



A Personal Choice

Excerpts and Selections:
Poems 2007-17

Colin John Holcombe

Ocaso Press 2017

A Personal Choice:

Excerpts and Selections

Poems 2007-2020

Colin John Holcombe

Ocaso Press 2021

A Personal Choice: Excerpts and Selections

Poems 2007-17

by Colin John Holcombe

© Author 2017, 2020

Published by Ocaso Press

Santiago, Chile. All rights reserved.

Issued: November 2017

Last revised and expanded: March 2021.

Copyright applies to this work, but you are most welcome to download, read and distribute the material as a pdf ebook.

You are not permitted to modify the ebook, claim it as your own, sell it on, or to financially profit in any way from its distribution.

CONTENTS

Introduction

Poems

:Childhood

Let No Radiances Conspire

Morning in the Grass

The Snowdrop

So Passes All that Matters

The Nightingale

Me Like You

Châu Minh Mai

High Homes in the Weald

Youth

Penang

Little Girl

Caesar Remembers

We Had a Little Farm

Wastelands

For You the Most Missed

Wessex

Out Walking

Middlesex

:From Love's First Fever

When You and I Were Young

The Summer Sky

The Primrose

Thunderstorms

Instruct Us

Trailing Sleeves

Tangled in her Arms

Forfeits

Only Half Awake

I Am the Softly Yielding One

O My Love

Eight Small Notes

Manners

Afterwards

From Consutia: Thoughts

Country Folk

This Small Sketch of You

Deptford

Kennet

Walking Out

One Earring Lost

Fabulous Night

Native Powers

:Time, Place and Circumstance

You're Matted in My Eyelids

A Toast

Mercia

Summer Nights

Cookham

Going West

Norfolk

The West Riding Towns

Far Out

Careers

A Tale of the Islands

A Well-Made Man

I Was Older

Local Histories

Voices

Baraka Café

The New World

Villeneuve sur Yonne

It's Time

Transters

Most Marvellous

The Stage is Set

Chilean Politics

La Traviata
Leaders
La Carrousel
The World
Climbing Free
Under Orders
Mandu
To the New World
The New Chile
Budapest
The Poppy
Ely Cathedral
Surrey Heights
The Peak District
The Windrush
Greek Ar Stater: Ellis
Indo-Greek Ar Tetradrachm: Demetrios
Indo-Scythians: Ar Tetradrachm: Azes II
Roman Ae Follis: Crispus
Byzantium Au Solidus: Leo VI
Odysseus
Home For Us
Winter Journey
Old Embassies
War
Notre Dame
Mammoths
Snowdonian Ice
Warwick Castle
Magna Graeca
Venice
Beyond

:The Disasters of War

The Temple Church
Winter Journey
Us At Last

Flanders

Heinrich Ludwig Arndtsfeld

Death Throes

Gonzalo Quezada

Old Manor Walls

:Homecoming

St. Paul's Cathedral

Teresa

Radna and Krishna

Cleopatra's Last Speech

Death of Satyavati

The End of It

For You Have Lived

Kentish Weald

Then Comes the Winter

Dead Weights

O Do Not Leave Me

To Be Alive

The Mistletoe

Blessings

Fill With Praise

INTRODUCTION

Introductions are hazardous matters, and it's probably wisely that poets avoid them, arguing the work should speak for itself, regardless of misunderstandings that may follow. But readers are entitled to some explanation for these seeming retro pieces, and no doubt some path into the daunting mass of work that appears on associated web-pages.

In general I have not grouped poems by date or appearance in collected form, but tried to provide some continuity through themes that progress from childhood through love in its all its forms, to society, travel, history, the miseries of war and oppression to the thoughts that close off our human existence — broadly speaking: there's considerable overlap. All the collections are represented, but the bulk has gone to pieces that seem to me the more successful. There is also a succession through the book from simple, song-like pieces to more serious and denser poems. Many poems are too long to be printed in their entirety, and have been given as short excerpts.

Possibly, as Zola claimed, a work of art is a corner on creation seen through a temperament, but that temperament is not a detachable and private matter but an amalgam of personality, traditions, interests, chance and the zeitgeist of the times. Or the zeitgeist of other times, it may seem in this case. No 'modern sensibility' is to be found here. No private and sometimes obscure references. No honest wrestling with language to say something fundamentally new. Not generally even an easy engagement with the reader in everyday, contemporary language. These poems are simply poetry as it was, crafted at the syllable level where words make their own aesthetic claims through the varying textures, overtones and dimensions. Also unusual may be a preference for strict forms, for the extension of European and Asian traditions, for long poems and for serious and sometimes religious themes. None of this is mainstream today.

Putting together any selection from many years of work is a humbling experience. All those careless slips, those over-ambitious phrases, those impressions that were not brought to their proper shape. Then there are the supposed fresh departures, the poems that seemed at their outset to herald new themes and treatments, but which proved in retrospect only to

have been a restatement of deep-grained interests: in my case travel, history and the eternal verities of human nature.

What must strike the new reader is how very un-modern these poems are. In their breadth of subject matter, their search for beauty of phrase and their deliberate verse craftsmanship, they are quite unlike popular amateur work. But nor is any there alienation from society, a fragmented consciousness, a preoccupation with un-poetic diction in mundane reflections on everyday existence in free verse forms. It is surely surprising that someone who has written so extensively on Modernism and Postmodernism shows little interest himself in writing the material winning respectful reviews in the academic and avant-garde presses. Why have I gone back to safe ground, to Edwardian poetry in places, to start again on themes that were overtaken by Modernism, and have been further displaced by the prose-based styles of Postmodernism?

Because, for reasons documented in my *Background to Critical Theory*, I have come to think that contemporary poetry is not going anywhere. The last thirty years have produced things of great interest but little poetry as such. Theory has become an overriding concern, and poetry today is trying very hard *not* to meet previous expectations, the highlights of which can be found in any older book of quotations or literary criticism. Since current efforts pay little attention to what was hitherto poetry, or how it was constructed, it is only natural that today's productions need constant marketing. What can't now be denied is lauded as positive advantages. With its network of awards, scholarships, MFAs, academic courses, constant novelty and unstinting praise for rather indifferent work in the academic and avant-garde presses, contemporary poetry has turned itself into a successful propaganda machine. Never before have so many poets been published and promoted, and never before has so much work seemed so unworthy of the name. As in today's painting world, poets divide into amateurs whose conceptions far outstrip execution, and professionals whose work pursues serious but esoteric concepts of little interest to the public at large. In both poetry groups the enabling skills do not exceed those of the average amateur painting group, elementary to middling, with only the faintest recognition that great riches lie in assured approaches, techniques and traditions. Poetry, which handles the larger

contours of words, and discloses its bloodline in deep and unexpected ways, is always more than craft, but craft of some type there must be. In this selection the craft is traditional, with emphasis on phrasing, white space patterning, rhyme very often, and words returned to their pre-Modernist inheritance.

But what else can be done? Serious poets have settled into a recognised institution in the way required of any organisation conforming to the established social order. Self-censorship becomes natural and unconscious, just as an unquestioned and edifying ethos prevails in corporations, universities and government departments, made so by common backgrounds, reading preferences, mentality and education. The questionable is never questioned. Why should it be? What would happen to careers, status, education and the publishing trade if the immense edifice of Modernism were brought down, and professional poets began to doubt the inherent rightness of their approaches? Hence the continual rewriting of the apostolic succession in the autistic and self-admiring coteries claiming a continuity with the great revolutionaries who founded Modernism. Hence also the bewildering variety but in fact narrowly circumscribed flood of productions, each exhibiting an individual bent for word play, but also an aversion to wider social or political matters, or common sense even at times. To be revolutionary today is to query that consensus of beliefs.

And no doubt invite a storm of honest protest. Poetry is not well rewarded, and professional poets might well feel threatened without their brave and self-supporting theories. The more complicated and fragmented our life appears today, the more simple and dogmatic needs to be the mission statement. In place of literary criticism, which attempted a technical audit, there is now only reviewing, blatant merchandising of some sort, whether empty word-spinning in the small magazines or sophisticated window-dressing in the grand stores of critical theory. Of the elemental human condition, which it was once the aim of poetry to express memorably, eloquently and truthfully, there is now little trace. Poetry has become simply a self-important text, without obligations to anyone or anything, and most certainly not to truth-telling. Nothing exists outside words, though how these are put together can become the object of poetry — i.e.

a poem is not a Romantic voyage into the artist's interior but a late Modernism exhibition of the playfulness of composition. We should be entertained by the innate fecundity of words, but not expect them help us understand the world. There is nothing beyond the text.

But that brings especial danger to poetry, already under threat from cut-backs in the humanities. The arts, and poetry in particular, are concerned with wholeness, where the many associations, connotations and histories of use that words possess, often unappreciated at first, are deployed so that the individual poem emerges from the race memories of literature. It is the very nature of language to be many-linked and imprecise, which poetry understands and exploits. Today, with its wrong-headed theories, poetry unfortunately supposes that the only course open to devotees of so treacherous a medium is to focus exclusively on words themselves, and to create a poetry out of their mundane, playful and non-referential natures. But the problems of language are not insuperable, and other disciplines, even logic and mathematics, have their deep fissures and workable accommodations. How poems are built is rarely of interest to outsiders, moreover, or honestly portrayed in contemporary writing, for that matter, and such limiting notions condemn late Modernist poetry to being a thin academic pastime. Poets once responded to the world, to its joys and unfathomable sadness, by dedication to their craft, by making themselves into some acutely sensitive and knowledgeable interpreter that both responded to and expressed events passing through their lives. They did not dislocate language to make semantic installations, or make private and often obscure journeys through a self-reflecting hall of mirrors. Why would they? How would that be enlightening or entertaining? Poets are quiet souls in the main, and few have an engrossing story to tell, so that their reflections devoid of heart-stopping expression would be better done by factual studies, philosophy or a good travel book.

Today's trends are towards a safe mediocrity, a poetry written in the manner of academic research, and no doubt helping to maintain tenure in these difficult times. No one would want to discourage new styles in poetry, or inhibit their ceaseless experimentation, but to impose a medieval scholasticism where dull prose-based styles alone give integrity

is stultifying, especially when those styles can have aims suspiciously coincident with the modest gifts of their proponents.

That unadventurous trend is also apparent, unfortunately, in the outlets that do publish traditional or New Formalist work, e.g. Unsplendid, PoemTree, Hypertexts, Contemporary Rhyme and AbleMuse. Though there are fine poems here, too much is clever verse rather than poetry, and exhibits a jocular or slightly apologetic air, as though real poetry were being written elsewhere. Would that it were! Many more poems, by a factor of thousands, are written today than in previous centuries, but where is the enduring quality? The readership for serious poetry today barely extends beyond academia, and even here is a disputed, minority interest. Academia has its strengths, but is not a sufficient world for poetry, nor always a sensible one. As historiography indicates, schools and movements are as prevalent in the humanities as fashions in the world of entertainment and mass media, and just as shallow and inhibiting. Much in Modernism is simply not thought through sufficiently, and seems sometimes to be purposely kept that way by avoiding clear statement of the obvious. Better that the wilder shores of contemporary poetry remain their beckoning selves, and continue to be acclaimed by those who believe as was once said of Yeats' more esoteric interests — rather too easily.

But truth will out. The elaborate falsehoods of *Pravda* could not hold the Soviet Union together once political coercion was relaxed, and poetry also insists on fundamental truths. Most poems fail as poems have always failed, through lack of talent, sensibility and hard work, but the suspect nature of poetry today also weakens resolve. Since language is self-defeating, what is the point of developing a special sensitivity to words, to their larger contexts and meanings? Or to keep refining lines that were initially flat, ungainly and/or unmemorable, without evocative images, or resonating figures of speech? The requirements are practically endless, but are pointless if only driven by career advancement, that academic need to 'publish or perish', which sees poems being turned out mechanically to prove MFA credentials and gain some local reputation.

Poets in general publish too much, and in that spirit I have withdrawn several publications — *The Nutcracker*, *Planet Earth*, *Small Talk* and *Aries Rising* — though transferring a handful of their less unhappy pieces to A

Book of Places. No doubt all four collections could and should have been recast, but the work is considerable, and involve literary journeys I do not now want to make. We change, and any rewriting means becoming again the person we were, just as translation means adopting another persona. In fact, many of the collections retained here are more mixed than I would like, and perhaps the only ones now I remain somewhat pleased with are *Shuja Khan*, *Wessex*, *Some Other Person* and *Petticoats*. But readers may see matters differently, and indeed do so, to judge from web traffic.

I hope, regardless of these comments, the poems here will find an understanding audience, which realises that these are not simply a return to the past, but a return *from* the past in themes and treatments that Modernism has chosen to ignore. One theme is the preoccupation with technical and wider social matters, sometimes contested, doubtless unwelcome in state-funded academia, but strongly present in pre-Elizabethan, Augustan and Romantic poetry. Second is the development of strict forms into believable voices: these are not poems written in natural speaking rhythms but verse patternings where every syllable and its duration is important for aesthetic and semantic reasons. Those who read only contemporary work — late Modernist poets and their audience — will doubtless fail to hear this feature, though it's the one thing that distinguishes skilful from amateur work, and what we register in reading the big names of the past. Third is the emancipation from indrawn Modernist preoccupations to a keen animal appreciation of the world, the bodily happiness of being alive.

Then there are the verse tales, not seriously attempted since the nineteen thirties. That was a different world, where men of letters were expected to excel at both prose and verse. Poetry was a natural extension of fiction, not something constructed on different principles. There was a place for setting, narrative, plot, dialogue, character, and for themes that enjoyed a general popularity. Fine writing today is under a cloud, and 'purple passages' will be expunged from any novice's submitted work. But why? Is it social class, unearned incomes and the time-wasting art of conversation that were so reprehensible? Or the belief that literature must be made plain and ugly to be honest, and is otherwise an outdated social accomplishment, like good manners or appropriate dress?

Is that also why the short story has declined as an art form, despite its many advantages, which are similar to the verse tale: a clear narrative, a small canvas needing evocative character drawing, a world so clearly depicted that it becomes a lens for larger views of society? To compound the author's blunderings, this selection also contains short excerpts from three verse plays, which attempt to rescue drama from an everyday banality of speech.

The success or otherwise of this selection is of less importance than what I hope the poems demonstrate. The old art of poetry is not yet dead, however unprofitable that may seem, or unpropitious the times. Little of any merit was produced by the mechanised slaughter of the Second World War, for example, and the mood and aspirations of our late capitalist age are equally uninspiring: unending resource wars, diminishing civil liberties, a bright but shallow materialism, a cultural levelling down to self-made standards, and an oppressive hypocrisy in the mainstream and academic press. 'What use are poets in such spiritless times' lamented Hölderlin, who was clinically insane but went on writing regardless. Yet poetry is not made by fleshing out theory, even correct theory, because theory is always secondary, an abstraction useful for academic purposes. Poets wishing to recover their birthright may want to think what poetry achieved before Modernism began devouring its children — before, embracing a portentous need to remake everything in its own image, poetry began its self-defeating journey away from the larger world it had once set out to champion.

Let No Radiances Conspire

Let no radiances conspire,
lay by that distant tune;
for all its elixir and remembered fire,
forego the shimmering moon!

All that might have happened while
we two cast our chart:
the fragrance in a stoppered phial,
the murmurings through the heart.

