

# I SAW IT ALL

a short story in verse  
by C. John Holcombe

Ocaso Press 2008



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# I Saw It All

I saw it all:

the judge's tone  
from condescending fall to quarried stone:  
*The defendant will answer to the questions put.*  
I tried: more laughter, and was probed again:  
lamentable to watch a tenderfoot  
in courtroom manners pit his acumen  
against the courtroom bullyboys in words  
of explanation, point out all he did  
was publicize the post, no more than that —  
against the regulations, but a bid  
to stay abreast of where his game was at.  
I used one woman badly where the great  
impose their vast infractions on the state.

My stomach clenched. I heard the gallery fall silent as the eyes bore down on me: *Unanimous, your Lordship. Guilty.* It was done. Completely. I could lodge appeal, and have my case reviewed, but bit by bit the courts would let it drop: an imbecile would know society had little time for idiocy like mine. In going down the narrow stairway to the courtroom cell, I'd feel the weight of precedent, the Crown loom high above me, and the pungent smell of cold grey concrete hit me: what I'd face unless and quietly I left this place.

What could I do? Silvered Sir Roderick's head inclined itself towards me, though had said but little, teasingly, as I had done when first they brought our friends in from the Yard: who went through noting how the place was run, to whom give preference, whom press hard. Two months, and slowly, week by week, I went on charming with a devilish glee: *That's clearly possible, but I can say no hint of that was authorized by me.* They opened notebooks, closed them, glanced away. No: no one bothers with a stray remark for all it light up, like a match, the dark.

*Yours is a difficult and onerous task,  
gentlemen, no doubt, but you will ask  
for any help you need. Here nothing's lost  
or can be covered up. We've been on through  
a sea of correspondence—at some cost,  
I'd add, to schedules we were working to.*

They'd smile. I'd smile. A pause, and then I'd ring  
the bell and in would come my secretary,  
to pose at them, pour tea, hand biscuits out:  
the well-endowed Fiona, fragrantly  
she'd drift in front of them, in place throughout  
as friend and more, and put a hint across  
to treat with deference her helpful boss.

How modestly they saw her, how she'd drape  
patrician manners on a winning shape,  
and smile ingenuously, when they could view  
the blue eyes friendly to them, and could sense  
how full the body was, which takes its cue  
in swelling quietly from a long defence  
of hemline dropping to the small court shoe.  
But all bound in, a recklessness and weight  
controlled by breeding and decorum, holding  
up by never stooping to that state  
of careless falling on them and enfolding—  
such as gives a restlessness to lives  
spent too much sleeping quietly by their wives.

I took them round, and said, *So here we come  
to Whitehall's policy of keeping mum.*  
They laughed, but warily, a game of cat  
and mouse they slowly warmed to, learned to play  
by rules of my designing, merely that,  
although of course by promise and delay  
I held them firmly in my palm, agreed  
as much as possible, conferred, applied  
myself to every aspect of the leak,  
assumed it came from here, that someone lied.  
*No more can I account for it, that streak  
of malice, than you'd want to take the heat  
for some poor plodder lapsing on his beat.*

Sir Roderick doddered after, fought  
each breach of privilege as he ought.  
Those famous faculties were still in tune  
with what the Government would want to do.  
His little game, high destiny at noon  
for anyone he'd want to pass on to:  
a doubtful policy in truth, which now  
was choosing bright-faced Hewison or me.  
My rival is that earnest, useful tool  
for politicians keen on strategy,  
but for the rest of us a nodding fool  
who turning with each point of view  
has not the slightest notion what to do.

I do and always did: the one who played  
the outside to the centre, never stayed  
for explanation, fall-out, taken blame  
for what the meek in spirit always get.  
Life is what it is, a bruising game,  
and those who are nonentities, or let  
themselves be thought so, have no role to play—  
more, say, than critics get to write the script,  
or those who timidly await their drinks  
at merit's overcrowded bar have sipped  
much at life's pre-eminence or sinks.  
I have at both, of course, and why I'm in  
with tricky Tony as his pal and kin.

For him so effortless. His frank blue eyes,  
disarming boyishness, and how he tries  
to understand you, make you laugh: good lord  
the man had genius to frame a war  
in not too subtle falsehoods we applaud  
by then electing him to think of more.  
Such stoic martyrdom, for having killed  
Iraqi poor with sanctions, promptly calls  
their feeble fight back grossest wickedness.  
Illegal flights and tortures: how he stalls  
to bring his Bushite cronies to redress.  
A very Daniel in the blaze of eyes:  
how must his God be great, or he be wise!

