

Meg and I



✿ a short story in verse ✿

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by
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Meg and I

We had a little farm there, Meg and I,
beneath the widespread, soft blue Norfolk sky,
along a rutted track that ran through trees,
to greenhouse, potting sheds and, half-concealed,
beyond the gusting, haunting April breeze,
a wilderness of grass, a waist-high field
of mayweed, marigolds and tormentil.

A lonely place to start, where dawn would spread
its spectral fingers through the mist, in fact
through our cramped quarters also, where we bred
long trays of butterflies. At best a tract
of market-garden wasteland and one stand
of pine trees rooting into pebbled sand.

We took what no one wanted, a scattered heap
of tires, and cardboard boxes, what was cheap
to rent, a long way out, but all the same
our point of origin, a childhood's den
in fields and coppices, where those became
a haze of sweat and bruises. Here again
we'd go out, all hours, weeks on end—to put
the primus on at last, watch cars go by:
that well-dressed cavalcade of business suits
immaculate in cuff-link, shirt and tie
while we stood working people in our boots:
executives who knew not how or when
but had their secretaries bring tea at ten.

It seemed unlikely that a tent and shed
could keep us so contented, warm and fed
throughout no better than even bet
we'd see a penny back. And yet we stretched
tarpaulins over, watched the concrete set
as day by day the thorns and brambles etched
their criss-cross scratches on the skin. How tired
we were, but stuck it out till prospects changed.
Spring came at last. We planted carrots, kale
and beet along the field and road, arranged
for some, if locally, to go on sale.
Just loose change shaken from the wind and trees,
we grew accustomed to, by slow degrees.

I'd always known each spread of Norfolk scrub
that came up under car-park and the pub:
and, more than that, the ache of afternoon
when nothing happens and our lives drain out
to chores and shopping, and then all too soon
to DIY and car and gardening bout.
The borders rolled out like some coloured shawl,
the little pond, the sprinklers, weeded lawns
that rose to coloured maples, stunted oaks.
Past parks and shopping malls the summer yawns
in seaside trips and picnics, but evokes
an evanescence threading into silvered haze
that slowly tarnishes through summer days.

5. Or so I thought, in what were open lands,
the haunt of butterflies and Viking bands,
but now thin pastures where the acid soil
gave up its treasures in occasional finds
of musket-ball, a coin, old starter coil;
a torque of pure-wound gold, a knife, all kinds
of treasured things that nonetheless were lost
before our latter-day, sustained inspections:
whole peoples sintered into rain and frost
between the topsoil and the wind's affections
that stir the bugloss and the nodding grass,
where dynasties of nothing stare and pass.

What life was that: to go from parking bays
to airless council offices, for days
and days shut up in airless cubicles
with monitors and filing cabinets, doors
that led to tortuous roughcast ventricles
down stairs to further cubicles and floors?
I thought of that, while restlessly the air
swept through the phalanxes of scented phlox,
the clumps of lavender, and all the rest
that speak of gardens set in foot-high box,
so tame and orderly. The very best
that life affords, is it, as spire on spire
of rhododendrons trumpet coloured fire?

And more: the butterflies, that fluttering wreath
of shifting habitats from wood and heath,
I knew them all: the orange tip, the browns
the ringlet, grayling, marbled white, the small
fritillaries, the hairstreak and those clowns
of sunshine holidays, as the hot days call,
the brimstone fluttering, and all the blues,
intense when congregated but still shy,
and local, camouflaged by leaves and stalks:
unless in treeless parts where only I
had knowledge of them through my childhood walks.
All were emissaries and led me on
to where, still far ahead, some future shone.

By foot or bicycle I knew all parts
of Norwich outward, had my bedroom charts
show views of fungi and the wayside flowers,
the ferns and trees, and on the downstairs walls
framed photos of the autumn's golden showers
in silver birch and beech. Their mantle falls
on first habitants, their makeshift camps
that lie now frost-deep in the glacial drifts,
those convolutions over cavered Chalk:
a vague topography where thinking shifts
between the phantoms of our mundane talk
to something darker, echoing, that stays
beyond and deeper than our passing days.