How hard and deep the past intrudes
that I must fight for breath:
again the tempest, sighs, the feuds,
times twentieth or fortieth.

Unfathomable as those bodies were
with repugnance and hot tears:
what haste was in the sorcerer,
what mirages with years!

Am I to say what happens when
now otherwise has grown
the hurt that in a fresh-dewed pen
made silver into stone?

Oh yes, you may hold me, smile, or
say things that maybe are:
but slow and bewildering is the draw
down of the moon and far.

Morning in the Grass

A land damp in that awakening,
where leaf-lined streets had names,
and schoolyard bells were ever making
havoc of our games.

The hopscotch sandals kiss and splay,
soft flips the skipping rope:
and youth's hot scent is scrubbed away
in fierce carbolic soap.

Yet here were miracles out walking
through each suburban street,
long intervals of parents talking
where fence and evening meet.

So were the high day's dawns, were
the sunlit worlds of sleep,
and loud abroad the brute wind's stir
as in the stones that keep

inscrutable their solitude
through hard days and the wet:
if lives to be are many hues,
come, kiss and place your bet.

And in those long-enchanted streets,
with girls we'd hardly know,
what phantoms and what sharp deceits
our tantrum hearts would sow.

Dust, dust in the evening, and smell
of morning in the grass,
that we in looking back could tell
how swiftly raptures pass.

The Snowdrop

All night long, to inner quietness bred,
the snowdrop lifts above the frost-touched earth.
With tiny petals tucked about the head
it gazes calmly down, as at a birth

it is oblivious of. A tiny corm
is certainly no boundless flowering spree,
but one of innate loveliness to form
a wimpled, nun-like blaze of chastity.

How very pure it is: a chilly white,
that's neither virginal nor intertwined
with harmless domesticity, despite
the garden plots to which it is confined.

No tranquil deity of woodland dell,
but poised and dutiful and ever bred
to brute persistence in a single spell
of aero emptiness before it's dead.

So Passes All That Matters

The wind comes, and the wind scatters
whatever we propose:
in this there passes all that matters,
the perfume and the rose.

How willingly would warm mouths smoulder,
the limbs with passion's health,
till suddenly the world was older,
more battened on itself.

But the tears, how the tears should come
at troubled hopes we sow:
accommodations we succumb
to as we turn and go.

Let me place my hands in your soft hands
and kiss and say how wild
are those far lands, those only lands
foreshadowed as a child.

The Painter

To sense her all day long in Eve's undress,
from when in rising she puts up her hair:
to be enamoured of the nimbused air
that had her odour and her otherness,

I took from others in this strange distress
among the canvasses Bellini painted,
a soul and body that was new acquainted
where all was simple, a mere naturalness.

When past her, through the startled day's embrace,
in thirst for innocent and withheld years,
I forced from bodies their most fervent sighs.
To which she said, 'I am a little space,
a sense of falling and diminishing in tears,
far as the starlight, out of quiet eyes.'

Me Like You

Before I was girl only, a simpleton
working in the wet fields and the far
plantations of the Pha Mieng Hills.
Long distance by bus and days taking
me on from father and sister sick
in Baen Pang Mai Daeng,
with its bewildering festivals and every
one laughing at great drench of clothes.

I am Mae-Ying of the bright eyelids
and of adulterous attachments seeking
the soft dust trafficking the evenings
as the trees press into the back yard.
I am the compositor of the bright lights
and denizen also of the night lands
of rest. Laughing and more rapacious
than is the mantis, I extend

an unruffled impudence behind me
in my hot cauldron of pants,
not scanty or voluminous but
intricately fashioned in the machinery
of my shaping: So is Mae-Ying
of Baen Pang Mai Daeng,
the village of four pagodas, walking
herself through Patpong's big hotels.

And if something unmitigatingly
sad is going away as though saturated
with what have sinned in, O my Lord
Buddha, I will pay you an offering
of six prayers if you find me husband
among the rich farangs, when truly

I will be faithful if he take me Milwaukee,
or Chicago, be good wife pushing trolley

round with children in the obedient
tree-lined streets I know in films.
But now in Leeds on temporary visa,
with Glen who no is American
but cares for mother. In her small house
I do beds, shopping, cleaning, cooking.
It bare in winter, true, and sometimes
flowers, respectable, look hard at me.

Châu Minh Mai

My name in Vietnamese means sparkling pearl,
or drift of fragrance in the threatened rain,
in all things delicate, a little girl

who, yet more distantly, may hear again
her mother talking to her, saying: far above,
the high moon watching us must also wane.

So choose, my child, my sweet, my little dove,
a simple countryman, when never die
the Mekong river lands, to which your love

will come as evening mists, where green fields lie
close, thick and comforting, and where the toes
can root their thoughts in fertile mud. The sky

will bring us rain in season; wind that blows
is moist and open-mouthed; our ancestors
will whisper kindly to us while there glows

the warmth of green within the bamboo floors
of granaries, and we can hear the fish
that glint and waver as the sunlight draws

itself to darkness and we eat our dish
of smells and quietness as the elders bid
us help our countryman. We did not wish

a hurt to anyone. It's true we hid
our patriots beyond the reach of plane
or gun just as the Buddha would amid

our living consciences, when we attain
a sense that all are brothers. Smoke and heat
then come, and sudden soldiers. No explain

why buffaloes be killed, or why must treat
us all like criminals when no one spoke,
or tie our headman up and beat and beat

with rifle butts until his old bones broke.
The more I cannot tell of: mother say
the moon abandon us poor river folk.

High Homes on the Weald

There was a holiness in all you said
I'd cycle through for weeks,
and even now the spoke's sleek whisper speaks
of some soft, festive bed.

But girls we yearned for once have moved away
to high homes on the Weald,
where gated citadels would never yield
their solemn, bridal day.

And even if I put on tennis whites,
wore sensible, well-laundered clothes,
there's still a larger sense that it behoves
us think of summer nights.

Love thirty, forty. Pause. First game to us.
And so the long suburban evening falls
to smouldering sounds of tennis balls
hard hit and ominous.

Yet in these games we played our manhood out,
long back and forth, avoiding blame,
though strokes and cancer come the same
on life's brief roundabout.

And much too soon will come the left unsaid,
misunderstandings we let pass,
where daisy-chains and elfin grass
outlast the sunlit head.

So go our adolescent, earliest hopes,
that hesitant and probing kiss,
and all the mansions that we somehow miss
as plain occasion mopes

about the boy we never were, the innocence
condensing to a troubling gaze
in middle-class, reciprocating ways
of small, unsafe events.

Youth

Youth I had and beauty such
as all men think is their desire.
Tinder the laughter and the light touch
of my inward-burning fire.

I am not proud, nor was so.
Sufficient for the day
their courtesies, their meekness, though
what can glad words pay?

For the heart is ever the fawn-
eyed creature, fearful and wild:
doubting but to old paths drawn,
impetuous as the child.

Sometimes, when the wind blows, for
all is spent now and I have no friends,
sorrow to the soul seems loving, sore
grieving till it ends.

Girls who are not pretty, swirl round
with the mouth full or sad:
better a house on the stony ground
than brood on what I had.

Penang

Pinafored and pretty-fingered,
silhouetted in the tall
spot-lit and over-canopied
hoardings of the picture house,
two little schoolgirls, lost in wonder,
gaze upon the cavalcade.

Cowboy hucksters, Chinese bandits,
cops and international crooks:
airmen sweep the blue Pacific,
the allies win the Burma war.
And see! There's someone's mum and dad
kissing how they shouldn't have.
Laughing now and taking hands
they turn toward the homeward track.

Flocks of girls from upper forms
meanwhile climb the foyer stairs,
thence returning, waving tickets,
taking the steps at two by two,
uniform, purse and pale blue shoes
whirl about the slender legs.

Even Acteon on Diana
didn't fasten such fond eyes
as, with a lapidary glitter, do
(chewing cashews, doting darkly)
all who here would walk with her,
talk with her, tack their tongue,
drifting, past a dental palette
incongruously thick with teeth.

Fay you are and fortunate,
lucky to that tricky bauble —
Oh Buddha is it? Well, that's good:
he'll arraign your arrogance,
lead you to more delicate
(but I do like the cool bids
now, yes, of your eyelids)
eloquent acceptance that
as my very soul is smitten
so your soothing words are bidden.
Do you not my heart believe?
Do you not my hands give leave
to link us for this night and find
your long breath folded into mine?

Little Girl

So, little girl, dance,
for soon, little girl, comes
not the night in ravelled splendour,
apassionata in the slender
rainbow into tapered drums —
castanet, calabash —
the fade-out into sombre sax.
Oh no, no, no, not one of these
extends the litheness or the ardour
of the vexed and sunk Armada.
Noonday to isosceles
wetness and luxuriance.

And if that is what you think
now, little girl, and plan for — oh
demurely, oh so gingerly —
if this the inner tide we see
beneath the body's feckless glow
of sweet done up as candy sticks,
of kiss together then the kicks
out and out and turn around,
all is forward, all is you,
brassiere to little shoe:
laughter settles into sound
enclosed as is the eyelid's blink.

So if you think, dance
little girl, dance as you will
little girl, that you hurl
round the music's stomp and whirl
caution to the night and still
have expectancy in glances,
have no fear in further chances.

Ah, ah, ah, now little minx
not the samba, not the rumba
will the sober years renumber
fortune not for forty winks
flatters that grave elegance.

Caesar Remembers

What I remember of that boyhood shore,
with the high waves breaking, was more and more
lifted together in the heavy swell,
was exultation: fear as well.

I fastened on that, was composed and neat,
always respectful — in the street
I did not go running, make any noise:
that's what they noticed, the other boys.

As Julii we were middling — not rich, not poor,
but ancient and patrician — father wore
Tyrian to his toga when out of doors
attendant on Senate and the settled chores
that came with our ruling the vast lands east.
I saw myself there as elected priest,
Pontifex, even, and every cause
lift in the rapture of their applause.

Yet apart from that — nothing. I was betrothed
to one called Cossutia. At fifteen roved
curious through bodies to the curled-up toes
under the shyness and the small, damp clothes.

We Had a Little Farm

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.

Wastelands

That first inheritance beyond our given name,
where troops of shirt-sleeved followers would urge us on
from safe suburban thoroughfares to ruffian streets
that were forbidden us, abandoned factory sites
where sunlight falling gave an oriental splendour
to wire, to slag and shattered window glass:
and then to toadstool-studded fields and murky woods
across the duckweed kingdoms of the water flags.

All scenes of local desolation, wildernesses
strewn with builder's rubbish, stones and scattered brick,
the haunt of lesser celandine and cabbage white,
and gold of slow-worms under corrugated iron
sheets — that ever-thought-on kingdom where we go
with all our gains as naught and with a beating heart.

For You the Most Missed

How is that true? The years lift away.
Estranged from our kinsfolk at end of day
we count up the cost and take for pay
life itself as best we may.
All in the future: mere straws in the wind.
You stand in the acres of sepia hills
half lost in the haystacks, in foliage, twinned
with the first breath of summer as it warms and fills

the woods and high pastures. Soft, ragged explosion
of cumulus the length of the rain-torn sky.
Rough ways, footways, paths not chosen
by farmer, grazier whose men stood by
from counting the quota of live-stock measures:
oblivious of all you raced far over
the wheat-lands and hedgerows to reach the treasures
of slow-worm and bird's nest and four-leaf clover.

Large bow in your hair, but not the lotus
of inwrought perfection, the studious child:
loud as poppy you loll in the photos —
brash as your cousins, raw-boned, wild.
Was ever a daughter so ockard and plainly
out at all angles as mother tried
to fashion a someone? I doubt it. Vainly
the money was squandered: she kissed you, sighed.

No French blood, no titles, no high breeding,
but simple tinkers from the Warwickshire hills.
From your mother, Flo, a love of reading,
and manners, straight speaking, truculent wills.

Baronet with farmer with labourer breeding?
Not in that country, not those days.
It comes down to me, the silent, unseeding,
walking the boundaries the years erase.

Wessex

*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. Tell me: 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.

Out Walking

It comes when walking maybe in the spring
time — or I don't know — out driving, at the first
frail plumes of greenness in the barren fields:
the hope then beating outwards, the nights reversed.
Refringence of morning on the hills that yields
days beautiful, beyond imagining —
months to cut the heart.

The trees and the warm lanes that blind us, stumbling on,
seasons with their fragrance, the keen winds gone
dwindling to the heavens, as the long days start.

It's the same, then is it? in that begetting
of April after April in those vales of trees?
Clouds in their passage over furze and heath,
smell of the warmth, of shadow, the hum of bees
contenting the honeysuckle, the fume beneath:
all in delirium gathered and then forgetting —
how the waters pour —
impassioned and headlong in each tumbling brook
with never a turn backward, never a look
to us who are rootless and return no more

to the high fields of childhood that summer long
invited and thickly through the schoolyard netting,
where we romped and got grass in shirts and socks,
took them all off, ran careless, abetting
the girls in freckles and their summer frocks
till Persephone was taken and her song
echoed all the pain,
the lies, deceptions and the misbehaving.

Do you stand in the doorway the same and waving
in the warmth of sunlight and the simple rain?

Middlesex

Where the cell-like edge of London frays
into the rich, wet acreage of Middlesex —
from Wembley through to Harrow, with High Barnet,
ringed with terminuses north — in trolley-
buses, tube connection, silver flex
of Metropolitan or Bakerloo —
there, always, I remember, with the weather
plumed above our playing fields, our gardens,
shopping precincts, roundabouts, our streets,
the opalescent bubble of a boy's

imagination clouds with Iroquois —
with Pawnee creeping through the ox-eyed daisy,
adrift in meadowlands where crimsoned grasses
awoke at dawn and shook at sunset. Seemed
as consequential that our hours should stretch
as far as summer, and whole days together
we would dawdle till the deliquescence
of the evening found such happiness
had wooded in our gestures, hair, our clothes.
Between the shadows and the clustered

galleons of great trees the mustard-
coloured moon recalled the promises
we made the very place the world tipped down.
We heard the night wind settle through the branches
the interpenetration of the leaves
restless in their tide of being, further
than our parents calling, chimes from ice cream
van so quietly falling through the close:
this life, so full, was inexhaustible . . .

Why now from solstice fire does summer go
to cool opacity, and wetness throw
distinctness on the paths to home? Again
I shall not see the splendour of the great
expresses out of Euston, Waterloo;
the roar of LMS, of great North West:
for small boy waiting in the wind-pressed grasses,
book at 462's or double 0s.
The signal clicks; it shifts; the light goes red.
How long ago that was and is. It never
stops. The past goes short on hopes, and has
but street lights clustered in their sullen gas
to mark our footsteps as we troop down streets
from home to local pub to corner shop.
what spirit replicates the spirit guts:
it's bad those many days did not take root.
We pass with comrades large in talk — of wives
of office politics, of children's sport,
of days abundant that in those regulation
holidays to Africa, to Spain,
where on the calmest of the afternoons

we watch from balconies: the green sea swoons
in rush of topiaried weed and stone.
So fresh, so frolicsome. We stand again
in bright amazement at the bend
into that world of bubbles. Boats above
were bobbing lightly: this way, that. The wind
that lifted sea-spray from the surface drove
all those sunshine-heavy afternoons
till we, becalmed under the vast clouds, saw
their columbines do cartwheels round the blue.