10. Despite our manifesto, all the lies of equal and a caring state, the guise was all so masterly in veiled contempt of country, cabinet and commons. Most would quail at questioning, but, made exempt from just this scrutiny, he acts as host who, when his dinner party breaks to many voices, moves them on, majestically.

*The path of peace must sometimes be through war.*

*We fight for lives we hold in common decency.*

Quite, quite brilliant, knowing what we're for is bombs and killings, where for him he'll look to cash and chat-shows from the latest book.

But all so different when he came to power: the cheers and handshakes of that smiling hour on which he'd build a quiet, solid base of power so absolute, that no defaulters from his policies he'd need to face, or opposition from his own supporters. A Britain sold off like the family silver, but all so different and the place to be beneath a glittering skyline wholly new—except for the Lords, who with their history of caution, prudence and of thinking through, were now anachronisms from an age that cramped performance on a wider stage.

They had to go: and by the simple ruse  
of calling democracy the power to chose  
they did. Everything that might confuse us  
in a flash replaced: just them or us.  
Doubts, complexities—they stood as Judas:  
treacheries not worth his minder's cuss.  
His show on TV was the modern House:  
a stage for slap-stick actors where he knew  
to mask the phoney with a candid look.  
Ineluctably, impenetrably there grew  
more legislation on the statute book  
as Tony tightened up the terror laws  
he'd made more needful by his doubtful wars.

In fact the shock and awe worked rather well,  
the more so on the innocent: the sell  
went on relentlessly: a dozy stroll  
as cities fell to bombings and surrenders mounted:  
Endless were the killed, but on the whole  
the enemy's and therefore never counted.  
Such is war, my friend, and truth is hurt  
as much as men are. Much is burned away:  
amidst the blaze of victory, much is lost  
in families and maimings. Who will pay  
as pain grows steadily and treatments cost?  
Others. Tony's was the right address,  
I thought, but now must backtrack or digress.

My hero went to public school, where mine  
was rather different, a production line  
that turned out copies of a ten-bob note:  
crisp and convertible. It never did  
to speak of salary or how you'd vote.  
Ours was small, tight world, and one that hid  
no doubt much loneliness, much grief,  
but none of this came through, and all those dates  
in boy scout dances, cricket fixtures, girls  
in flounced their dresses through the garden fetes,  
at last turned tawdry as the twinset pearls  
in Tatler photographs the middle class  
will strive to get before the season pass.

Of course I'm not like Tony, couldn't say  
just how contemporaries, from day to day,  
should live out purposes. I only saw  
a world of outer suburbs, quietly run  
in leafy parks and bus-lanes, general store,  
in keeping up appearances, where one  
could be a cut above, but not that much:  
not showing off. I went to Sheffield, where  
my attic through small windows looked across  
a row of red-brick back-to-backs, the air  
sulphurous with disappointment, urban loss  
that underpinned my reading social science:  
all quite trendy then, which breathed defiance.

The young are impressionable: my tutors spoke  
of class divisions, how those classes broke  
the spirit of the working man. I knew  
the truth of that from digs and launderette:  
the shabby pointlessness of lives soaked through  
with little thought of change, at least not yet.  
Men are the authors of their fate as well,  
of course. I looked at broken glass on walls  
round smokestack industries and defunct mills,  
and saw how tawdry was the light that falls  
on faded photos, cinematic stills  
of lives used up, retired or thrown away  
in yearly wrangles on small points of pay.

Yet how they told their stories, had their say,  
not noticing how lifetimes slipped away,  
and what was sunshine grew more overcast.  
Behind those hemmed-in walls they stood  
to watch the minutes on the clock tick past  
from junior trainee through to parenthood  
and age at last that threw them out. They had  
their beer and whippets, skittles, Whitby trip,  
a flutter on the dogs, occasional wedding,  
the lassies lechered at, who took no lip,  
the skirt the owner's son was likely bedding,  
or so the talk went: frankly no one knew,  
though money counted, in that old world too.

Those were the Thatcher years, and all the same  
was anyone with sense who played the game  
to gated residences, private schools,  
Bermuda holidays, and weekend breaks.  
Doubtlessly they worked for it, not fools  
my artful fellow students: few mistakes  
they made in fixtures or in fielding well.  
I had no quarrel with them, sometimes see,  
in city offices or chauffeured car,  
a well-dressed businessman who could be me.  
Why not? I wasn't born a commissar.  
But now I had to make a living fast,  
well-trained in social consciousness at last.

