missus took my hand, and held it firmly. 'No, now don't say more.' I stopped and gaped at her, had nothing planned. 'We've heard all this,' she said, 'and long before.'

'Renier was charming but feckless, never worked a second more than he was paid for. True, he was the erring son, who always shirked the things in life we all of us must do.

'And yet we loved him for it. Always felt
that someone else was there beneath the charm,
who played unwillingly what life had dealt,
no part in any mischief, hurt or harm.

20. 'That's why he often spoke of you, and said
you really were the best of friends he'd made.
Yes, truly so, although at times misled,
with due acknowledgement a tad delayed . . .'

So in this world we have our shaky lives,
our jobs, our rates of pay, our workman skills.
Nothing's for sure, not kids, not wives,
and what we leave undone another fills.

And so I ask you: who's deluding who?
Were they believable, those strange delays?
Preposterous is the point of view
that he who fouls up proper also pays?

I'd only say beyond each building site
are things intractable, that come to this,
that one who's sensible will keep in sight
the simple rules and working practices.

It's all you have, the hours on hours done right,
which, like a spirit level, shows who's boss.
the rest is out of mind, and out of sight,
and what you stand to gain is other's loss.

25. So, as I see it, there is only work:
the rest is iffy, doubtful, close to lies,
a sort of rhythm that you cannot shirk,
but which your weekly pay-checks recognize.

Peter Falconer: Civil Service Mandarin

It is the way we work, have always worked:
responsibly, with animus to none.

We're quiet, persuadable, have never shirked
the sheer hard graft by which reports are done.

That's all there is, and for acknowledgement
there is your paygrade and an OBE
for lucky souls, for great accomplishment,
but one that doesn't come too liberally.

My father put it best: you get to be a part
of life that's upright, decent, played by rules
in long traditions that ensure the heart
obeys the ethos of those famous schools

that we remember all our lifetimes long,
both when we won and lost, the clear defeats
that were deserved, as there is right and wrong
and steady purpose in those headlong heats.

5. 'Your choice, of course,' my father said, and paused.
'She's very pretty too,' his eye like glass,
the caution and the hesitation caused
by what was obvious in speech and class.

The rest I need not speak of. We lived well
and even had a run-down flat off Pimlico:
the scene of weekly entertaining, one you'd tell
had seen its golden years some time ago.

No children, therefore, nor were like to be,
which seems a shadow in a cloudless sky:
a strange thing now but one Hermione
was adamant about, and doubtless why

she married someone who respected form,
and kept his counsel, never blabbed, and gave
a certain wealth and comfort, much the norm
for wives who plan to royally misbehave.

My fault, of course. In such a humdrum life,
I reached for what's forbidden us and failed.
It's rather late to find another wife,
and all that goes with it. The ship has sailed.

10. And we who see the vessel diminishing
with friends and laughter and the good times flown
are left with quandaries, as wondering
what part was cowardice, what part unknown.

We've colleagues, clubs, the annual cricket match
that make the years pass quietly to their end.
In the best of beano days there is a catch,
some hateful memories the years will send.

Remorse at our own selfishness, the pains
and hurts of others where we did not care,
the wives of friends with whom in thought we've lain:
it is the jester's cap and bells we wear.

We choose the hardships where we come of age
and know ourselves completely, through
and through. The world's great globe is but a stage:
we learn by finding what we cannot do.

All have insomnias and their hidden fears,
the things they will not speak of, not aloud,
their ribald laughter that is close to tears,
the spiteful things of which they're none too proud.

15. Life, as someone said, is but a cheat,
a swelling bubble that's too slowly blown.
It bursts at last to lies and hurt deceit:
it's in bewilderment our hopes are sown.

Into a strange, and hurtful and deceiving land
where best of show in dahlias turn to weeds.
To love's sure blossoming we reach a hand
and meet the corset that the hostess needs

to hold in body's svelte anatomy,
the melt of contour into perfect shape,
where things not given us will tend to be
the empty satisfactions others ape.

We grow a wild dependency on things
of vague imaginings that are not there,
that urgent grasp of youth that smiles and brings
a tinge of bitterness that darkens air

for long weeks afterwards. I still recall
Hermione's abusive, bare-face lies:
still in my thoughts the retching bodies sprawl
with gross buffooneries and vapid cries.

20. But every treachery will slowly fade
and leave no bruises on the perfect skin.
We all go brightly on, a game that's played
despite the paradox of hurt within.

We keep our distance, not so ill at ease
at people richer, louder, those who lack
the wherewithal or basic decencies
as not to spin great lies behind our back.

And think: is separation or divorce
a compensation for that sullied cup?
Neither's, frankly, an attractive course,
with friends and property divided up.