These I don't remember now, nor you
nor even fishing trips when we two sat,
watching hours together water full
of surface as our ruffled hopes. Nothing
bit, or bobbed or moved, though marsh gas bubbles
rose in glistening algal conurbations.
The weed was deep and still. And what we saw
was nothing but a murky world of shapes,
of Rorschach premonitions, vaguely true.
Strange how individually we wait

with brolly, briefcase, glasses, paper-mate,
to board our yellow Network trains — the same
that take us through the spruced-up suburbs, past
the council dumps, allotments, coppices,
wastelands rolled, felled, filled in, made good:
a past that's well tamped down. It doesn't stir,
although I think at times, occasionally,
just after rain, in springtime, carriage windows
open to the warm scents of the south,
the cold year waking up and London with it,

what are these empty synagogues of spirit,
the riches mammon serves and shackles? Here
in business suit I lounge, and am prevailed
upon by something unforgiving.
Like bird-foot deltas, pigeon-droppings, sudden
pools of sunlight as the train revives
its old speed over cantilever bridges,
the same old offices with plotted plants,
it seeps through us, to far away, and leaves
an after-taste of how it was together.

If home is where heart is — and it seems whatever

I may do about it I return
days older, or days younger, indistinct —
so many things I did not want, for what's
the benefit in retrospect? — I see
a small boy dangling shirtsleeves in the shadows,
above old drains in gardens where the sticklebacks
reflect the turbid cross-glints of the current.
In gold and crimson is the day out late
and, though I didn't know it, late for me.

When You and I Were Young

In constancy, our days out walking,
when you and I were young.
Laughing at the echo calling
with its cuckoo's tongue,
the tops of trees forever talking:
so our tale was sung.

Through field and forest, truth foretelling,
whole lifetimes stretched away.
The emperies of clouds were swelling
with our happy day.
Come, come, there is no compelling,
each will have its say.

And in each cloudy, wind-topped coppice,
through miles of misted blue,
wandering, sauntering and delighting
in country house and pew,
how warmly felt was rich blood pulsing,
and trysts exchanged were true.

The tall hill and the cumulus
bloomed to our design,
the wheat-lands, warm and generous,
the leaf-entangled vine —
around the hopes, and credulous,
our happy hearts would twine.

How days, days, days so soon departing
to leave us stilled and numb,
precipitant and self-reproaching,
will to tears succumb,
but not imagine we'd be hurting
eternities to come.

As Is the Summer Sky

As cold and distant as the pale blue sky
when under, all at hazard, out we lie,
at one with interludes of clouds and trees,
and traffic's murmur or the muted bees.

With clean shirt on, we'd buff up shoes,
review the morning's tasks as though we'd choose
to be then different, have our lives
rebuilt in other children, workmates, wives.

In venturing on from what has been
we'd come across a pristine sylvan scene,
there start again and, out of hand,
would cultivate some virgin plot of land.

In new Elysium we'd find
some woodland creature to be apt and kind
to all our cursed contrariness,
beyond amalgams of this breath and stress

where men must close their eyes to pain
and sordidly tot up the loss and gain,
long wars against whole nationhoods
of hoarded matter and material goods.

But of ourselves, for one brief hour
we'd be as summer rain will soak the flower
with memories that seem a distant song
to which, at some remove, we still belong.

That bourn or birthright, an abiding sense
of women slept with but in innocence,
of whom we knew but nothing, why or when
there came such blessedness to us mere men.

The Primrose

The primrose with its smouldering yellow hue,
so soft and fresh but oversweet, as though
its frank ingenuousness would quite outdo
the sumptuous freshness of new-fallen snow.

Why should we think of pleated innocence,
or modesty as part of sovereign youth,
of kirtles and the maiden joys to fence
her off in trenchant leafiness? In truth

the plant's tenacious, and, from its broad, thick stock
in round leaves' ending, thuggish roots reach out
through leaf-mould, gravel or the hardest rock
to make of earthiness their strong redoubt.

So is virginity, as poets know
who take good care to emphasize its bloom
of air-fresh loveliness that won't forego
the plumed pre-eminence she must assume:

that you will love her, always, her alone,
when that most intimate of parts will sow
an efflorescence through that smiling zone
these clumps of thickly ruffled petals know.

Thunderstorms

The soft, repudiating, cool, damp skin,
the wounded beauty in the shadowed mouth,
the rich, dark splendour in the hot lands south,
the headlong breath where every rush within
denies all need for rein-in, pause and weigh.

The hazard of that deep, reproachful look
in eyes that held no melting tenderness
but amber, acrid-tasting bitterness
of things plain stated in life's open book:
yes, use me once but you will pay.

That even now — how odd that is — I taste
that deep red lipstick, cloying, over-rich,
the scented paragons of giving, which
in over-burdened riches from the waist
will neither urge nor long delay.

I bought you flowers, I brought you gifts,
but pointed fingers in the soft, plump hands
but wove a dalliance, which understands
that there is nothing otherwise in shifts
when consequence is far away.

How endless were the sun-stilled miles in this
warm rain and paddy in the regal head,
and more imponderable were things not said
in that occasional and florid kiss
that spoke of innocence. And so you stay

until your father with his hotel chain
who needed no poor farang in its ranks
may give belatedly his grudging thanks,
that nothing lingers from that first campaign
but far-off thunderstorms and thin bouquet.

Special

Special. The ordinary sex-bitch won't do.
You have to like her. She must like you.
And when you get it wrong you pay. A big drop,
Like falling off a high building: you never stop.

So you weigh it up: that mutt from Staines,
With her comical singing, farts, varicose veins,
Floods in the bathroom, great piles of shoes,
And being together, always, the two by twos.

And know in the end it's not love or sex
But the hope of it, the undrawn cheques
On the blonde who smiled that time at hockey,
An endlessly remembered day spent lucky.

Enough for a lifetime of keeping mum, or face
What is always differing or another place —
Which you don't get used to, though kept in tow
Are lives still perfectly failing, for all you know.

Trailing Sleeves

It is the spring, the reckless spring
that brings to lovers mortal pain,
in hurt that tempers everything
as sunlit shadows dull with rain.

So, is the heart as are the limbs,
entangled but in essence free?
Indulgent of those childish whims,
committed, but would feckless be?

How brief the torment in the street
in temperaments of glad green leaves;
the flouncing chicas turn and meet
the would-be in their trailing sleeves

of scent and posing. Virgin powers
inherent in the picture shows
of brief disclosing: hours and hours
are given to their smallest clothes.

Make haste, the undone breathlessness
of passion does not come again,
and after is but wantonness
that plays with us, poor mortal men.

Tangled in her Arms

From all day tangled in her arms
I fought my passage there,
and felt that heady perfume in the hour was
dropping from the air.

You do this and we do that: the fingers stalk
round in their red shoes.
*We can have the turning world as well
in anything we choose.*

*I am hard like a ringing penny on
a glass-topped table, bent
on drumming music out of you, so
round and round we went.*

*I am the wind's deliverer, its
clattering wheel's roulette.
I am the chatterer and still disaster:
this is what you get.*

The tall head waiter is beaming and has
tossed our cheque away;
and all the occupants are shut in glass,
envious and grey.

So she and I, the city decked
with interludes of smiles,
went out by foot on the roundabout route:
a tickertape of miles.

I saw her feet, her painted nails,
imprint the sands of shore.
I saw the apparatus of her body
burst on the chairman's door.

Complexioned as the summer clouds,
she wore my ring of gold,
though *poof!* she said, *that ever you and I*
should settle and grow old.

I'm cut by sharpness of your hair,
embittered and distraught.
I know the desolation miles across
to safety at that port.

I sense the salt taste of your tears,
the staleness in the flesh,
there is a traction on the world as hard
as finger joints must mesh.

Do not look for me in the sunrise, in
my golden-studded ears,
I am not in the sunset or in the slow
occasions of your tears.

You are bitten into my sharp blood, your
movements shape my sighs:
a small dog barking in your drops of tears
fastens up my eyes.

Mine is splendour of the light,
a freshness in the grass.
Can you not now feel the whole world sigh
as on my legs I pass?

My lovely, high, my distant one,
let down your golden hair,
so all I want and now remember is
the sunlight in the air.

Forfeits

Each to each the plain birds call
as once again the minutes fall
to quiet contentment in the grass,
while centuries and centuries will pass

unnoticed in the nodding corn
that's ripened, reaped and so reborn,
as are the little lives of men,
collected and resown again.

The inquisition of the flowers
indignantly would cast its powers
on both of us as we too lay
about them on that unspent day.

And when the last of daylight folds
itself to muffled purple-golds,
and everywhere's a peaceful glow
that only faithful toilers know,

then hurt and bitterness and pain
are no more permanent than rain
that drenches earth but then is gone
as intermittent sunshine on

the sights around us that we hold
as daylight in our eyelids' fold:
the scent of grass and fingers' touch
whose very sensing seems too much

to understand as round us go
the coloured jousts of picture show,
that frank and elemental blaze
which animates our passing ways.

We are, and feel ourselves, alive
in this rich world through which we strive,
but have no patent on, and pass
as summer's footsteps through the grass.

In brimmed magnificence that slow
condenses as we thoughtful go:
one day, one hour, no more than that,
which we were happy in, and sat

about with friends, or more than friend,
the one we'd hold to till the end —
that was and will be, ever bring
some part to that encompassing

the pilgrim in us, going on
where warmth and kindness ever shone,
to that eternal, bridal day
when we shall all our forfeits pay.

Only Half Awake

The bed, the chair, the varied heaps of clothes,
for you were never one for tidiness,
but gave impetuously your person up
as hands are prompt about a loving cup.
Here all that captivating wealth of dress
and hair are only as the air betrothes
itself to odour in these mouldering rooms
so redolent of ends and scattered blooms.

My dear, my only dear, with me believe
there are no heavens to come but what is here.
No overhearing hangs upon the air:
in shapes and odours there is no one there,
no tunes or melodies enchant the ear,
and tell the listening heart that it must grieve
for what was given us that is no more
until we stand upon that further shore

where all's forgiven us, if so it is.
Who knows? It may be where we once again
relive our errors, heartbreak, hurt and loss
but now continually, where pain and dross
must constitute the little lives of men,
those stiff ambitions that have come to this
despair and turpitude, this place of rest
in which, perpetually, we're ever guest.

The odour here has not a bitter taste
but sombre, as beneath the ripened fruit
there lingers something of the honeyed flower,
an over-sweetness which, long hour by hour,
has so bedrugged us on our fervent route
that all things chosen were in reckless haste
across itineraries we were to take
reluctantly and only half awake.

I Am the Softly Yielding One

I am the softly yielding one.
I am the always needing, won
by pieties of gathered hands.
Beyond what sensing understands,
I am the warmth unclouding winter lands.

I am the fullness in the air,
the openness with no one there,
a contour and a silhouette
so fashioned out that you'll forget
the intervals of past regret.

Be glad with me, entrammel all
that makes this heavy body's fall
to flood and quietness. Now you see,
however lost or brief it be,
in locked companionship you live with me.

O My Love

Soft, fervent as teardrops, are the flowered
anemones of your breasts, but they cannot
forestall for an instant the tendernesses
with which you, O my love, will always attend me,
stepping as you must do in and out of clothes.

What have I to do with the busy movement
of limbs, the knit of patella, the sternum and always
the fragrant envelope of the body breathing,
O my love, lazily as afternoon over the eyelids
on rivers that tremulously empty south?

What is the dressing then but the long day's folding
up of the body into its shining length?
Yet I, O my love, who cannot go with you, but
endlessly vacillate, being ever running
to door, lift and car, thinking before and after

of the light which makes those webbing intrusions,
that deepening of fold into eyelid and jawbone,
as fields of armies dissolving, that, O my love,
you are moulting your body to shadow, for all
that I hold and entrance you till morning come.

Eight Small Notes

What if
in the miasmas of your going I said,
Let clouds
ruffle their silver, the seas pearl,
I have your soul?

Or if
luminaried in pity I said,
Be warned of my wrath?
However far off, this on your path
will flicker and simmer.

Or if I said,
As you will be with friends, later
eating or laughing,
it comes not from me, not in my name
this darkness of Cain?

And you, who come
after, inhabit my clothes: Remember
I am the weather,
the hurt of first sunlight, the sunset,
I said.

Mother to me
is the patience and dullness of seasons
I have seen
five times unflinching the forest leaves
thicken and sing.

Not proud
ever, I am attentive to things,
to their small-eared
unstinting ways. In this I feel
nearer to you.

And also,
to speak truly, I did not know
how endlessly heavy
I should carry within me this
column of grief.

Streams run,
the rivers cloud over: they never
relinquish their course.
I ask only that abstinence hold me
close to this source.

Manners

How long ago it seems, a doomed affair:
the summer sunlight on that rural France,
preserved in recollections everywhere
that time and differences did not advance.

Our loves are people only. No doubt are
imperfect, changeable, with troubled spells,
and what we make of them is one small star
that hangs there distantly, where nothing dwells

for all eternity. We fall in love,
associate, but still stay different:
there's precious little of the things above,
and blest companionship is briefly lent.

A country chateau in First Empire style
with lawns and library and assorted rooms:
but was I happy all that senseless while
with that identity a name assumes?

Time passes, passes, dearest, passes on,
and lost entitlements are neither here nor there,
and what is wholly ours is wholly gone
in wills and testaments and mouldering air.

And all we have and hold will come to harm,
and youth's fresh looks be gone as beauty will,
but not the breeding and patrician charm
when manners once will stay as manners still.

The house is now in others' caring hands,
the grounds remodelled, new beds laid out,
and what belongs to those now haunted lands
has still entitlements we cannot doubt.

In this we're not chameleons, cannot
it seems consent to play all roles: some part
eludes us always, and that round small dot,
which ends the sentence, yet can break the heart.

Afterwards

As I grow older must I cry the more
for the long days past and the lingering stains
that the hands leave of course, and the body
in surfeit of vigour impassions the faint stuff of air?
How the legs in decorum rise up and arch
downwards to dwindle in such pretty feet.
Splendour of shoulder and sinew, the dependence of breast:
all this to have known, and daily, and at night
in dewed and heavy gentleness sunk deep
wrapped in the hem of angels, to smile and sleep.

But waking solitary, as I seek blindly
for a fragrant breathing and small heart beating
I am confounded, for a moment shaken
by these plain walls and this rough bed. I stand
at the basin, reproachful, and feel the shadows
encroach and bunch up on this grizzled face.
Not ravaged, not handsome, but one with the weather
erratic, still changeable, with gloomy spells.
How far it all seems now, as the sunlight throws
unimaginable splendour on the high-stemmed rose.

And afterwards what is there but the chill
transgressions of the wind, high trees, the surge
of autumn languidly through streets, a sense
of melancholy, of lights on water, all
of this to be denied, laid aside
and with a smile, like an old suit, a song
we knew the words of once, and shall forget
completely, even that we knew them, you
and I in the long days following that pass
unmarked as footsteps through the summer grass.

And in the infinite small matter that is our lives,
sadnesses even in which our fates are written,
there is much ragged evanescence, blotched
mortgages of things so undertaken
late, half-heartedly or yet too soon
that all miscarries. Miseria. But
if I may once and only walk with you,
and take your hand and, smiling, speak to you,
you will come, won't you, and down those far-off streets
run again laughing in our childhood heats?