I started with that mixed-up invitation  
which led to Falklands, when a sovereign nation  
rose as one beneath the flag, a waste  
of frost-chapped hills and peat in truth, but still  
a part of England, inviolable and chaste.  
How dare the Argies test the British will?  
While Europe dithered those nice Chileans helped;  
our navy steamed up to the isles of sheep,  
their long-lost destiny at last fulfilled.  
The Argies gave up what they couldn't keep.  
Manoeuvres, skirmishes, some men got killed.  
The mainland sent its fighters over: one  
by one our missiles downed them, just for fun.

20. Also the Belgrano, sunk as known  
outside a self-imposed exclusion zone.  
*War, the Almirante said, is not for fools,  
but if that country means to rule the waves  
would it please not also waive the rules  
in pitching conscripts into watery graves?*  
One ran the bunting up: the other mourned.  
But what are fifteen hundred young men lost  
among so many in the flood of war?  
And did it matter what the error cost  
to grieving families, that silent corps?  
Or that the log afterwards of the submarine  
had sunk mysteriously and left the scene?

Obvious scribblings, but they made my name  
where that Westminster village has the claim  
of being national talking shop. It's true  
but also baleful, rather: no one likes  
the closeting of minds, the poisonous brew  
of quid pro quo. Indeed it sometimes strikes  
me I'd have done much better if I'd gone  
as Guardian correspondent to the Middle  
East or China, though it doesn't pay  
unless you have some sideline or can fiddle  
the expenses or the rake-back, but, as I say,  
still hopeful, wanting a convenient perch,  
I angled winningly and got research.

We thought alike. Our PM put aside  
high-minded principles and beer-soaked pride  
to be as our Americans and know  
the cost of all things, which and when to buy  
in policies and people, things which go  
no doubt against the grain of times gone by,  
but now quite necessary, which also worked.  
Our Tony knew that, and was also bored  
by self-important fools who make it rich  
in social consciences we can't afford.  
In calculating how to bait and switch  
it would be years before the one high-flyer  
need fall to earth at last as one B. Liar.

Ten years, I calculated, till that war  
knocked all our futures sideways. We were for  
the all-American and decent way  
of Wall-mart, shopping malls and barber's shops.  
Influence and oil would make it pay,  
we planned, but in that land of fuzzy-tops,  
of ranting mullahs and incendiary faiths  
who'd want to poke the wasps' nest when we were  
succeeding nicely through the UN route  
of killing millions off, where deaths incur  
no awkwardness of photo: soldier's boot,  
his rifle, air support, the rain of shells  
that turn the playgrounds into pock-marked hells.

And when to secret airports, sad, downcast,  
the quiet and flag-draped coffins came at last,  
did Tony stand there, chastened, and reflect  
beside the families and sober dress,  
how oddly can a fool-proof plan be checked  
by a few score martyrs and perverted press?  
Of course not. Sensibly he gave the orders  
that none be photographed, or more than facts  
allowed us in these private hours of grief.  
Unless so dignified the case detracts  
from that high hope, or more: a firm belief  
that history will judge him and in ages hence  
award him prescience in world events.

The needed counsel of a wise old head  
could trade for stand-up comic's part instead.  
So Campbell told him and so Tony thinks  
of all the stratagems his artful mind  
can serve up smiling as his rating sinks.  
How hard for us, who were his friends, to find  
the stale banality and bloated phrase,  
the self-apostasy of righteous laws,  
the vote of Parliament for peace or wars,  
the scourge of terrorists and their prime cause,  
become the toast of Congress, long applause  
that spoke of armaments, at which a wall  
of silence and discretion buries all.

If lust for notice is a fearful thing  
then so are women and a two-month fling.  
Such urgent longing for the female shapes  
that rose to mind beneath their walks. I knew  
the high slopes of each swelling bust, the nape's  
descent in shadowed vertebrae, each hue  
of desperation in the eyes, the long  
release to hopelessness, beyond the stop  
for pity's sake, and then the lift within  
the surge of buttocks and the haunch's crop:  
I knew the wet abrasiveness of skin  
and most of all, within the eye's wide stare  
the brief astonishment of being there.

Continually I saw them in their slips,  
their breathing torsos swaying from the hips,  
a reaching outward in each swelling breast  
as quiet as weather-bells in clouds, a lift  
to fullness in the cloths that pressed  
to apparitions in their blouse or shift.  
I saw the soft betrayal of the skin  
so beautifully arranged there was no sound  
upon that blest-and-long-astounding day,  
but soft as mushrooms scattered on the ground,  
there came that beaching in a dawn-swept bay  
with cinders following as that old fire  
burnt out at Babylon or new-built Tyre.