And not just natural history. Every town and village had its origin, its settling down by spring or crossing place or pastureland. Norwich I saw in zones as though the glass were dipped in industry, the districts manned by speech and custom of each social class. I was an oddity: my parents thought in time I'd turn to other things, be less detached and solitary, would learn to act my age, as once they put it, more I guess be set on girls, the which I did. In fact this young misogynist had led the pack and only fitfully had turned his back.

10. I did not tell them all I did or saw, the girls I went with: awkward, wanting more than some quick squirming on the sofa bed, the fights, the violent kickings, floods of tears, the cute, toe-curling dumbness of what led to drop and catch up in the change of gears. Predictable and bland to one who wanted reckless pungency, the smell of streams, the rain of pollen which announced the spring, long nights unfolding into more than dreams of schoolgirls posing in their latest thing. Beyond suburbia and its ordered streets were worlds of instinct, and of feral heats.

All my boyhood I had been as one
who knows the wind-stilled torpors of the sun,
the flowering through the fields, that steep hillside
that shows its undertow of aching clay;
I watched the kestrel and could sense its pride
in gaining mastery of air and prey.
And with the footfalls of the fox my skin
would raise its thin, tense follicles and tell
that trees had midnight in them, and bracken scrolled
in pastorship to spread its rotting smell
when hares were massing and the vixen rolled.
A world of blackness where the wild wood's rain
was pressed and sombre on my window-pane.

I had no patience with the small-town ways,
that special someone with her doe-eyed gaze.
I saw too many in their gangling flocks
of boobs and gymslips, that great moving press
of legs that dwindled into unhitched socks:
they were the same in truth, and I could guess
who had and maybe hadn't: did it matter?
Not to me, and while my classmates talked
of this or that pert creature, what they got
or could have got, they said, and pranced and stalked
behind some fancy pants who might or not,
I leaned continually towards what might
be things beyond our short, poor human sight.

The why and the sense of it I never knew
but was as always listening where there grew
the sound of mosses seeding through the door;
the whirling sycamores that spun their keys
at spring-time's end and how the autumn floor
was quietly felted with its aspen trees—
to me alone there walking, while back home
of course my Dad had comments and even Mum
was half agreeing when he said: *Look, you
can go on walking out till kingdom come
but back you'll come when there is work to do.*
So that was life, a sobering alphabet
I couldn't spell with much, at least not yet.

I didn't want to: at that corner shop
where Dad was always working, couldn't stop
on Sundays, Bank or public holidays,
it was the same to him: *to make a crust,
my lad, you go at it, and nothing pays
you better than to get the public's trust.*
It wasn't that: he had the franchise, only
that. They kept him working on until
you'd think they owned his family as well.
Each week he had to find some gap to fill
in counter takings or the firm would tell.
He went on getting greyer, rattier and still
they found him further profit lines to fill.

15. Of course I spoke to him and sometimes aired
my newest business plan, when he despaired,
and properly as well: *Is that it, lad?*
What sort of hope is that, except one bound
for certain obsolescence, just as mad
as all the others? Youngsters go around
with nothing in their heads: as proud as kites.
I did odd jobs on building sites and cleaned
in offices and hospitals. Each pound
I earned was put away. T-shirted, jeaned,
and always broke, I never bought a round
for anyone, or picture ticket, took
a girl out, read beyond a library book.

Dad ranted, hurt his heart condition, I
stayed just the same, of course, as weeks went by,
the months to years, and still he pestered, said,
Now come on, Robbie, must you waste your life
on hopeless pipedreams like the last? Instead
of old men's hobbies, think of house or wife,
the training needed. Then a Meg came round,
no one particular, just someone there
who helped and sympathized and heard me out.
Another loon, said Dad, went almost spare:
Look here, Robbie, it will come to nowt.
True, an addled-headed entity,
but also one, I saw, with time for me.