From Cossutia: Thoughts

To husband though you're not: thoughts and sad
greetings. The hours as we had
frugal of happiness hang in the air:
fugitive, they follow me everywhere.

It is over. But I know you, Caius — of
soft words, consoling, they are not of love,
but pipings far off, Theocritan sighs
to have me content you: delicate lies.

Do not mistake me. I'm smiling at
all those flummeries you have learnt off pat.
You wanted me yielding, as soft as sponge,
did you, compliant, above all young?

Well, as to that I am not offended. All
I do ask is you sometimes call.
I hope that you prosper, and even gone
will think of you further and travelling on.

Remember me, Caius. I shall count your stays
in our hearts here as fortunate, all the days.
Spurn me or keep me, the country you go
to is warmly occasioned by what I know.

Country Folk

In wine-pink they lapse, the summer days,
or fade into snapshot or revoked will,
and over dewed lawns the small feet pass
in a pattern unnoticed in the autumn's blaze.

You who sleep on, without vigils to keep,
no perils to fear from the statutory hours,
or watch half-extinguished, the last smoke spill
soft as the hair of the white head asleep,

have come, as I shall, to an abiding place
with grief disparaged and tired feet bleeding,
to bend yourself down with the very flowers
given so boldly in His springtime grace.

Those eyes shall look down that let daylight in
and Breath commingle with breath proceeding
from a mouth softly open it cannot be
the pride of the Magdalen was a mortal sin.

No, no, dear Lord, you were not looking
when the fervour for life set the small breasts free,
you did not notice how every slight creature
came to her sighing, from a little crooking,

no more than that, of her last finger.
you who denied that rosebud of feature
should bloom exuberant in sunlit youth
(no, no, you said that rapture would bring her

no fortune but only deep fear of the rain)
with a stone in her heart should this travelled Ruth
stand in the fields that pieties fill
with chaff from threshing of your golden grain,

had forgotten, dear Lord, that we country lovers,
are signatories of the unkempt grass,
with clocks that climb slowly up the hill
and lives both ours and one another's.

In a lifetime's torments I shall afford
to dream until death on that troubled face,
and after, with nothing on the silvered glass,
I shall make a pact with you, my Lord.

This Small Sketch of You

I could not go from you, nor could I stay
but drew my memories from lines of tights,
from crumpled bodices not put away
but, as the restless summer air assumes
in peeling paper, shapes and battered lights,
the smell of laughter out of inner rooms.

I searched continually the days that loomed
through trees to balconies, blank window's gaze
that spanned indifferently where you had roomed,
undressed behind the bric-a-brac, or sat
all day in bars and sported, made displays
as animals will mark the place they're at.

What apostasies there leered in plaster stains
or filled the cracked and mildewed, murky glass
with outlines shimmering with passing trains.
Whole days I watched the rain fall in the streets
where you were working, saw the long legs pass
or pause beside the tail-light's lifting heats.

I told myself each time that retching pain
would suffocate me less, that I could trace
out floridly with oil and brush that vein
of mockery in breast and pelvic floss
if not that battered oriental face
the hang of eyelids and the fringe across.

And more so, in the dazzling choreography
of water I would see to rinse my teeth
there arched a pink and wet-slimed cavity
like yours so impudently hawked about,
that I would hear the small bones hiss beneath
the earth's small mandibles as breath went out.

You twist the ring and smile and half refuse
the club's expensive drink before you go,
but stub the smoke out, then you ease on shoes:
just one more customer for one more night.
You turn the private striptease down to slow
and, with the breasts held out, expunge the light.

And then there are again the rain-smeared lights,
the stoplights phosphorescing, that assist
me not at all but melt into the nights
of windscreens black beneath a proscenium
of leaves that thicken as the windows mist
and blur as clasping bodies lunge and come.

Like flagella turning inside out,
and flailing urgently across the tiles
in public lavatories, that stare about,
acid and imperial, to put a face
on natural functioning, the which defiles
the body's questioning and childhood grace.

I see your eyelids blink their mordant brown
astonished and turning their thin lashes in
and folding as the hair when the head goes down
to immense distances in water deeps
and coming up again to half begin
a tarantella in their heady sweeps.

Afterwards an incandescence on the streets,
torment of diesel smoke, of black-ribbed wheels
spinning you back and clothed on well-sprung seats
and voices pouring out, as though to lend
a reek of female sex to rubber seals
but also voices scarlet, somehow tender.

I'd set out screens and trolley, place
things in order, wash the plates up, clean
the windows that the afternoon would grace

with candid quietness a body red
from glowing heater bars as you would lean
in patterns also of that sofa bed.

With you entangled in such legs, the spurt
of hair from armpit and the stench of sex
withheld and purposely as though the hurt
would drain through windows into age-old grime
of rows of terraces that blaze or vex:
you never came at night or sat on time.

You took the housecoat off or left untied
to sprawl and flaunt yourself as nesting birds
must meet their offspring's hunger thrust out wide
in beaks and gullets that would threaten me
with tears and tantrums and the squalid words
with which you gave yourself, and endlessly.

The darkness comes, disrobes itself. The room
is hot with tears and wretchedness. I rest
the brush a moment, let the colours bloom
then turn the light on, work the wet in wet
for towering impudence in each small breast
and a fragrance somewhere that I cannot get.

Across the moody Thames come half-lit views
of offices and gantries, pleasure craft,
of all-night buses and of thinning queues
that we have built our lives on, or would do,
I said to you the once, but how you laughed
at me completing this small sketch of you.

Deptford

Particularly in autumn with estates massed as smoke,
and buses running past with bright-lit destinations
a litany of something defenceless in the lines of posts
and the concrete that runs on implacably into cul-de-sacs
or the memory we have forgotten of childhood names.

So come the occasions with their unbearable thoughts,
in crucibles of streetlamps, of neon lights winking
above the trucker's pull-up places at Christmas, packed
with girls pretty as ever, legs dangling from love nests
over the streets below that are awash with evening.

Later the hopelessness of breasts loosed at mirrors,
and love portentously weeping in showerheads,
as though they lasted forever, the days, and every joy
were entangled in the lettering on their pillowslip.

Kennet

With that I'll leave her where the sunlight seems
a dark reflection in the clear Chalk streams,
where pungent yarrow and the water-weeds
return the heady scent that was her hair;
where sorrel darkening drops its copper seeds
and cuckoos call on absences, on nothing there.
The years that passed brought nothing good. Abroad
I worked a time, came home and bought a place.
I married in the end, of course, had kids
whose likenesses and prospects others trace.
The memory perhaps it is forbids
me think more seriously on what was bidden:
a countryside more saddled up than ridden.

Its hills were holy ground. I moved away
so not to think of them from day to day.
I have a happy marriage, caring wife,
three kids to manage for: I run my farms
with such efficiency a whetted knife
could not be sharper than my foreman charms.
I have few friends, perhaps, but earn respect:
a man to tussle with but not outsmart.
The rest is otherwise. I tell myself
to meet the day's requirements, do my part
in what is different, with a different wealth.
I am a man accustomed to the gritstone Dales
far more than mooning after cuckoo tales.

Indeed some flintiness of Davenport
has built its walls in me, as well it ought.
I grow more sober-sided: work or play,
I do the necessary, sometimes think
of what has passed: an interval I say
of no importance, just an eyelid's blink
at something possible, now locked away.
Perhaps, with summers past still in the air,
in pulling boots on, feeling body leap
towards companionship with someone there,
I could outwit my customary sleep,
and reach behind it to a larger day,
if filled with just supposes children say.

Each life has many entrances. I think
a man in daily purposes will link
to what he would be in some other dress
of handsomeness or money, finer birth,
the which he'll never understand unless
he try them honestly, with all he's worth.
I did, I tried with Emily, and did not lose.
That opening episode is with me still
in how I move, my joins, my sturdy bones,
more deep than consciousness, and will
perhaps outlast this Daleside grit and stone.
For life is what we hope of it and trust
to write our troubles on until we're dust.

I Do Not Know

*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, cobbles, 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 are standing, 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.

Walking Out

Today I'm walking out in pleasure as
my limbs, my body and my high-heeled shoes,
withdrawn from winter, have the spirit rise
to graciousness that every woman knows.

Between the homage of approving eyes,
and Red Sea passages to pick and choose,
I feel the clasp and lift of plumage as
in pageantry this breathing body goes.

Whole lives are mine and in their voyage go
as did the mariners on troubled seas,
exposed to dangers till the spice isles lay
about in blue and misted opulence.

When, after storms, the lengthening evening calms
to crinolines of feckless, surf-edged waves,
I shall let my cargo down of dreams
and incantations as occasion weaves

into the troubled hearts of men's desires,
those hopes' dominions that they see in us —
who are immutable, as are their tears
at being faced by what true beauty is.

One Earring Lost

One earring lost within her tangled hair
and I would love all women searching there,
and in her slow unclothing I would trace
the soft embodiment of what they said,
those Tamil poets with their labial grace,
whose little ears held trumpets round her head.
I knew her urgency and how she sat
when sad or satisfied, the hang of limbs
when laid beseechingly as hands in lap.
The swelling potency, the passing whims
as seen in cigarettes when fingers tap
their lovers messages as native drums
announce, if distantly, that evening comes.

Fabulous Night

Something of the fabulous dampness of the night
is phosphorescent in this small-roomed place.
You shiver, draw up bedspread, have the light
fall on the page and my unwritten face.

But still there is presence: mild, not threatening,
but meaning the same to have this whole night through
companied with us, close-lying, listening
to the breath's soft intake it is patient to.

The moon at length tops the far hill and heath,
ripples its silver onto the roofs round.
Myriads of them are in the woods beneath,
turning their horns though they make no sound.

And you in the morning, who hold me, have been
as far away tender as their one-time queen.

Native Powers

There must be somewhere that our small hopes save
from endless turmoil of the years,
with soft sweet rain that falls as tears
as we go quietly dreaming to our grave.

Some plot of land that always stood as ours,
through which our names in footnotes run,
where spring's rejuvenation had begun
to make perennial our native powers.

Playmates, high-school sweethearts, co-eds wed
when springtime fills the air with vernal scent,
and all the loves about when day has lent
ephemeral glory to that onetime head.

And you are walking in that springtime air,
and will remember, surely, how we went
by church and parish record sent
where all the country signposts said beware!

How breathlessly you showed that cottage lair,
four-posted pinewood and conjugal bed,
the soft entreaties that were left unsaid
of two short lives that should be kindled there.

Now you are elsewhere, having married well
again the gossips tell me: I
do not doubt it, no, nor would deny
that you could make the very treetops sigh,

a crowded room fall quiet, and white-haired men
in restaurants dribble soup on tie,
where even their stout spouses turned their eye
and, not religious, said 'amen'.

'Write no words for me when I am gone,
but conjure me as once I was,
in all the heartache of the once because
of splendour when that spring-time shone.'

You're Matted In My Eyelids

You're matted in my eyelids, are not kind
to that maternal thing I'd be.

In stout and unclothed probity they stand,
my breasts of many-hued but human clay.

In me there is no sauntering summer breeze
but more the spurt and drench of hair.
Like the limpet, hard and clenched, my gaze,
and un beholden to you what I hear.

As though of warmest amber were my skin
and ambergris had filled my pores,
hold me, weigh me, have me flaunting on
in rich proposals that each prospect wears.

I am my office and my future hope,
am larger always than my sins. I wait
as some astonished consciousness of shape
will in the morning clothe itself with light.

I am the blessedness that body wins
to be its own intent, and bear again
in rugged fortitude those burly runs
that must at length collect quiescent man.

A Toast

The sunny air and long facades
of stone and marble promenades
between the lake and junipers
were memorably and wholly hers.

The carved, once ducal coat of arms,
the tenancies and scattered farms,
the all-but-sacred mystery
of precedent and family,

the very things that we must think
as illegitimate, and link
with all that should be put aside,
assembled in their feudal pride

make beings who were born to rule,
however the beribboned fool
she'd danced before, bewitched and wed,
incline or not that addled head.

Which spread to everyone: the maids,
the cook, the butler, umpteen trades
in truth subsisting on the place
and not-too smiling madam's grace.

Their future prospects took the form
of how that woman was: the storm
or pleasantries or sour disgrace
all written on that morning face.

And how they walked! Such airs they had
that Sheba's queen was not so clad:
that imperturbability
in body's right to wholly be.

But always bound by how it's done,
the sumptuousness not overrun
by modish fashion or by thought,
but long-remembered years at court.

Indescribably they knew
themselves in person, shape and hue:
their body was as body wore,
with always licence to explore

all manner of their inward self
befitting one of rank and wealth.
Mere gelt was much beneath them, got
illegally, as like as not,

from trade, or factories, linen mills,
those harbingers of coming ills
in agitation, votes for men,
the fault ignored that let in ten.

And so we think of them towards
the end as much the age records:
forever descending marble stairs,
erect, imperial, with distant airs

that like the odour of a fine champagne
retain the splendour of a reign
that's past and done with, yet can stay
the toast of one full, happy day.

Mercia

Beyond the leaning gate, the ever-ripening August
fields lie thick with corn and yellowed Cotswold lime.

Rough, honey-coloured stonework in a corbelled tower,
the melancholy echo of the bells that call
up promises we nurtured in the sun-pressed grass
when youth was all-imagining and still to be.

Then falls the stealth of evening coming on in barn
and house, some bird that pipes occasionally and waits
breath-held, to listen to itself and be content
to mark this middle England of the Mercian kings
as rich and indolent with husbandries that lie
broad-bathed and welcoming beneath the open sky —
where billowing cumulus like chorus girls can pause
and laugh in sun-rimmed petticoats of sumptuous white.

Summer Nights

The strange possessiveness of summer haze,
the stench of paint, of tar and brimming diesel fumes,
the fierce and hot bewilderment of days
that grow oppressive in the upstairs rooms.

Beneath there simmers a breathy gentleness,
the heavy body one with its confining scents,
though frank licentiousness is still the dress
that folds to courtesy and common sense.

Bewildering avenues where canopies
of glad green leaves forever given to sauntering:
all things complicit with the lifting breeze,
tousled and abundant in everything.

A richness in the bodies through moist nights
and opened in their ripening to a restlessness
that agitates our person, and invites
such hopes of overwhelming happiness.

Cookham

As for the unfathomable, there are the clouds only
that on some days hang in indolent splendour, scattering
refulgence and sadness on the hills beneath.

Yet here and everywhere was England: ordered, rollered
into farms and parklands, shelving to the Thames
which, upstream silver dimpling into water-meadows
or threading into inlets, here on the village settled
an air of foreign occupation. It lined up boatyards
and small bridges, reflected riverside hotels;
for visitors it shimmered, backdropped picnic lawns,
jostled the odd pleasure craft, plunged, legend-pooled,
to runs of tench and perch.

All this is thematic,
and was. Stanley Spencer, painter and iconoclast,
traced each day with eye and brush the solemn glory
of his God. He painted in vast canvases
the Thames rolled back, from its cramping gravels the dead
awakened, tumbled out in dawn-pale multitudes
of children, postmen, vicar, schoolmistresses, the baker. . .
The vision, roundly drawn, composed as of the weather
with its mildness and forgetfulness, the public
accepted with large commissions. More followed. He married,
was successful. Working on altarpieces, however,
he pierced the body to its ribald cloak of flesh,
painted his own in every jubilant particular,
then a friend's. All still, he saw, the progeny
of God.