Fiona walking on as though in sleep  
I saw continually as those who keep  
within a circuit they can circle through  
but rationally, appropriately, the same  
as other women keep to, and must do  
to have no catcalls to afflict their name.  
What can I say to those who more and more  
walk out delighting in the summer air  
and lift the instep from its undone thong  
as though a silent sound was threaded there  
and brought them travelling, as will a long,  
soft, silent welling through some ocean reach  
say nothing till it rises on some beach—

to curl there distantly with all the pride  
of unused summer in its foaming tide?  
That's what I thought and felt but always hid  
beneath those silly politicians' shows  
of power in purposes of all I did.  
I saw that proud, long-stemmed and swelling rose  
as mine, or almost mine, and would be soon:  
despite the name, good family, with brains,  
to cede in any group to whom the nod  
is given, finally, and thereby gains  
the bold and ever fragrant under God.  
My meetings with her were a sonic boom  
of fragrant quiet in an upstairs room.

30. It took some doing, plausibly, a few  
demanding recompense, to pull her through,  
but still she came, replacing my PA  
who stared and bit her lip, but had to go.  
But all done easily, with extra pay  
and pension rights of course, and super show  
of missing her, with pressies: we all got drunk  
a little, anyway, and my long speech  
with anecdotes I trawled from Personnel  
with tears brought back the things from time's long reach  
that made us thoughtful when we wished her well.  
Afterwards of course I walked on air:  
just one more conquest and your man was there.

To cross that obstacle the plan said more,  
a Red Sea passage to Sir Roderick's door,  
some means of knowing what the old fox did  
to help or hinder Tony's rule. It's true  
he didn't like me, but the manner hid  
much ruse and posturing: he had to do,  
he said, as Tony wanted. That I doubted,  
but wasn't privy to the battered box  
of party secrets (yes, forgive the pun)  
that Liz presided on. I heard the clocks  
now ticking furiously that Brown had won  
but then more halting, maddening and slow  
as when for certain did our PM go?

I knew what my fraternity had done  
in plays of gallantry and teasing fun.  
But not with her: Sir Roderick's own PA  
was not some empty-headed little fool  
but had a truly Alpine rate of pay.  
No doubt in helping me she broke some rule  
or regulation, showed me things, or warned  
of moves afoot, but for a price that clocks  
be wound up nightly by her partner's toil.  
The world of politics is one of knocks,  
that tells you never let them off the boil,  
but hold them closer as they clench and cry,  
as in her little deaths I saw them lie

out in their undressed hundreds while the blood  
congealed and hardened into Baghdad's mud.  
Vicariously, of course, not yet PM,  
I went on playing with this grim old trout,  
abused the power I had, as he with them,  
and pounded harder till she wanted out.  
At last, with correspondence copied, say  
I couldn't understand it, *really, such  
a bubbly figure and such glorious fun,*  
well, I was sorry, desperately, and much  
more angry at myself for what I'd done.  
Always obfuscating, but the loner  
still to Liz now, and of course Fiona.

And so it went, though slowly, Fiona mad  
at all the presents that her rival had:  
one so beautiful and half neglected,  
the Liz the opposite, but spruce and smirking.  
The danger was Sir Roderick who'd detected  
some subtle change in us, we two now working  
amicably for once, in close rapport.  
He wondered at it, called me in and tried  
to fathom patterns in the always shifting  
me that was and is. I never lied  
but felt my purposes were also drifting.  
But not for long: I knew now what to do.  
He left in August and my Liz would too.

For all was fading, dropping out of reach  
because of that most idiotic breach  
of protocol and common sense—I mean  
the dossiers, the sofa government,  
the brimming confidence of having been  
much, much cleverer than the papers sent  
by experts and his own FO, he saw  
the shades now gathering on his shabby reign,  
that what he'd promised us could now be pressed  
to measures, simple measures to attain  
what ten year's government had not addressed.  
He hung on hatching one success to last  
above the tawdry scandals of the past.

I need not tell you I expected this,  
and got all ready for the parting kiss  
of Chancellor's appointment. True, a few  
of Roderick's old chums would go, but in  
the main it was the time-befuddled do  
of pouring old wine into new wine's skin.  
The which it must be, for the great machine  
runs with and for our civil service. All  
as I say, was organized, each man  
had case and dossiers close on call:  
this was my masterstroke, but, if you can,  
just think how simpler things would all have been  
if Tony had as promptly left the scene.