Just what she hoped from it, she never said:
her pay, eventual prospects, where it led:
nothing at all, but looked to me instead:
a sad thing, willing, and was simply there.
Dad ranted on: *if this is love or bed
or pure convenience is your affair,
but not in my house, son: you get a job.*
Meg took it in her stride. *A day or two
or weekend at our place, but otherwise
well, you know mum. I'd cook for you;
but for the rest, the farm, the butterflies,
eventual farm: I mean you mustn't quit
but maybe, you know, you could wait a bit.*

I nodded, said I'd think about it, went
that evening to the farm, and promptly spent
a night there sleeping, tried to, under trees,
until the wind picked up and then it rained,
and then more steadily: I hugged my knees
and shivered, waited, senses strained
to catch the first grey lightening into dawn.
Hourly I checked my watch as time inched past,
I felt absurd and out of sorts and wet
in trousers, underwear, and socks at last,
but still I wasn't giving up as yet,
and made this first and none too welcome test
of manhood serve as pattern for the rest.

Afterwards and shivering, I made some tea, when Meg arrived and there as stupidly, stood grinning at me, but with breakfast stuff, which both of us then cooked. She lived with me: throughout that first hard year of sleeping rough, at times at least. It toughened us, and she and I became a twosome. People called: the boys in blue, the forest staff. *You got the owner's say so to be camping here? It is?* And then they poked about our spot, and added, *Maybe. But remember we're the ones responsible, so watch those fires with all this glass and heaped up trash and tires.*

20. Something of the woodland grew in her: the woody juniper or conifer. Resolute but awkward, she would stand half motionless for hours, was hardly there in talks on things she didn't understand or maybe didn't want to: didn't care what others thought about her, what they said: Meg was that unsociable and out-of-doors, tough, independent type who never lays the blame on others, but will find the cause in plain contrariness that made our days still plodding onward through long murk and wet, with little hope of happiness as yet.

Of course in looking backwards now they seem
ragged and extravagant as some great dream
of hopes that came belatedly to clothe
those years of being only tired and poor.
We'd wake up in our little shack and loathe
the greyness pooling on the concrete floor,
the boots and sweaters there, the growing pile
of underclothes we hadn't washed, the shape
of yet another long and cheerless day.
We'd brew some tea or coffee, sit and gape
in silence at each other, naught to say
that made much difference: in a state
that said togetherness was growing late.

Frail and entangled was the thin birch wood,
and even deeper where the old boles stood
knee-deep in humus and its layer of cones
that rotted quietly into leaf-mould ground.
Below were pebbles and the blue flint stones
that lodged, frost-shattered, in the hills around:
Above the circlet of the Pleiades
that every August brought their showers of white,
thin shooting stars. I'd watch them while they drew
their rays like pencil lines till out of sight
behind the clouds, and then the moon came through
to hold a landscape in its silvered spell
of night's benevolence, that all was well.

Across the interval of years I've learnt
to see the truth as otherwise: they weren't
for the most part lost or wasted years, nor yet
the fruitful partnership that might have been.
I led, Meg followed. The two of us would get
some sense of purpose in that pictured scene
where fields of butterflies were wholly ours.
That's all. No presents and we never dated,
went anywhere but weekly to that farm instead:
all hours, all weathers. Through the while she waited,
Meg, for no doubt more than board and bed,
Dad continued ranting: *all boils down
to a tuppenny allotment out of town.*

And then of course he had that wretched shop
he'd always hated and would have to stop,
he said, and suddenly he did, retired,
and missed it, sat around, ran errands, tried
to take up interests, couldn't, felt more tired
and angry, complained as usual, went and died
one early morning: breakfast. Stared at mum,
gesticulated, couldn't speak: no hope
we'd understood him, loved him, how we'd been
his point in living, now would have to cope
from this point onward with the dog-eared scene;
he never left in truth, still being there
and glaring at us from his books and chair.