The public disagreed, bought nothing. By turns
he lost his wife, his friend, the cottage and commissions.
He painted on. Became obsessive: abroad a celebrity,
at home a bespectacled recluse. Eventually God left him.

In the iron-stained gravels one stripped December day
they buried him, a pauper with a civic pension.
Years pass. At the request of visitors the council
open a museum, which vies now with the Sunday funfair.
And distant from the village, far from his demise,
unruffled and unconcerned by it, the huge clouds rise.

Going West

One has had enough in the end of the grand
addresses, of Pont Street Dutch and the high rents,
the flaunting oneself before the stretched-out limos,
and marquees shimmering behind the week's events.

Enough of Greenwich, or of Hampstead even, where
the erudition is bred of a foreign earth
and the air is unhealthy with such fumigation,
though rain runs briskly through the rolled turf.

Hounslow I came to, where the twinkling gravels
of the Thames and its poplars and the light blue sky
were rinsed for the first time, where yeoman farmers
brought in their produce to suburbs that lie

Now gardened and contented in priveted
decency, each with a garage and buttressed wall,
where the small man held castle, and the living
could turn to stone slowly at the twilight's fall.

Norfolk

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.

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.

The West Riding Towns

So when they spawned their ungodly children that ran
up, down the rough grey tumble of streets, did
they think that their Albert, theirs, past the skid-
marks to marriage, might just make it and get on?

And not have their own fussed-over lives — such
as flickered twice weekly at the Odeon;
but plain words in parlours at Council, not hangers-on
glimpsed lewd, glass in hand, at Christmas time?

Aye: something right topping, like cherry on cake
rotated to preacher or aunt, and not that much
after to be divided, not the soft touch
of the lassies laughing at their mill town fete,

but artists, musicians, writers — local men
with clink of good millstone in their gait,
who buffed up their vowels, made them tough and straight
not vague-capped like clouds on the roads ahead

that went over the moorlands, where if broom or ling
flamed in season, they were dull again
all very shortly: each in his common pen
to have whippets and fantails to lead him on.

So there's really no answer, and if any man
wanted an out it was his. But not their thing
ever when, grand like at Blackpool, each year would bring
their Gracie to sing with their own brass band.

Far Out

Far out on branch-lines, past the usual termini
of London's ever restless, packed commuter trains
there may be occupations built quite differently
with prospects open like the morning paper, ads
that float unthreatened by the slowly lifting clouds.

Indeed the out-of-season coastal towns like Tenby,
Rhyl or Bridlington may just be that, produced
by conversations with a total stranger, stop
we suddenly alighted at for no good cause
which, like our memories of childhood books became
a part of Superman or Dare or Famous Five.

Careers would then have been quite otherwise but still
presenting us with purpose, cash or clout in lives
complete, but in some other person, year or street.

Careers

A smart address, and concierge rings through
before we take the lift up, find the door.
A large room opens to a stunning view.
My wife's old boss: *You haven't been before?*
he asks, half smiling, and we take our place
among the other guests: none navy men
it seems from each complacent, settled face
that likes long lunches and will start at ten.

Later, when we talk and I've begun
to grasp he doesn't like his guests, I ask:
But, admiral, if you don't make number one?
but find he stops me, face a subtle mask
of mischievous good humour. *Hope I don't.*
I'm being frank with you. As does my wife.
I'd be much happier with some job afloat.
A river pilot maybe: carefree life.

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

Visiting

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

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

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

A Tale of the Islands

You can imagine how it was when Hegwa, near
uncle on my mother's side, last of the direct kings,
ruled the fourteen islands. Unmitigated mayhem,
frankly: drums, feasts and flotillas all day long.
The bashed-in skulls in hundreds wash up on the beaches.

Things had to change. Our smiling chum was booted out,
and carrying the spark of decency to a dark world came
the white-suited ubiquitous administrator — Nevison
by name. Not a bad man. Inoculations and what not
drove out smallpox, brigandage and incest. Good.

Except on this small atoll. Here apparently
the ancient rites went on. Which is where yours truly,
the kingdom's heir apparent, summa cum laude
of Edinburgh and Yale, after a good deal of nonsense
and got up in outlandish costume, received initiation.

Not to be barbaric — words His Britannic
Majesty (i.e. the Commonwealth Division,
all bolshies then) was kind enough to pen. Even
Nevison, then retired, I spoke to back in England, said
'I think you'd better go, old boy, you can't dodge London.'

And also there was M'tupawalma, my queen to be.
The first encounter fairly did me in. Huge topaz
eyes, a glitzy laugh, a delicate and I
should think unfingered body. Know , O king, the gods
have given generously. They had. Oh boy they had!

So here we were. Or rather I was. My entourage
had beetled off, leaving me to contemplate
the sea, the island, clouds, anything they said
that would announce to me my reign as king. I see,
I said. My dress was fiendishly uncomfortable,

not so say absurd. I felt immediately ridiculous,
sat on the beach, watching what of course was beautiful.
The sea in picture postcard colours crumpled into surf;
the lines of kelp splayed out and back; leathery,
the palms waved stiffly in their canopied hosannas.

The sand I found most comfortable to camp on, warm and dry,
and there I stretched out, thinking. Dawn lightened into morning.
over the silver-crinkled bay the clouds in small
flotillas began their muscular contortions. I watched
these portents out of nothing distend themselves to nothing.

All day long. No doubt I wasn't in my proper mind
exactly — hunger, or the water drunk — for what
I did was odd for me, so level-headed,
calculating even, odd indeed. A storm
blew up and in the rain I danced, naked and exulting.

Yes, I was unhinged. The rain was hissing on the water,
the palm trees flapping round me. Still, I knew
a strange exhilaration, that in me flowed the sap
of godhead: I felt the surge of sea, the islands rocking
on long pedestals, the echo of my name.

The rain stopped. A speck upon the sea, now brindled grey
and green, became a small canoe. I met the warriors
and took from them the royal mantle. Then embarked.
At my capital, M'tupawalma. *Welcome, King,*
she said. *Rule with me my islands, Queen,* I said.

There the cameras stopped. *OK, that's thank you everybody.*
And, Highness, you were great. Sure was, said M'tupawalma,
giving me an open kiss smack on the mouth
which I could feel for months. *You mean,* I said. *Promotion,*
honey. You ain't no actor. We had to go for real.

Ours is a model family. Prince Tswin now sits for Oxford.
I write a little, play some golf. Walma's into cooking,

culled from Hola, in which from time to time we feature.
And yet I could have sworn the islands spoke, to me
at least, if never Tswin: we have new hopes for him.

A Well-Made Man

I saw a well-made man, suntanned and tall,
of forty odd, but with a youthful air.
Some pleasantries were said, and I recall
my thinking something in the manners there
did not accord with rustic, southern earth
of vineyards, farms and sun-warmed heath,
for all that gun-crest spoke of local birth.
For like our consciousness they stayed beneath
the hurtful memories that shade the past.
*He's not the simple countryman he poses
as, the doctor offered me at last,
and that the least enquiry soon discloses.
But what he sometime was I doubt he'll say,
and more prefers it being kept that way.*

I paid my duty call that self-same night,
and found him much at home, by happy chance
beneath the splendour of the moon's full light
that blessed his vineyard's end-of-harvest dance.
We spoke of shooting, vintage, crops. The biniou wailed
and interrupted much the words except
that Paris with a wistful note prevailed
like childhood promises we haven't kept.
Later came an invitation, where I met
the happy household of 'Les Trembles'. She,
Madame de Bray, was charming, would have let
the conversation amble naturally
but Dominique, while still our well-bred host,
remained apart from us, a smiling ghost.

The shooting season ended. Back I went
to Paris with our friendship not advanced
by one iota. Yet the distance lent
an air of mystery that the months enhanced.
A whole year passed. *You're missed*, the doctor wrote,
so please do come. My neighbour adds his name.
I started out at once, and as by rote
was rambling over, finding just the same
the house and occupants, as in
I walked as one who'd hardly been away.
Perhaps I hadn't: seeming still within
us both the interest resumed its sway,
or something like that, and the trusting air,
which children have, again was kindled there.

To them I was their father's silent friend
who came continually as weather will —
unasked, a backdrop that our thoughts attend
to rarely, though it colours all. But still,
as I have said, a happy house, and one well run
with gardens from the seashore winds withdrawn,
stone terraces that faced towards the sun,
tall pines and ornamental lake and lawn.
A fine and ancient property, where one André,
of sorts the bailiff there, and I suspect
a scion of an earlier de Bray,
was guardian recognized or in effect:
a throwback to the old regime, a place
of strong traditions with a honest face.

I Was Older

Remember I was older. If I fed
her some advice or praise it never led
to more than what an acolyte should know
who sees, and far above her, some pure light
transcending everything, whose shadows grow
the more encompassing because of height.
I cannot say quite what I mean, but all
who heard her happiness were from that time
entrapped in it, lost and had the sound
of their own pieces muted into mime
beside what pulled the roots up from the ground.
If there is magic in the world, that world awoke
to storms that wept with her, and rocks that broke.

All heard, within themselves and not by choice,
a woman's urgent, soft and swelling voice
express with tenderness a life betrayed
in scorching arias and then that long
diminishment with which our griefs are stayed
into an ever-sad but stabbing after-song
that shapes the contours of this world we know.
And this is what I looked for, why I sung
in choirs and amateur recording groups,
and was quite popular and joined, or hung
about, in various well-known acting troupes.
Not full professional, that I couldn't claim,
but of a decent standard all the same.

How I earned by living, my daytime life,
of course was different. I had a wife
and two adoring children, with a house
down Bromley way, suburban but detached
with apple trees and garden that my spouse
gave endless hours to, and indeed had hatched
as part of our extended lifetime plan. If all
else fail we should be independent, self-
supporting, knowing happiness we had
was wholly owing to that commonwealth
of skills about the well-intentioned dad.
All families are happy in their several ways
as I was, certainly, in those first days.

I need to stress how settled, dull and plain
my circumstances were, and would remain
so, ever, if I'd had my way. I'm not
some master of the universe, no high-
placed roller piling up the chips he'd got
to cloud-topped altitudes nor seen before,
but slight, convivial, with a happy grin
most times: a small boy's freckled face with hair
that flops about, who wears a cardigan,
slack-sleeved in pubs, indeed most anywhere
with green-check shirt and tie-less if he can.
You've seen my type a thousand times in scenes
from Country Life or motoring magazines.

Local Histories

The last of this innings — who met to play
with family at funerals or in registries,
but also at cricket when, on Sundays from May,
they would field and feud down the summer leas —

the cousins Tennysonian under the trees
that were sunlit and warm, where the scenery cloud
bowled white bumpers that the umpire allowed
along with the catcalls, the ladies and cream-rimmed teas.

Grandfather, however, of a different
sort, dressed himself smartly and so went to town
in a big way with women, and had to rent
something in London, where the soot came down

on the grimmest of tenements. But it was different then,
when heirlooms were purchased and things had pride
attached like a label, and at Whitsuntide,
doffing his overalls, he would take his pen

and write to the family (as he could, you see —
a skill self-taught as how to speak
appropriate to occasion) in a world to be
kinder to father and uncle — who should have their week

back with the old folk. And did. But when he died
one Easter from cancer, the bright blood went chill
all very quickly with three mouths to fill.
and the scorecards of course were then put aside

for good, most likely. But it was not a story
I think unusual as the car-borne hearse
arrives here and stops. Memento mori
for my artisan cousin? Well, perhaps it was worse

for those who went on, for my father came
compendiously to make amends.

Only half-humorously he would name
lord mayors and bankers he had as friends.

But none of them cricketers, still less his son —
who was bookish, travelled, and avoided sport —
so that, weighing it up, he'd have no doubt thought:
amongst the lot of us no side had won.

Voices

To the rough-built tumulus I came,
to the house stooped on the hill;
Yet the town inhabiting my name,
simply listened to grow still.

*John comes home this week. He will not stay.
Like enough it will be cold today.*

As evening clothes itself I draw down shutters,
put the cat out, douse the lights.
Floorboard with floorboard communes, mutters,
breathlessly the whole house sleeps.
Moonlight and starlight dazzle, in the well
of midnight gossamers the subtle spell.

Lucid and most secret are the generations
shining in their small gilt frames.
To each of them I make my stations,
reproving bitterness, the blame.
Rant of passion, lamp-lit rage
of tallow on the soot-soft page.

Am I the last? I am, the very last.
Kith extended are not the same.
The days pass over to overcast,
The snarling bear at length grows tame.
Families reach solstice; these remain —
the voices, the solitude, the rain.

Baraka Café

Caught at Rabat, the Baraka café, with
the vibrant clangour of a five-piece band
clashing about me — crescendo and
the rain of drumming from our coppersmith —
I light up, wait. Spot-lit, appears
the sweep of jawbone, the high-lift eyes,
of a dancer, another, long step and thighs:
and a shutter comes down of about five years

that is built on and settled. Doorman again:
You see? That is Sasha. She whisky go-go.
That one, she like you. You remember? No?
I do not, I say. It was different then.
However, excited, Fateeha sits down,
I think it's Fateeha. Yes. My Arab host
fluffs introductions. Laughs. Says, *ghost*
of a chance I've got if I don't quit town.

They're never that mercenary, or so I thought
till sat with Fateeha — diminutive, moth-
like and practised, half-meter of cloth
and smouldering allurements for life-support —
when I'm struck for the first time how much is brought
of my own to this séance, to lives that call
for family, place and affection — indeed for all
that tonight seems so suddenly out of court.

Still Life with María Jesús

Outside it is raining and I am writing.
Distant from the table but waiting on
is the unaccountable María Jesús —
she whom the menu cards eye warily,
alert and condescending as they are.

The aloof, full beauty with the tossed-back looks
has stopped her prowling and with hand
folded into hip supports like a caryatid
the washed-clean counter where two coffee cups
froth with excitement at what I'm writing.

For the few customers today the chairs
have agreed not to look so rent-a-crowd.
Each back bends smoothly to a wide seat
and goes on to extend a half-curved lip
above the steel-chrome splendid legs.

Outside a cavalcade of bodhisattvas
with bright umbrellas is in progress. Each
is tented and maternal, as though filled
with the divine radiance of a thousand
companionable María Jesúsés.

Like the days themselves, the cars press
nose to tail, and sometimes bark at
traffic lights or rain-drenched trees. María
Jesús pockets the tip, and with one clean
swipe returns the place to what it was.

But in another far-off but forever
world they'll all arrive at happiness —
table, chairs, rain, me writing — as
the beautiful María Jesús floats
down in full-enabled, bodied mode.

The New World

I think of that far voyager, that faint
recalcitrant and no doubt feckless man,
impelled by Calvinism, where no saint
need come between him, nor the artisan
and priest depict for him the face of God.
He was his own-built self, and all the ways
he took to were by heartfelt conscience shod,
where king and commoner to his keen gaze
were not so equal as constrained by laws
which man had made although referred above
to things eternal, when, from new world shores,
that far Elysium, and not with love,
his eyes looked backward to the Europe left
where justice withered and all pity slept.