And there are situations worse than mine,
where all they had is lost, completely blown,
where families must daily rise and shine
in shabby properties they'll never own.

A name, a family, where good and bad
must come through equally if come to all:
that glimpse of paradise we sometime had
before, as churchmen put it, man's first fall

25. From grace, from providence, as men who must
forever wander on this tawdry earth,
and those with names of immemorial trust
must learn to keep them at their minted worth.

Richard Postle: Pastor

My first appointment was the affluent south,
with pastoral duties trifling, by the book,
more close to homilies: the fragrant mouth
of plain obedience is all it took.

They start you off that way, a year or two
in suburbs, fields and gentle summer heats:
then drab industrial wastes, a sombre view
of factories, chimneys and of grimier streets

where life itself is desperate, hand to hand,
that, though you tough it out, it cannot be
but mean, thin-spirited, a poisoned land
that thwarts the best-intentioned strategy.

So here I did not prosper, nor did I find
a kindly laity annulled my fears.
Midland folk, of course, will speak their mind,
where muck and brass will line their grown up years.

5. In fact, the bishop had me in at last,
and, typically, was rather blunt and short:
'Your days of airy talk are in the past:
you live as they do now, or as they ought.

As to prospects now, young man: I think
you'll find it easier if you took a wife,
and someone down to earth: a local link
will ease the passage of your path through life.'

None of that was welcome, but I prayed
that God would help me overcome my pride.
I kept a journal of my thoughts, which stayed
as constant mentor to me, at my side.

Each plan or hope or raw mistake I made,
each passing comment of parishioner,
was duly jotted down, a barricade
against the likelihood that there occur

a repetition of that earlier state
when I was undecided what to do:
obey my conscience, or to abdicate
at streams of callings that were crowding through.

10. I stayed but didn't marry, made each thought
an echo if you will, but for myself,
a private meditation where I sought
a sort of spiritual or inner health.

The lives we occupy are wafer-thin,
and bound in inessential, passing things,
though in this world of beauty mixed with sin
the rain falls, sun, and then the blackbird sings.

Eternity is in the churchyard rows
of blunt, mossed stones that meet the winter storms
as though obligingly, the heavy blows
of years reducing them that each conforms

to what we know, and must, of this hard place,
this world of vanities and senseless pride:
in all we're given here, there stays His grace
by which, long hour by hour, we're fortified.

How many rotted into stony ground
had all the springtime fragrance of the earth,
or, when the ending of the world shall sound,
will rise envisioned by a larger birth?

15. A short, tight-bodied people born to thrift,
an unforgiving land that is the north
but even those unlovely bodies shift
a little as the springtime calls them forth

to dance at their own tunes and find a mate
beneath the indifferent, not unkindly sky:
to rag and bones descends their worn-out state
and far from sweethearts and their hopes they lie.

The sad, rich foliage of the falling rain,
the endless desolation of a thousand plots:
for sure the stirrings underneath attain
no words in marble or forget-me-nots.

The rose, the laurel and the rusting chains
that line the unmown, plain and grassy walks,
the Churchyard homilies that truth disdains:
the world's a graveyard where each absence talks.

These carefully-tended kingdoms of the dead
are always near to us: we cannot touch
but sense around us in the things unsaid,
uncalled for kindnesses that meant so much.

20. The spring that wakes in small commuter towns,
in spent bulbs harvested, the seed-plots sown:
in healthy upland walks upon the Downs:
the things in staying single I disown.

And so it is that gentle and unnoticed thing
that pours from bathroom tap and fills the trees
with their beseeching voices, that's bewildering
but all the same is part of God's decrees.

And year by year we quietly journey on,
from faith's grandiloquence we fall away:
our goals, no sooner grasped but they are gone,
where tombstones look towards some other day.

And what is true perhaps is what remains
between the heartbreak and conciliatory,
a thing indelible that inward gains
a world in splendour that we cannot see.

In long remembering we live among the dead,
their past belongings, papers, unused clothes,
salutary books that other souls have read,
beyond earth's vanities and outward shows.

25. But yet there's no evading it, the still,
abiding voice that haunts our very sleep.
Long day by day it bends us to His will,
towards the rendezvous we all must keep.

Steven Munby: Lecturer in Economics

I had no urge to set the world to rights
but only follow where my own thoughts led,
Mine a rational nature that avoids the fights
with loud-mouth advocate or dunderhead.

I'm quiet, I'm rational, strive to think beneath
the propaganda that must guide our lives
into the absolutes. I pull the teeth
from specious arguments our press contrives

to show as plain good sense and honesty.
They're neither, usually, but interests
of those with money, some duplicity
with what a sense of normalcy suggests.