I stuck it out, of course: procrastination,  
lies and promises and more evasion.  
Liz was pressing me, and more Fiona,  
I went with one and then the other, each  
denying how the other thought I owned her.  
In heaven's name what I had I done to breach  
such furies in them? Still I'd take them out  
to ever more expensive places: immense  
the capital for that. I got a loan  
but not sufficient to survive the sense  
that Liz's funeral might be my own.  
But for Fiona there was some estate  
of coming wealth and privilege if she'd wait.

At last the ultimatum came: to chose  
the permed and dyed Elizabeth or lose  
the post I had been working for, along  
with liberty in short. How did he know?  
He laughed, Sir Roderick. I had got it wrong  
in climbing that back stair, he said, as though  
the correspondence copied wasn't his:  
the bets he hedged, his notes, the favours paid.  
He looked me up and down as though a cat  
had dragged me in, or I had gone and made  
a stinking puddle on his floor. *So that  
was that*, he said at last and with a grin  
buzzed to let his smirking PA in.

I smiled and clenched my jaw, but saw too well  
the last exclusive he would leak or sell.  
*Is this how civil servants earn our trust?  
A woman used and dumped: who would not feel  
some tinge of rightful pity and disgust?  
A stainless character, who could not squeal  
because of protocol. How was it fair  
that men with prospects, perks and shorter day  
could act so caddishly and at the crunch —  
you get the tone of it — make women pay  
for all the extras to their canteen lunch?*  
Richly beside the point, but on it went,  
and to the saintly tabloids heaven sent.

40. But life, as I have said, is only show.  
I leaked his papers first: indeed he'd go  
with face and quietly, keeping hands on wealth  
and pension, contacts still, they all were his.  
It was a sort of putsch by stealth,  
and would have been but for discarded Liz,  
who cut up rough of course: indeed for all  
the nights I'd spent with her would choose for thanks  
to threaten with her carefully detailed notes.  
Such is the PA training, when the ranks  
would suddenly be shown as scrambling goats.  
He went, Sir Roderick. Fiercely, Liz hung on  
until my one protector would be gone.

Tony at last resigned: a wave went round  
of frank relief and rush for higher ground.  
But I, no envoy, downward went and weighed  
success with errant follies, how I'd ranged  
advantage over principle, where strayed  
beyond the necessary, what had changed,  
when not so different looked those student notes  
on policies, hypocrisies, though now, of course,  
it was a murky grey when no one thought  
the State beneficent, or moral force  
lay in democracies but actions bought  
by oil and armaments. Although it's true  
our Liz was gone at last, but I was too

on threat of prosecution. Not so men  
who wrote and, pondering, would write again,  
scrupulous of custom, those who bought  
their shirts from Jermyn Street, wore Church's shoes:  
the wise old heads who took the weather, caught  
each shift of emphasis, the changing views  
that swirled through corridors and then lay dead,  
to be revived as all things are revived:  
the wise, the outrageous, the plainly daft  
all settle into period, yet are hived  
off to new adventures, starved or staffed  
according to that long deliberation  
that serves as measure of a thinking nation.

I saw the polished shoes on parquet floors,  
heard voices drifting down long corridors,  
saw plush recess of libraries, filed report,  
the endless annotation, summaries sent  
for consultation that are piquing thought  
in offices and board rooms, Parliament  
with privy councils and their witnesses.  
I pictured all who hung there on my word,  
the lines of juniors who silently  
would stake their very life on how they'd heard  
I thought their prospects fared. There came to me  
sad laughter, empty rooms, the door on door,  
a bounty given me but now no more.

New names, new ministers: the order passes  
like wind through hayfields of the toiling classes:  
all to be cut down time in time, as all are reaped  
by policy not knowing what it should.  
Small men on the whole, but honest, steeped  
in that long ethos of a public good.  
Perhaps community is shared deceptions,  
but that I cannot know or where I next  
may pledge my services, but if there's trace  
of useful merit in a well-honed text  
it won't be long before I find some other place.  
And yet Fiona, my most desperate throw,  
now smiles at Hewinson, for all I know.

Sir Roderick was right: those feints and ploys  
are airy mobiles only, glittering toys.  
I stared at all the windows: souls at work  
no less oppressed and hurting than my own  
but bought off quietly with that thoughtful perk  
of job security, a comfort zone  
that keeps them going, good days, bad, throughout  
their marriages, the high schools fees, that aunt  
who left them nothing after all, that night  
they woke up breathless, the hopes they can't  
reduce to office scheming or the girl that might.  
What's life? Advancement, graft, an artful game,  
and politics that follows just the same.