Where Catholics murdered Protestants with such
solemnities of torch-lit savagery
that Hell's own fearful torments couldn't touch
the roistering throughout the Holy See.
The Protestants outdid them even: ripped,
flayed, raped, and stretched them out in pain,
for hell's own devilry was so outstripped
that Lucifer himself could not complain.
As for hags of witches, they were burnt in tens
of thousands, as were Muslims, Jews and Moors.
For so was Christendom that sought to cleanse
itself of foreignness or tainting cause.
The millions more that faiths could not affect
were left to wholesale hunger and neglect.

Yet from that effervescent cauldron's rim
escaped the brutalized and rabid scum —
deported, emigrated, sent on whim
to penal settlements or kingdom come,
where deep resentment and ingested rage
at courts and institutions only brewed
a dangerous fervour to fulfil the age
of brutal chivalry their leaders viewed
as plainly given them. So was the hill
that rose before them in the setting sun,
ablaze with challenges they must fulfil
as patiently as saints who also won
a citadel that under God's good grace
could be a born-again, forgiving place.

A world where tired humanity could start again
and live in simple plots where grape and yam
were given on asking, and where honest men
could say: I came, I worked and so I am.
Rich acres beckoned them, moreover, gave
good profits from the meanest strip of land.
a buoyant livelihood where men could save
what they had gathered with their own hand.
Sometimes the Indians helped them, sometimes not,
or sparkling frosts came early in the fall
or blizzards blanketed what springs begot:
a hard land always, but beautiful, and all
was promising, a new deliverance come
with evenings deepening into maize and plum.

And what a grace that was: the rivers poured
out trout and sturgeon in their three foot girth.
All manner of rich eating flew abroad,
and surely Providence had marked this earth?
It was a blessing from the Lord's own hand
whose own continuing was guarantee,
and when the sun went down a fiery brand
of angel rose from furrowed corn and tree.
A wealth of miracles extended on
to where His benefice securely blessed,
and that great light of heaven blazed and shone
far over an illuminated, golden west.
Despite the Indians and tribe of Ham
so was God's promise made to Abraham.

Theirs was no scholarship in musty books
or tongue's felicities to get them through.
The wind's complaint, they heard, the croak of rooks,
and creaking harnesses they woke up to.
No more was needed and each vain excess
of sensibility could come at cost.
The old world castes they spurned, and saw noblesse
oblige could ruin men, real men, who lost
the day's entitlement when thinking strayed
beyond the needful. In that book of life
they set down blessings as they would a trade:
their land, their health and children, house and wife.
For earth is hardship and the vale of sin
a place that we poor men must wander in.

A Lunch Party at Villeneuve sur Yonne

(On a painting by Eduard Vuillard)

For one whole day — what glory in it — happiness!
Those his friends who walked there, in the noontide coolness
of the garden, where talk was gathered and the cloth spread,
what had they come to? Conversation as the wind,
infectious, filling out the trees, and of a sudden
stilled. He saw what he had painted. That each in talking
to his neighbours turned as though upon a inner
spindle, knit in sympathy with other things.

High summer then in northern France, so rich, so fresh.
Leaf-tips sparkled in the bushes; the path was dry.
What had he done? The Seine, left-centre, sloughed
a skin of pale viridian. The sun was swallowed
up in oyster-shells of grey. Strange, nocturnal,
in the undergrowth, the afternoon was waiting,
not like an animal, but pungent, bruising . . .
The irises, far left, bared fangs of purple bloom . . .

So much had happened, muddled in the twenty years
between the picking up and laying down of brushes.
So much was changed. Particularly for Misia.
Dear darling Misia: how dumpy she had grown. Didn't play,
she said, not now. But Pierre was in the south somewhere,
still painting. If recollections are what we hollow out
and crown with our accomplishments, what then were his?
Nothing he could think of, except some canvases.

*If you were famous, what would you do? Why — go on
of course, what else? And if that meant you journeyed
the further from what your object was in art — still then?
Oh, I don't know, yes . . . perhaps. What should he say?*

That skill was wasted in the hands which never held
the least of what he'd wanted? That painting was
his proxy in an adoration which shouldn't now
be his? No, he was not sorry really, as things fell out.

There are no happy lives, not overall, and gains
are as the trees — arrayed in gladness, triple-crowned
in green, but at their centre dusted, taking on
the dark. What the canvasses now showed, as he could see,
was not Gethsemane, not fame, not valediction,
but how the hours put out their innocent, shy hands,
that, hungry for them, we too reach out, as days
upon days flash out and fold into each small event.

It's Time

It's time we put the properties away
and went home for the night. An hour to dawn,
that's all that's left our characters and they
in twos or otherwise have now withdrawn.
What bliss when dying inwardly one meets
the quiet welcome of an ordered room,
undressed, to slip between the crisp white sheets:
who cares at this point who is what with whom?
Therefore, to tell much more is not my purpose:
life's lamentable but not a circus.

I say this most advisedly because
you'll want to know, I hope, what happened. Well,
actually not much. All's as it was,
it seems, as far, indeed, as I can tell.
The characters kept active and July
rose glorious but then that sunburned month
ended muggy, overcast, the sky
a grey and superannuated sponge.
One week was promising, until, again,
our friend the herring-pond breezed in with rain.

Nicholas, the idle waster that he was,
got down at length to his last chapter.
The weather worried him the least because
he felt it rather circumscribed his captor.
He met her, once a week odd, otherwise
the girl was pretty damn mysterious —
not that he wanted to monopolize
her, naturally, and that was fatuous
or worse, but still the weekly dose of laughter
left him doubly importunate the day after.

Thank God the season now was hotting up.
From home or hols last travellers are back,
a touch reproachful and in truth hard up.
The nights were drawing in: in silvered black
was most of Kensington from six to seven,
when girls push bicycles, and smiles are met
by old companions with another leaven
of men, entanglements and change of set.
In this as constant as the moon is fickle,
which leaves us, often, in a pretty pickle.

August had gone, incendiary. September's out.
The rain-dressed mornings have a sharper bite.
The season of mists, misgivings and of doubt
has cleared for Nicholas wide miles to write.
For which he's none too grateful, though the studies
resound with fullness that his heart once had,
but now more quietly. Yes, no passion muddies:
against all sentiment he's iron-clad,
intending, rightfully, to disappoint
the damn-fool notions art may reappoint.

Most Marvellous

Many and most marvellous
the orchestras and sumptuous courts.
The world is empty and a thing of glass,
but still it colours with these thoughts.

Substance passes; it will seem
a shaft of sunlight what has been:
But if old men nod and old men dream
I shall tell what I have seen.

Would you believe the khan's ten queens,
alike imperious and beautiful,
with all their courtiers and their go-betweens,
drifted as a miracle

of perfumes in embroidery —
as though within their fifteen layers
of silks the body's brilliancy
glimmered through their withdrawn airs?

High walls there were, and lakes around.
Vast hills were built and highlands razed;
great parks in flower; in shaded ground
the tiger slept and chambok grazed.

Sometimes drifting days along
the water city of Hangchow,
we were silent in the song
that inward haunts me even now.

Scandalous it was to me at first,
such wayward luxury, such unwon praise,

but in this dusty world I thirst
for long-gone, full and happy days.

Transters

All their famed lives they were drifters,
feckless from the start.
No rich man in the cherry stones, but choosing
the rough trades and the mart.

All was their brimming oyster which
they left in dawn-white heaps,
and women trashed in their bridal sheets
others had for keeps.

Poised to be irregulars,
pressed and abruptly gone:
down highways where always were soft voices falling
convivially and on.

The dark trees spread in their eyelids,
evening wraps the skin.
Lit windows to guide them from highways and byways,
and warm smiles let them in

This little Tranter went to Haymarket,
this one to the Scrubs,
and this one in laughter ran all the way home with his
takings from the pubs.

Now don't you ever be like them said
my strait-laced Auntie Jane.
You can make yourself a real life and a half
with brawn and tad of brain.

And so I did: no dunce in class
I went to the local tech,
and for every success at board and bed
the Council sent its cheque.

But who will find me a good goer,
and who a young bride?
Who will take me beyond the natter and tether,
the dreaming world aside?

The high-steppers dangled such darkness
of hair and glittering breasts:
and always such tempests and spangled tears as I
plumbed their treasure chests.

Peerless of Peckham, despair of Ruislip,
the pride of Kensal Rise,
and many and many a time the whole night long
I shut their fluttering eyes.

Abroad and home, five years and taken
finally alive
by Babs' bright look, her welcoming mouth and jack-
hammering new jive.

You can get to me on a Tuesday, or
any day you please:
we were married in June when even birds
fell out of the sad trees.

The Tranter family all turned up,
the whole south London crowd,
and large as life on the spot-lit turf they said,
Charlie's done us proud.

And so I had, a modern house,
a warm and caring wife,
and Tom said: even I might settle down,
son, for this sort of life.

But even then an undertow
of thoughts, I don't know why.
And sometimes I would talk to Babs under
the vague and drifting sky.

I asked where do the clouds go,
how do our wanderings start?
How sad the summer rain is when we hear
it falling through the heart.

I asked what is belonging, and why,
out of the Ark in pairs,
the Tranters came as much with others' claims
so muddled up with theirs?

* * *

Who am I? You have heard me, calling
a thousand times your name.
And soft in falling as the summer rain
is first love, last, the same.

Tears, you know not how the tears come,
as sudden as the dew,
nor long through congress and contentment
arms have passed me through.

In fey lands and fell lands, whenever
the winds abuse my name,
as constant as the scudding clouds, my days
have purposes the same.

Abroad in heart and body, but
the bright hair blowing free:
always there were strong legs walking as
the long day walked with me.

The Stage Is Set

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.

Chilean Politics

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

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

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

La Traviata

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

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

Leaders

Let clothes assume whatever shape
will give immediacy its outward grace,
so are our lives attired, where none escape
where skin and clothing interface.

Who wants a world of as we are,
of foul anatomy that doctors see,
those worlds in passing that are never far
from stale and sad sufficiency?

Yet the beautiful are not dismayed,
appropriating in their ways
the different hairstyle, or the different shade
of lipstick that their choice repays.

Nor are they purposeless automatons,
or witless props or manikins,
nor is their calculated gold and bronze
a product of their perfect skins,

but are their leaders: what they wear today
the rich and fashionable declare
the orders, darling, none will disobey,
retune their sports car, do their hair.

Nor should they when such effort goes
in just that jacket or the choice of shoes:
whole months of window-shopping: no one knows
how hard it is to pick and choose.

Irrepressible, insufferable, hated most
by dearest childhood friends, they party on,
all too conscious that the smartest host
will miss the flashlights when they're gone.

La Carrousel

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

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

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

The World is Various

The world is various, and only God
the Merciful, from whom all blessings flow,
has ranged on further than these feet have trod.

What sent me journeying I do not know
except to witness for myself the great
and forward spectacles our faith can show.

I've sat with beggars in their outcast state,
been robed by emperors, at their right hand
have talked as equal till the hour grew late.

I've seen the distant, often fabled land
of mirages, of dervishes, of golden domes,
the wind-hewn emptiness of desert sand.

Some men are patient, till the poorest loams,
some tend their animals or hunt for food,
yet others, journeying, will have no homes.

Some thrive on harmony, while others feud
continually as Bedu do for wives
to make their dynasties so many-hued.

One sits and begs all day, another strives
to be the foremost in his craft or tribe:
there's no accounting for our different lives.

Climbing Free

It's neither enemy nor quite your friend:
the rocks look distantly on how things end.
You mount upon a tough and tactile thing
resisting every ligament and bone,
which mimics how you're powered up to cling
upon that rough embodiment of stone.
And there you're tensed and swaying in the air
your muscles pulling on you, climbing belt
and ropes and buckles, boots and stanchions tensed
to just the limits you have maybe felt
but never tested quite that much, or sensed.
When all is threatening, your confidence
must reach on outward to a wider sense.

Of kinship with the wind, the sun, the rain,
the growth of lichens and the softening stain
of weathering in joints or rock's thin skin
that seems a living thing, and one to last,
but isn't really, or it doesn't win
a second glance when novice climbs are past,
but to the rookie all important, should
he draw the parallel from rocks to bones.
He feels the force of things and won't oppose
the anchoring certainty that locks in stones
as part of him indeed, especially those
that leave the centre standing: inner peak
to urge him on and up if stone could speak.

In fact I see that morning all too well:
the hoar frost on the ground, the half-felt swell
of breeze about the pine trees where we camped,
and then the crisp white sunshine without heat
that stoked long shadows in the grass and stamped
a crisp vitality beneath our feet.
A bright, fresh day for climbing, where the early mist
would clear and lift the moisture from the rocks
and leave them hard and subtle-joined, apt
to serve our stratagems and belay blocks.
It seemed we had the towering future wrapped
about our waists or hung on climbing belt:
a perfect start, in short, or so we felt.

The four of us were keen to go. We made
a simple breakfast, packed the camper, paid
the last of calls and so were ready near
to eight, each kitted up and in his thoughts
the moves rehearsed and sequenced, standing clear
as far as anyone of usual sorts
could see ahead to what was here quite new —
a looped ascent across the eastern spine
and then straight upwards to the central face
that rose near vertically, a rough incline
of steep-grooved granite rolling from the base
to wispy clouds that half obscured the view
of that spiked summit we must take in too.

Under Orders

I went to Hereford, a pretty town
where hills and hedge-crossed countryside look down
on level windings of the Wye. Four years
I studied there. Scholastically at least
did well enough, but had no social peers,
indeed the differences still more increased:
the girls seemed pallid and my friends too young.
I thought of India with its fervid heats,
the creaking trishaw, oxen, laughing wives.
It all was different here, the rainy streets,
the chill propriety, the little lives
so orderly that if they kept in touch
it was at Christmas only, and then not much.

I wanted something earthier, with more accord
to truth, and wired my father, then abroad.
'My advice to you', he wrote, 'is go elsewhere
before the lure of India taints the blood:
if that's impossible, then have a care,
remember poverty, the flies, the mud:
besides, our rulership is not to last.'
I thought of women with their nose-piece gold,
their fluted fingernails, their chiselled nose,
I saw the darkness at the elbow fold
and thought how languid is our English rose
with small proprieties and ill-brushed hair
that rises out of High Street underwear.

So India once again of summer heat,
dead animals and bustle in the street,
the scrawny, barefoot peddlers shouting wares,
and horse-drawn carriages, and crush of bikes;
the whining beggars working round in pairs,
and then that fragrant peace as evening strikes
a marbled dome or minaret with light,
the last of coloured daylight brings its care
across the wheat and paddy, shaded wells
with knots of villagers collected there
to circulate such talk as gossips tells
of pregnancies, of lawsuits won or lost,
the price of oil or what a sari cost.

India with its Mughal forts, its fret
of jewelled domes and trees and minaret
which rise on sun-baked brick and poor cement,
that binds a hundred million to its toil.
India of fumes and excrement,
of bodies moving on its hardened soil.
Where all is circular, a heartless wheel
that rolls its suffering from life to death,
uncounted, unaccountable: a vast
evacuation of the human breath
to seek detachment from the cloying past.
A world of abnegation and of fastening joys
that leave our lives at best but broken toys.

Mandu

Wide are my realms — hot, mellow
wheatlands, thick with cotton and
with saffron, pomegranates, yellow
citrons: scented all of them

with pungent odours of the fields,
with smell of rodents and of oxen,
and cool that every coppice yields
in steeps of quietness and shade.