25. Mum took it badly: shook him, cried for days
until, bewildered, in a tearful, fretful daze
she sold the house and bought a three-room place
nearby. She gave us twenty grand apiece,
both Meg and me, and said: *in case
you haven't cottoned on by now, the lease
is what you'll buy together. Got that? Make
a proper partnership for once, and try,
just, Robbie, try to be the sort of son
your father could have hoped for once. And by
the way—I mean this— seeing all Meg's done
for you, and always will, you need to find
some way to show her you're not always blind.*

She knew that. Living here had made the ground
the bridge between us, and the trees around
looked down and were companionable, a lease
made ours in principle, and known before
the sun in sinking threw its russet peace
across the pine-leaf spreads and sandy floor.
In our small theatre of the woods we heard
the pine cone crackling as the fox stepped past,
the field mice rustling through the grass, the weather's
change in seed pods popping, and the vast
descent of barn-owls in their outstretched feathers.
We heard the kernels fall as alder fruited
and thick dull scratchings as the badger rooted.

Meg knew each creature here, the warning note
of blackbirds calling and the hissing stoat;
the soundlessness of kestrels plummeting
through turbulent and brimming steeps of air.
She knew the vole and dormouse and each thing
that had its habitats, that nothing there
would keep them from their burrows, safe inside
the thickset winding of their well-made house
of straw and brambles, where they'd wait
and silently: the weasel, shrew and mouse
each in whiskered and a quivering state
while high over them, half visible at noon,
would pass the pale and ever watchful moon.

She knew the dull and grey days when the rain
re clothed the outlines with a water stain
birefringent in each leaf and fern,
that brought a focus to the thin-clothed skin
of wet and chilliness, when days would turn
that cold around and push it far within
as though embodying us with aches, when Meg
was first in cheerfulness: the cold and damp
that came in endlessly, the fuggy days
beneath the plastic, when the pressure lamp
would hiss and splutter, and the soft, wet haze
collect to droplets on the plastic cloth
and kill each chrysalis or new-hatched moth.

So went November and December, then
no Christmases for us but shift again
through January and its long hard weeks
to mud in February, the sleet and rain,
and then much worse, torrential rain that speaks
of waterlogged large fields and flooded lane.
Till green things start, and in the trees a sheen
becomes perceptible, and roadside weeds
grow thick with caterpillars: every kind
of bird and animal has busy needs.
The which we knew, each year by year behind
the slow encroachment of the summer days
we watched the occupants of breeding trays.

30. Those years were hard: the road went on and on,
and when we got there, half the zest was gone
in rules and safety, VAT, the books,
in checking car-park, toilets, catering staff,
in catching holes the rats had made, or rooks
and thieving boys the most, on whose behalf
we had a notice board for name and shame
which Meg administered, did rather well:
for all her diffidence she'd go and bawl
them out, stride over with the list to spell
their names: a loyalty that I recall
as though belonging to another day,
one happier than this, in its small way.

The end came suddenly: the first day fine.
I'll soon be out of here. No, that is mine,
she'd say and snatch the plastic food away.
You get your own, now Robbie: just push off,
and come tomorrow if you want. It may
be nothing, probably is, that wretched cough
you gave me. Just a check. Of course it wasn't.
There were the long, long batteries of tests,
with X-rays afterwards, a certain note
of seriousness, evasiveness, requests
for further scans and probes: how doctors dote
on specialists with letters to their name,
but Meg was comfortable, about the same.

For her long hours of smiling drowsiness
but I of course more worried, spending less
and less on farm and staff and caterpillars.
I took up residence, the nurses found
me various time- and conscience-fillers:
the usual things no doubt. I hung around
from morning's opening to the close at ten.
I racked my brains for something she should hear
about the farm, our parents, what they said,
and Meg, of course, was smiling, Robbie near
and hovering, for the first time, at the bed:
and so we talked the future through at last
when all real chance of it was slipping past.