Let me explain. Until eighteen or so,
I was a candidate for English decency:
a minor public school: in embryo
the life that's tutored to conformity.

But pleasing, I'd have thought. I had that frank
and manly openness that wins good friends,
and wins them honestly, that never shrank
from telling others how that friendship ends.

Nor was there some conversion on the way.
I'd gone to Exeter as others had
of my persuasion, with some résumé
on charm and modesty, simply clad

in civic virtues, being one to work
for compromise, the common good.
I held to principles and didn't shirk
the effort needed for our nationhood.

Or so the parents of my girlfriends saw
immediately, the gifted one who'd make
the most suspicious, grasping parties thaw
to naturalness in easy give and take.

So what then? Nothing. Some uneasiness,
perhaps, that slowly wore resistance down,
some growing recognition I confess
that I was rather more for gown than town.

10. And even that, I have to say, was hedged
about with doubts and special circumstance:
for all my openness I'd not have pledged
myself to any in that ghostly dance

which life increasingly now seemed to be:
constrained and arbitrary. My coursework led
to some detachment, and more wonderingly
I thought and weighed up all the life ahead.

How men must spend their short and pointless lives
outrunning heedless others in their class.
The first in cricket, head of school, each strives
to gain the all-exclusive, golden boarding-pass.

To what? A larger, well-lit, wider stage?
We all have burdens that we didn't choose.
Great love brings pain we can't assuage,
the richer man has only more to lose.

I name these all too obvious points because
I had a choice to make, and make it soon.
Marry Pen or not, that surely was
my overwhelming, darkened sun at noon.

15. Would I propose in two months hence
the day Penelope would come of age
to put an end to gossip and pretence,
and as her father said, a further page

on our two families, so much alike
in wealth and social consciences. We both
were county folk, and therefore keen to strike
an attitude of pride and modest growth.

At least ostensibly. In my own case
I own to further issues, perhaps the guilt
of life made easy, those who need not face
the wear and tear of lives they hadn't built.

Perhaps. I do not say it was. At best
a lucky stroke of fortune. I had done
a little better than these simple words attest,
being not the prize their daughter might have won.

Penny, I should say was pretty, more,
was gentle and unassuming: great blue eyes
that held you plainly there, no yielding door
to further questions as to hopes and whys.

20. It was those unassuming, flat, clear eyes, whose
very candour held you on the spot,
nor did they ever promise otherwise:
the entity you saw was what you got.

It sounds a glorified accountancy,
Penelope put down as loss and gain. But still
she was a sort of entrance fee
into a spectacle I'd not sustain.

A good life? I asked my tutor once. He,
I have to say looked startled, then amused.
'What's studied here is ancient history:
a wife will keep your talents fully used.

You think that writing books and such like stuff,
lectures and tutorials make a decent life?
Mere mental lucubration is enough,
beside a beautiful, adoring wife?

Let me tell you that such girls are few
and far between, and, more than you can know,
the future is a place you onetime knew
to which you somehow cannot go.'

25. Of course I tried, as though Penelope
had my detachment, my cool hold on life.
In those eyes I saw the wounded constancy:
she was my chosen and elected wife.

I went on marches, sometimes. Wrote a bit
for left-wing blogs as earnest students do.
Penny said nothing, never mentioned it,
and certainly her parents never knew.

Though what these tendencies amounted to,
if more than those vague dreams each person has
about his life, his prospects, what he'll do
— trivial, but with a personal razzmatazz.

In time, increasingly, these ways were blocked.
Marry, or do not marry, the choice is yours.
The ship has come to port, and here lies docked,
it's not the time to dream of other shores.

I tried, at least I tried to tell the truth,
talk through these matter with her dad, but he,
just put it down to doubts and dreams of youth,
'with age there comes responsibility'.

30. Blind, wilfully blind? I do not know.
But like a horse that's slowly broken in,
shorter and shorter were attempts to grow,
and more was sealed, and sensibly, within.

I bolted, got my doctorate, moved on,
have now a teaching post, and look around
at cleared industrial sites, great factories gone
to leave a half-uprooted, broken ground,

where I can see the government decrees,
their policies and latest spending plans
as smoke, miasmas that the autumn sees
prepared but un-enacted wedding bans.

It is a world of shadows, if not lies,
supposing this or that, which isn't true:
and act by act the would-be future dies;
and what we should have done, we cannot do.

And so a life that should have been was not,
and all those purposeful and happy years
were flung unminted in the melting pot,
and that great bloom of life met pruning shears.

35. We live our lives of effort, hope and change
or stay contented in a gilded cage:
how far across those likelihoods we range
our late prevarications can't assuage.