A regal land, and won by conquest.
Mu'izz on his golden throne
casts his eye, covetous —
the envy in it chill as stone —

to lands of harvest, lands where still
the francolin and whistling dove
out of the air spring, and pleasant
hours follow the hunter as at will.

Here the tiger, skulking from
his fierce and fatal leap through trees
has the drum and beaters bring
him snarling forward to his knees.

Here the chamois and gazelle
skitter on the mountain slopes,
and sharpnesses of morning spell
contentment when the evening's come.

To the New World

This is a strange country, and you must be careful not to confuse how the sun flares out on the far mountains, or exults on the rivers with the high brilliance of trees that are here shaken to uproar, to shout their hoarse irruptions of shadow into the Ur-lands of evening unleaving continually to distance, with ever being homely and one with the sad, closed smell of dust.

Hosannas and saint's days are not as they seem, and for all the fashioning of lace for tourists, or elaborate bridles, the bustling festivals, or the evening concerts in parks, each place has its own Plaza de Armas, where perambulating children under the palm trees know the names of the warriors, the conquistadors quiet on their plinths that are set in granite.

Walk round at evening. When light drains away you will stand on the earth and know how hard it is, and feel stamped on the soul the recusant nights when the Cross would go forward, with all to lose.

New Chile

Stooping under the trees, the melancholy parades
of high buildings, the glitter town, distinctly
perpendicular in these lost evenings of white
flares on windows, we find the neon lights winking
on a bodywork waxed and betokening beneath
the rain a raw health throbbing with the heavy
overhead cam engines and their intricately fluttering
and clattering of valves in steel-lined ventricles.

Angels by the Mapocho, imported hopes
tinted by the glass and luxurious leather.
All that was uprooted in the Junta years
is shed as is paper of the left-wing tracts.
The future roars outward and slowly the metal
bends into modernity or into spray-shop paint.
The trees continue but from their leaves is absent,
except in the colours, any incendiary future.

That is all past, and the chauffeured bodies
are wrapped in the good life of department stores.
The stones keep their distance and the towers of concrete
rise more imperially into the rain-dark sky.

Budapest

Tonight where are you sleeping, Marya? I watch
the lights from passing tramcars strobe across the room,
and gutter. A hush in voices. Bare steps, and then the hum
of distant church bells. Four, is it, or five o'clock?

So much of this and you I had forgotten, Marya,
gone clean from out my mind. In Budapest. Dear God,
how the years evolve, how soundlessly they drop
on streets, on cinemas, cafes: vague they are and far.

And since I cannot even see your features — no,
not clearly: the years dissolve particulars, the hurts,
and what are left are isthmuses, conundrums, words
attendant to their issue, but not at purpose now —

I ask: where did it get you, really, Marya,
the strident, rifle-punctuated, all-night sessions,
the arguments pulled snarling from the midnight presses?
Where are they now? And where are you, dear Marya?

Things happen. Or do not happen. Who can change his hand?
And here I've sat, all night, placing this with that,
What you might have done. Or I. But I go mad
thinking of the certainties in which our hopes had end.

It is the living die in Budapest. The dead
already are dismembered, in their generations
they peel from off the walls, in the streets whirl: legions
of the dust whom Cross and Synagogue have hid.

We claim this importation in the heart of Europe,
in Magyar lands, in clouded fields of grain:
fields the Huns raided, resided and were happy in.
These are the spectral lands, however you may view it.

For you our thoughts were visions: for me they leant upon
emptinesses at midday, on heat without substance.

The wind whirrs across the fields, and what it brings to us
is only what we dreamt of, what you and I put in.

How dark the years are sometimes, how vast and sad! I see
that smile of yours is emptying, the rooms are up for let:
I suppose not much again, Marya, will our thoughts meet,
nor you fade out reluctantly as dawn lights up the sky.

Dartmoor

Talk, turn up the radio as you pass
Uplands of heathery, half-stifled screams.
sun blushes into the wayside grass;
pebbles flit quietly in the headlong streams.

In none of them, mysteries — not in traces
of sheep's wool on wire, in rabbit's bones.
Not even in winds, though their eddies turn faces
inward at encampments and in standing stones.

The heather roots thickly. The rivulet fills
eventually the pools now as black as jet.
Spattering the blue a hawk swoops and spills.
Incessantly, the birdsongs chip at granite.

Shadows of clouds graze the far hills whence
comes a patterning of white, pure white on the silence.

Warwick Castle

Heavy the smell of river, the prevailing seasons
of drift and of rottenness, a running on.
Weaker than sun through a stilled translucence
of water, the Renaissance here was thinly-borne.

Opening from their calyxes the swans preen
improbably on the water and dissolve.
The gunmetal colours are flurried, levelled; soon
there is nothing but stillness where moorhens delve.

All this was Offa's, Warwick's, the middle kingdom:
land of fat willows, slow streams, unaccountable crops.
Dowager, the river gathers its itinerants in,
no archers but clouds on the embattled steps.

A dream, just a dream, with no more semblance
to Italy than willows on the water's blaze.

Wiltshire Downs

Half mythic are these Downlands, where a steady fume
of cloud will lift all day and fade into a tranquil
blue. A wealth of pasturelands, of ragged trees,
and incandescent rapeseed interspersed with wheat,
that forms a counterpane to realms beneath, that chalk-white
world of towering, gold-torqued men who charioteered
across the warm abundance of their breathing earth.
Each day a lived inheritance, a born again,
till brute extinction met them with the glittering legions.

To misplaced reveries are gone their soft white bones.
Whole armies of shadows together inhabit the standing corn.
Red blusters of poppy are seeded on the sacred wounds
and at evening the warriors encircle the hill forts and couch-
grass knits a restless silence over unkempt tombs.

The Poppy

Cast from the ploughman's hand in bright excess,
the scattered blotches of the poppies sow
their fumigations into depths below,
as though they too would know forgetfulness.

Beneath the wind-occasioned, nodding head
of arrant wilfulness, each stem perceives
a fibrous web of rootstock that retrieves
its food from rotted kingdoms of the dead.

The furrowed fields, thin-tilthed with clay-and-flints
to let the porous Chalk lands breathe beneath,
the beech tree grove that stands as thick-set wreath
through which the tonsured daylight darkly glints

are hidden parables: the golden torque
or arrowhead that's rusted with the soil
and amber-baked as is the adder's coil,
or dance of harebell and the careless talk

of goddesses, whose moist and fragrant mouth
is in the blue-soaked goodness all around
in cloud and coppice, where the close-cropped ground
will rise to open wheat-fields in the south.

Ely Cathedral

Along the nave the hooded candles wink and flare
as though their pinchbeck innocence could light up faith.
The small hypocrisies of Sunday dress or talk
enlarge to radiant mummeries of coloured glass.

The footfalls echo into dust, but quiet as nuns,
wimpled and unruffled, the pillared transepts soar
in grey processions across this land of smoke-
entangled alder woods and flats and marshy creeks.
Afar is Palestine, bright-templed, robed in blue,
and bounteous with olive, or the unfavoured fig,
but here is only Ely, doubt and what men do
who drudge for pearl and sustenance in oyster beds,
for all that storms that daylong batter shores will leave
on pools the benefice of glittering evening light.

Surrey Heights

Throughout their years abroad, these called them back
— the good-
earth smell along the thick-mossed paths, the topiary
of leafy ways that led to croquet lawn, the haze
of midge above the green and lily spangled pool —
and which they saw, in fevered counting-house and port,
with breath of evening lifting through the temple smoke:
the Leith Hills crumbling always to a loamy quiet,
the winds still warmly perfumed with their Wealden miles.
Old memory's contentment came with evening prayers
that fell profuse as candlelight on leaded glass.

From rooms that smelt of childhood ailments and of spinsters' breath, the eye looked on through rainy, green-soaked glass to charcoaled roofs of cedars and to tea at five, set down with chintz and silver on the sun-warm grass.

The Peak District

There are streams rich in their industrial past,
if now assiduous of neglect, where water spouts
from stacks of thick, micaceous flags, and after pools
in hollows scooped out from the mountain limestone,
weathered
white with bryozoa, ossicles, sometimes
the crinoid cup itself, its long and feathery
arms trailing after some forgotten reef-side current —
as flail the wheels in long-abandoned cotton mills,
the haunt of mouse and ferret or small butterflies,
whose consort of the wind and careless chequered shade,
and sound of water falling through the steep defile
combines with women's lives gone through these walls,
as though their tied-back, sweated penury could be
effaced by benefice of water pouring through.

The Windrush

Beneath the slow incontinence of cloud and sun
the Windrush pours its sour translucence into ripple
glass, more corrugated where the willows hang
on water deeps and hold the costive river smell.

Upstream, the stream is water-silvered into tiny bubbles
and runs in twinkling rushes over gravel beds,
and there are roach and dace as glinting flakes, and bream
that nose on upstream with their oddly bulbous gills.

All stilled or slowly passing with the centuries
of stipend, book-bound learning and the eloquence
that made the Oxford martyrs and the great divines
a home of manhood's last munificence, and dreams
that haunt whole families, and still go on, widening
as the river does, to cities, fame and work.

Elis: Stater

Bespeaking a certain, incised, metallic possessiveness,
accrediting the fields, the workshops, busy quays,
each beneficent but counted into less
than gods who saw them safe across the bustling seas.

Yet what was evidenced were muscled body skills
applied to voyaging and trade as much as husbandry
of wheat and olive on the porous limestone hills —
within their shadowed walls, of course, and sanctuary.

The last immutable, that men could never sour,
given that earth and underneath belonged to Zeus,
dangerous when himself, with his unlicensed power:
if not there mediated by a constant use.

The ships brought fistfuls, heavy, of a solid worth
but nonetheless affordable to the well-tilthed earth.

Demetrios: Stater

Reigning ever beautiful in this rich land
of terraces and river-watered slopes of simmering heat
between the nomadic peoples moving close to hand
and the murmuring southward fields of fabled, thick-sown wheat.

Demetrios: the headdress of the elephant
proclaims him forever triumphant, though the reverse flan
set out the legends sideways, as though words were scant
acknowledgement that here was one, solitary man.

Who passed as others pass across this continent
of hot impermanence, of sects and strange belief.
Perplexing the fabled blaze as empires came and went,
yet always incantatory, intense and brief.

Here too the Zeus-anointed came in wind-snatched song:
an Alexander, the god-like, who did not live long.

Azes II: Tetradrachm

An ungainly exuberance at best. The bannered lance
and blundered khorosti promote the imperial cause.
Across the pinched-in centuries, each small advance
was through the horse-back interludes of polis laws.

Crucially, logically, as from a water wheel
where fields dust-brown in winter flood to green again,
at the unnumbering incursions they could only kneel:
abnegation and patience are the lot of men.

Besides, these were different. Each tousled and cord-bound head
was loud in the saddle, and the bridle silver spoke
of summer snow-melts, grazing lands, the mutinous spread
of glittering distances that made the Scythian yoke.

In this metal they ruled, embattled, a half-mythic breed
led by a basileus in Greek they couldn't read.

Crispus: Follis

The choirs, the incense and the emissaries. Non
nobis domine. Outside, the chain-mailed world
of raw manoeuvres, battle-fleets, saw rough men gone,
following the penants that the blundering winds unfurled.

But here in hot licentiousness of leisured courts
the women's eyes withheld such mysteries, such hints
of unclothed impudence that these imperial thoughts
collide with infidelities and restruct mints.

Faustus, rich in coiffures and forbidden wealth,
imperial longings in her thick and cloying breath:
Demnatio memoriae. Each muted self
had something inextricable from their ordered death.

More in odd coins than inscriptions will be Crispus read,
or held in glory that laureate and unbending head.

Byzantium: Solidus

The evening dawdles on the monuments, and takes
an impenitent long leave of imperial munificence.
Mutatis mutandis where the world in silence makes
its own ornate and somber music out of sparse events.

We have set upon these coins our empire's nimbused face
of jewelled and ornate modesty, that all men here
have thoughtful purpose in this Heaven's thin-falling grace
and serve His ministry, therefore: be always near.

The court parades its protocol, and like the sun
the emperor moves on ceaseless idolatries and requires
a prompt and unfailing obedience to what is won
of the pure heart held captive to the unseen choirs.

What is eternal is always eternal, and men may not
forego the instances of gain their age begot.

Odysseus

Odysseus the most of all, that storm-
and-ever-shipwrecked voyager, who knew
how Circe conjures up in human form

our desperate longings, always will. The few
who pass unscathed have learned the jeweller's art
to carve the cameo from that quiet hue

of textured honesty, which does not start
with fervent breath beneath the counterpane
but larger purposes that serve the heart.

Within this wilderness of love and pain,
and deep immured in it, with no way out,
we fare as travellers who'd still retain

the sense of others slept with, and no doubt
a pride and tenderness, if mixed with shame
that no one's memory is long without.

Innumerable are those we cannot name
that come about us as some bar or room
is cleaned and emptied of us all the same.

And more so even when about us bloom
those longed-for miracles of limbs and eyes
which we too carelessly ignore, assume

were false remittances of breathy sighs,
repentences from dew-pressed sleep,
and not the soul at one with its disguise.

Home For Us

Enough of visions, enough of change,
the lies diminish and condemn:
the promised land is out of sight:
the dark brown loam is tired of them.

One by one the lights come on
in streets of gaunt industrial cities:
beside some local Rubicon
the young decide their destinies.

The quiet of evening and the loss
of brightness as there drift across
the wastes of tundra and of taiga,
the ever-falling snow that haunts
the mink and bear and arctic tiger,
where the Volga eddies out and flaunts

itself in staging post and Cossack town
in undone miles of silver coils,
where seeping out, by slow degrees,
the thickening water softens soils
in fields, in gardens, through the trees:
till the hoar frost reaches skies
and the sturgeon, spawning, dies.

Birch and alder, then the fir-tree screens
the streams now tumbling into deep ravines.
High up, the Urals like an unclothed breast
displays bravado in each reddened slope,
and though the glittering morning come to rest
as dull galena in its mineral stope,
forever toiling up the winding path
beneath the head-frame where the tailings spill
as quiet as minnows in the crystal rivers:
a glint of gold and green and all is still.

A wad of sound, the wind: the aspen shivers,
and of a sudden through the lands of Rus
there's hope from exile and a home for us.

Inward Journey

It is that inward journey each must take
if not in bitterness yet little thanks.
There are no happy lives, and we must make
what best we can from our now thinning ranks.

Where have they gone, the trusting hearts and hands?
and do they brood on some remembered day,
that rich exception to the shadow lands
when all our sorrows here have had their say?

And what of those we loved most reverently,
in all their empery of full-dressed pride?
How solitary we are, and constantly
to dreams in petticoats so firmly tied,

that all we would, and have done afterwards,
each small distinction or a credit earned
has been too laggardly and so affords
scant recompense for what the heart had yearned

with its whole being for. We walk the lands
with half a life that's spent, or lifetime gone,
and see again a house or tree that stands
as then, by path or road that ambles on

indifferent to us, wholly so. Where we
have aged, grown weary of this world, they're still
unquenched, companionable, the same: we see
them quietly gesture to that house or hill

that once meant all to us, but must remain
as learned journals that include our name,
and all the laurels we had hoped to gain
in fields of knowledge that are flat and tame.

Yet world is warm and with us still: it stays
a benediction from those distant fields,
a sense of homewarding to room in days
of glad remembering that some photo yields.