I didn't like to think of that, or dare,
to be more frank about it: Meg not there.
I pushed it from my mind as day by day
she lolled her head and looked on absently.
I'd bring the travel brochures, lay
them out across the bed so she could see
and choose the best for us, we two at last.
A Meg sedated now, and quiet again,
a comfortable night or so the nurses said,
Meg still looking at me, smiling, then
the eyes grew fixed and she was gone. The bed
they screened off, pulled out tubing, when around
me came a drench of hard and anguished sound.

A dark and stabbing nothingness that fell
to hurt my thoughts and shaking hands as well.
But Meg, despite all efforts, died a day
remembered as no different from the rest:
a sky with breaks of blue but mostly grey,
a shifting break of sun that did its best
to promise summer shortly, easier days.
Meg's mum was there, and mine: they gave her things
to me: her nightdress and those woolly socks,
a change of underwear, those two cheap rings
she bought. I looked around as though the clocks
would stop, the world stay silent, then I walked
out slowly as the women stayed and talked.

35. I think it was the brightness hurt the most, the emptying inwards that had made a ghost to go on functioning with all it had.

That me was separate, though it could see the cars processing as they had with dad, his hearse, the funeral ride, but distantly across a landscape that was just the same, abroad with busy people, occupied with just what I was doing, changing gears and signalling and turning off: a ride as smooth and uneventful as the years that trailed on quietly afterwards but not with hope and purposes that Meg had got.

Despite the funeral: a sham ordeal that drained us even if we couldn't feel it much. Our mothers, friends I didn't know, and me, of course, the spouse by common law but only that: we made an odd sideshow so lined up, waiting at the chapel door to take our places, stand and sing the words above the organ and the preacher's voice: a braying confidence that made each tune seem oddly other than our simple choice.

Our sister Margaret has gone too soon,
he boomed, *but to a world where butterflies will seem much brighter to her opened eyes.*

They did, for all I knew. Beneath the weft
of things continuing she still was left
in farm, apartment and our common friends--
how very few we had, and even there
I felt that gnawing guilt that grieving sends
*to each and everyone as on we fare
along that final journey all must take.*
Or so the vicar said, and true, I thought,
and cast my mind back through the years
that now had pain about them, as they ought,
of course, and far more than my stifled tears:
but unacknowledged, as though nights were full
of her still awkward but more urgent pull.

That week I thought to let arrivals lie
uncared for, uncleaned out, and some did die.
I could have brought more staff in, had
those weeks when Meg was poorly: now it seemed—
how can I put it?—a thing perhaps too sad
to think of even. Here was all we dreamed
of : farm and butterflies and home. I found
her raincoat hanging by the door, the boots with socks
still poking out, her plate and coffee mug
up-ended on the draining board, her sandwich box
now empty by the toaster, with the plug
still in. So real it was, that through the door
I thought she'd come in, blushing as before.

So that was Meg: a fill-in, nothing more in truth, and no one to be thankful for, you'd think. She got no notice in the street, was half invisible, the hair cut short, a pair of old scuffed plimsolls, largish feet and oil-stained pullover she'd bought at Oxfam probably, and tattered jeans. Life's scraps and second servings did for her, but if where's justice in some further place then all who ever knew her would prefer that angular and blushing, raw-scrubbed face to some exotic minx whose charm and lies smile out so prettily from shuttered eyes.

40. Those first months hard: the drinking, sleeplessness, the getting up all hours. Now less and less I took a pleasure in the scenes nearby. I looked on dark-green pine trees, warmer claim of market gardens, flowered slopes. The sky was blue, the rapeseed shone, but all became a glaze of hard cold facts in history books: new hopes, new generations: still there gleams for others no doubt where God's fire had shone in furze and coppice and the traffic streams on past in sparkling highways. Days go on, smiling or indifferent: we do not, returning to a tended, needed spot.

I went to bars, used dating services
and tried what every helpful column says.
Besides, I wasn't poor, and spent of course
far more on strangers than I had on Meg,
and did ungrudgingly, without remorse.
But though they kept me going, that square peg
was still inside and looking on. I told
myself remember what our Meg had said:
You make a new life, Robbie. So I tried,
how much I tried, but through my head
there came Meg's earnestness, who never cried,
but flipped so sadly through the project file
I never went with one that extra mile.

So there we are. Months passed, the years.
Her mum grew older, died, mine, and fears
that I should be alone with no one there
to talk of this and that, to ask advice,
the usual commonplaces we must share
at times with others like us, which suffice
to keep us limping slowly, painfully on
at length were given. I was alone. But more,
I saw the others there were much the same,
the walking wounded, smiling on. Yet for
such happenstances we are not to blame,
I thought, grew steadier and contrived
to live again, and so the farm survived.

That past is built on, and our worked-at plot
has now a walkway and a picnic spot,
a place for Sunday visitors, and half-hour tour
for swallow-tails and carpoi where a pool
awaits them and the plastic panes ensure
that all can see them: that is kids from school,
our geriatric parties, photo buffs.
We tease and keep them on such tenterhooks
they go round happily from cage to stacks
of mugs and T-shirts, pamphlets, flyers, books,
a single butterfly or bumper packs.
Like my father, in the same old trap
of carefully filling in each earning gap.

Sometimes I think of him, and as the light
is turned down on another day, and night
exults in freeways or in lines of shops
that cast their tinsel hopes to private drive,
to car park, cul-de-sac and cold bus-stops:
on everything that's ordinary but alive
to what I told him but he couldn't grasp
or didn't want to, maybe, as that scene
of earliest boyhood fills with springtime there
and things beginning as if Meg had been
some batch of sturdy skippers in my care,
I think of winds collecting, such as blow
far over that unchanging world we know.

45. Their source I cannot tell, but watch at times
the gathering morning sunlight as it climbs
above the pine trees, opens on the road
or paints in undergrowth a thousand points
as if that momentary view had showed
another world in waiting, which anoints
if that is not too strong a word, a sense
of time quite other than the past we lost:
that underlies it, serves as thermostat
to stem the grief and ever numbing cost
we recollect and are astonished at:
something that for a while we once held dear,
not wholly gone from us, nor yet is near.

Whatever plans we made, the farm goes on,
and will, I hope, when Meg and I are gone:
the first from memory, and I am too
whatever lawyers call it in some will.
Our parents now lie quiet, and, passing through
the loves and sadnesses the landscapes fill,
I sense the boundaries of Chalk beneath,
the rain of soft and settled glacial sands,
the footfall of the fox, the blackbird's call,
the sunlight falling through the pine tree stands
from cumulus that is not heard at all.
And as for Meg, dear Meg, for all I know
she's still there angry with me, far below.

But these are words, mere breath, and all I own
I'd give to have her back and with me, grown
back to that plain creature with her hair
undone as always, scruffy, reconciled
to being overlooked, but watching there
the momentary radiance of a child
who sees as we did those enormous eyes,
the coiled proboscis, the beating wing
that gathers in its dusty counterpane
the tiny scales: a strange, exotic thing
beyond the hurt of sunshine and the rain
and think: if we are interludes, and pass,
then they are jewelled heaven in the grass.

And then, repeatedly, the day is bright
if not continuing long out of sight.
The past is then diminishing, I see
a purblind, ever-backward-looping path
across a boyhood to misogyny,
with someone given me, on whose behalf
a world of coloured butterflies was sent
to lead, as parents always said it would,
across the pebbled lands, the heaths and trees,
to what we never hoped for, parenthood:
a pool with children bathing, summer's lease
on holidays we never had, not Meg, nor I,
beneath that widespread, soft blue Norfolk sky.