For would the days delight us out of turn
or wantonly display their varied form
if we, the passing ones, did not return
to see the world around us still perform

its uncut miracles for other eyes,
its blaze of sunshine and its sudden rains
in storm and tempest and the clearing skies
that, dropping benefice, still inward stains

our hearts with strange rejoicing, where we go
with lighter step awhile and feel our hearts
inflate with some such wonder, inward glow,
where small epiphanies have played their parts?

Each day returns a little, gives us space
to hope and glory in this earthly sense,
and quietness, and settling into grace
that makes our sojourn through this going hence.

Old Embassies

Old embassies of sense, the delegations
of high-plumed officers that nodded head
towards equalities in other nations,
whose honour held to what was said
in ball or conference or tête-à-tête
as much as any brandished, ink-bound creed
of treaty conjured by the balding set
of politicians and ministers — indeed
was preferable, and forged the personal bond
in men who never lied and never cheated.
True, they fenced a little but, *au fond*,
were honest, principled, and so were treated —
if to a world brought up on different rules
becoming out-of-date and dangerous fools.

They passed their venturing out in nightly haze
of dancing, flirting, partying and eating
as though a brazen creature of those days
must soon cocoon itself from name and seating:
retire, and drag itself aloft, detached
from school and cadet corps on gilded wings,
until came someone whose fine wealth was matched
by name and manners, or by some such things.
It hardly mattered. With their glittering peers
they danced till dawn in costume balls whose prize
would keep a wealthy man in style for years.
Beyond the happiness and smiling eyes,
the dallying, however, and sheer sense of fun,
a hard world waited, and that hard world won.

The red cock spread its flame-wreathed wings across
wide swathes of podsoil to the western borders.
Home troops seemed powerless to stem the loss
that turned the taxable to gross disorders.
Whole towns went up in smoke, the ripening fields,
the gaols and country mansions of the gentry.
The restitution that rough justice yields
seemed barred to action or to even entry.
Riots, mutinies, assassinations — some
fifteen hundred civil servants lost
their lives. Those caught were flayed to kingdom come
but still resistance mounted, added cost.
The Czar despaired as, like a spinning top,
his new laws failed and tottered to a stop.

The bite of frosted water, fine champagne
that foams in happy mouths, the warm content
of walking back in well-fed bodies, rain
then falling elsewhere in its own intent
beyond the windows of brocaded rooms,
and almost making up its own evasion —
though these were many, and the breath assumes
a quietness come of lovers' satiation.
Evenings dressing in the stiff-starched shirts,
of English tailoring in beaver skin,
where sumptuousness and cut assert
the modesty of simple diamond pin:
an easy bearing where each joint achieves
the sense of frankness in which body breathes.

Intrigues with subject people, some
conciliatory and some intent on war:
intricately though the channels come
the hopes for Austria or Hungary more.
A wise intelligence is never still
in old bureaucracies with iron lungs,
combating not one constant, single will
but chatter of the strange Slavonic tongues:
all different, irredentist, founding State
on myths of arguments from made-up past:
a mix of sublimation, as of hate —
the which, if voted on, would never last.
All this he knows, the emperor, but waits
on coded whispers from his vast estates.

War

The choking heat, the flies, the sun that shed
at midday not a sabre's slash of shade,
the sky a warped and shining sheet of lead,
the ground a carriageway in which there wade
men, horses, guns, a half-carried boat
upon a sea of yellow, trampled mud.
Such was the first campaign, the easy float
to Baghdad and destroy the Turk. A flood
of orders followed — dig in, retreat, attack —
until at Ctesiphon the columns stopped
and broke upon the Ottomans, when back
they came, disorderly, the wounded propped
by splints of regulars, and then he spoke,
the red Assyrian god, and weather broke.

All that winter long in Kut they starved.
Wind howled about the ramparts; water froze.
The scourge of dysentery continued, carved
its brief epistles with their names. They chose
to wait it out, in hope that Yusuf's men,
as miserable as they were, raked by fire,
as sickened animals in their own small den
might do the sensible: give up, retire.
Surrender was the Allies' own when spring
trooped out its own thin colours on the plain.
Officers were housed, with nought to sing
of, true, but common serving men would gain
a gruelling march through flies and dust
to starve in hovels as good soldiers must.

To Flanders came the strident, beating rain
that warped the gun emplacements, sank their base:
a hem that hardly lifted off the plain
but showed a pitted, wry and wintry face.
In time the fume of warfare furred their tongues,
sank in their bones, a rheumy, chilling breath
that swelled through trenches, filling lungs
with some repugnant, choking phlegm of death.
One caught a rat that tore at bodies, made
a cage for it and trawled it on a length of thread
but even it was cautious, fearful, stayed
unmoving as the barrages loomed overhead.
At last the waterlogged, deep trenches froze,
and stiffening bodies were released to snows.

Notre Dame

I stood by Notre Dame, whose ancient stone
had been fresh scoured, and bore a splendid throne,
with canopies and seats and twelve-foot arch
through which our august dignities would march.
First came the guards, the Swiss, in liveries
as near resplendent as their majesties',
rich players and then one hundred gentlemen,
the princes, abbés, and the mitred men:
the cardinals of Bourbon, Lorraine and
of Guise. The dauphin led there by the hand
of Navarre, Orléans and Angoulême,
and finally, out-dazzling all of them,
young Mary Stewart in a dress so white
and all encompassing it hurt the sight:
so young, so beautiful, that all must dote
on sculpted bodice, arms and swan-like throat,
round which the diamonds glittered, and each ring
on snow-white fingers was a wondrous thing.
Indeed a silence settled, a deep awe
at that rich majesty the people saw,
and when in following our royalty came
they seem but counterfeit and not the same;
as when one looks into a light and sees
a blinding nothingness that by degrees
becomes a floating, darkened spot of light
that will long afterwards obscure the sight.

Mammoths

Swollen as they are and part of earth-time, the tusks,
femurs and molars — huddled together in fissures,
in long loams, in gravels well-pummelled — canticles
of enamel moving with the rivers that brought them,

grinding south and south, with the ice-blocks floating:
the auroras of winter canopied in their small brains,
the husks no doubt also of summer in their soft hides,
only we cannot see them, all that hugeness gone

greedily but without stain into the heavy tills —
the Gipping, the Chiltern, the Lowestoft drift:
tough, glutinous blanketings that the great bones
work in and founder, and are never released from.

For imponderably they are of this time and this place,
uncomfortable or diminishing as that may be,
in docks or foundations of industrial buildings,
things that are nondescript but carefully planned.

As such these pantehnicons of the flood,
ruminating and then melting into the tundra,
may almost be part of our own tenured lives,
integral with the weather in this late warm spell.

Snowdonia Ice

On mountains, shelving, and on standing lakes,
a stunning whiteness and then a bitter frost
in a land of moraines, drumlins, eskers that lay
beneath all the summer, and in cold about —

which still would come back, blundering on
into glaciers, whiteouts, shrouded mammoths, bear,
till distally and signally the melts trailed out
to conifers, to poplars and then temperate grasses.

And a gradual heritage for hunters-gatherers
in a landscape smoothed out, or with pocket hollows —
round which they farmed, fished, till they half-filled them in,
what with the climate supporting and the ample soil.

But not in the end: there were always the torpors
when cirques returned, half, to their former state.
The cold made patterns and the hoar frost deepened;
the mountains tinkled crisply in the bare-rock steep.

But more of that even in their inner natures,
their fastness of being, to the very bones
came the eloquent and empty white of winter
till the summertime trampled them to loams.

Warwick Castle

Heavy the smell of river, the prevailing seasons
of drift and of rottenness, a running on.
Deeper is the sunlight than its translucence,
probing a Renaissance that was thinly borne.

Opening from their calyxes the swans preen
improbably on the water and dissolve.
The gunmetal colours are flurried, levelled; soon
there is nothing but stillness where moorhens delve.

All this was Offa's, Warwick's, the middle kingdom:
land of fat willow, slow streams, unaccountable crops.
Dowager, the river gathers its itinerants in,
no archers but clouds on the embattled steps.

A dream, just a dream, with no more semblance
to Italy than willows on the water's blaze.

Magna Graecia

Always wheat by the rivers, olives on hills
though tumulus, palace and village pass.
In a soil quite patchy, a farmer tills
much in bone-dust and in sharded glass
where even today the plough may ring
on rough-hewn ewer from burial plot,
when there will spill glistening
unthreaded lapis or peridot.
Shadows of the great world gone over breathe
dustily through this town and leave

in the walls, parked vehicles, the nodular streets,
on the graffiti sunning on yellowed stone,
moods larger than absence, that delete
the epiphanies pregnant in the bone.
All through their long years the fathers walked
cypressed in robes as opposite
trees flamed through afternoons and stalked
silent at evening and darkly clothed. It
seems but yesterday the Medici blessed
the town with its small fountain and assessed

it so much for tribute, continuance
of their building, reef-like, through men's lives.
To this wall, this roof, this seminary, the sense
of living surrenders and yet survives —
as it must do, continually to be settled in
soft-vowelled syllables of scent and grain.
Apprehensions of the spirit were never thin
in small Greek towns of the Ofanto plain.
And though lives be blended there remain
the figs, the olives, the contributory gain

of wines kept in hiding, ladled out
at festivals, weddings, at harvest ends.
And if rough walls surround there is about
them conspiring a silence which extends
deeper than well-shaft or legacy-yield,
to the stout rock itself where the rough blocks sit
open and empty. In hilltop and field,
patient as summer, the cicadas knit
their hard sounds in stone for the Bourbon kings,
offertories out of lifeless things.

Venice

I leave the gate and take a path that leads
through flowering marjoram and open vines.
Above are oranges and, just as then,
the periwinkles sparkle in the grass.

It seems but yesterday the years I passed
in subrogation to our sovereign Venice,
but now a summer's breath is in the wind,
and all around there seems a happiness
that clothes these festivals of countryside,
and makes our littorals of floating lights,
the fret and hubbub of our carnivals,
but working transcripts of a dream, with no
more matter to them than the tranquil clouds
have business with us but to trail on slowly,
that meek, perpetual majesty as shown
in wondrous spectacles upon the earth.

I press on upwards as the path grows steeper
a free man walking in his own good time
a man at peace with God who is his conscience,
and one moreover kindly, with a wit
well known to Doge as to the quayside merchant,
a twinkling eye and ready deference
that brings commission from the Church or State.

I pause to get my breath, but looking up
can see the tops of cupolas through trees,
and over them that yellow, heavy dome
above the chapel where my work would hang:
a shout of outside laughter where the light is dim,
evoked with incense and with candle smoke,
with sins repented of, where God comes back
to figure in our soul- and self-perceivings —
as in those paintings that we see again

with long-forgotten passages that show
in our long trailings after truth we found
one day a resurrection of the light.

As so it seemed then, though the path was steeper.

A nun is waiting for me. Quietly
we go down corridors and into rooms
where all is ordered and the air is still.
I pass by apparitions bent at tasks,
intent on sewing, on the stitch and patch
of cassocks threadbare at the knees. One lifts
a head, acknowledges my greeting, sadly
smiles. The figures here were famous beauties,
hung with wealth and title, families
whose names make riot down the packed canals,
receive in palaces of gilded pomp,
where men in livery, good honest men,
must go the instant on some passing whim.

She'll be, the Abbess, with me presently.
I sit at first, but then get up and pace
between the windows and rush-backed chairs,
across a room that's comfortless: a small
brass crucifix beside an altar cloth.

How different is the world beyond. The window
looks down to levels where my workshop lies.
The light still flares there but the prospect darkens
and what was glittering is laid aside.
The everyday returns and I can see
both shining interludes and what are now
but villages with churches, congregations
that bow to images and rough-hewn saints.

Beyond

Beyond there is the rain, the rout of seasons,
the impotence of sense, the stabbing pain.

We live our eye-blink and disdain the reasons
that add no tangible or mortal gain.

But come the mornings in the sunlight, urge
to live more fully than we were before,
and have the precedent, the pent-up surge
propelling animosities to war,
we find we do not understand it or the men
who dragged their lives out entertaining not
one word of it. We say: no, not again,
and hope, encumbered with our trivial lot,
beyond this long charade of painted show,
to find what's permanent in where we go.

Across that blighted interval of time:
depression years, fresh wars, misshapen hopes,
religion in itself but antique rhyme,
and goodness pummelled on the blood-soaked ropes,
we look upon the world which once we were,
a warm and settled one, of human scale,
where truth was knowable, and would incur
a lifetime's following though well could fail.
We're better paid, and cared for, entertained:
we sow our furrows in a stranger land
to reap, pass on or squander what we've gained
from that invisible, obedient hand,
but know the high forgiveness before
can bring no shadows back from that dark shore.

The Temple Church

To this same Temple Church my father took
me once, as his had taken him before,
no doubt to get the feel of it, and look
on martial gravitas defaced by war.

I gaze on templar's effigies preserved
in armour, tunic and their hand on sword,
and ask myself again what ends were served
with life as circumstances I'd afford.

Then come to me the things my father said,
and much in passing, with no thought at all
that I would count in time the brave hopes fled
as filial recklessness, to more recall:

I have no son, and nothing I can say
will make one pause here when I've passed away.

Winter Journey

I must have dozed. Pictures of the cupolas
in gold were built as though of water jelly — the same
which we as children, I remember, at Rabenschloss
built hobgoblins of, noses like our governess's
till she, poor creature, led us off and read long stories
to us from the Brothers Grimm. They still go round
this sleeping head. Frightful journey. The carriage jolts.
Sometimes we wait on what we think are sidings or
branchlines

while troop trains rumble past. It seems unreal:
the shut-up stopping places, the mesh of shaded lights.
Diary entry: Jan 8th. 1917.

Late arriving: after four. Prague when it
appeared took on the outlines of a winter city,
the squares and palaces closeted in snow.
What surprised me was the silence, complete in
Karmelitska as I walked to my apartment.
I thought of Christmases with Klaus and Anna, and only
when the bell, dull and gloomy, of old St Nicholas
boomed and reverberated were my thoughts returned
beyond the wealth of learning — to wounds and stench
and mud.

My dear von Macke,

Your letter awaiting my return
has just been handed me. I am appalled. I can't
believe it possible. Having seen myself
in five days at the front, with what composure, courage,
and even gallantry the least of troops resist,
permit me to say that a more accomplished and more
upright officer, well-thought-of and beloved,
never served the Emperor. A mix-up of the names,
is evident. So, look, my dear old fellow, put your mind
at rest: I know the C.O. and will write at once.

Wilhelm does not acknowledge. A Major Gunscher writes:

MUCH REGRET INFORM YOU DESERTION CASE PROCEEDS

BEG TO RECOMMEND THIS CORRESPONDENCE CEASE

REGULATIONS BRACKETS WARTIME STILL IN FORCE

VISIT SERVES NO PURPOSE WIRE YOU WITH RESULT

I know this stratagem: met it all my life.

Say nothing, do nothing, refer you to the colonel.

Well this old buffer, Red Cross only that he may be,
is built of stronger stuff. I'll go, of course, but can't
there be some let-up in this endless roll of drums?

*You enter, all of you, at daybreak, the doubtful
lists of war. Such is your duty. . . is inescapable. . .*

How I do not know, but sometimes what I've said
flares up at night to wake me. *Gentlemen, you fight
pro patria, for Austria, and when the cannon roars,
Gentlemen, the regiment, the Imperial Fourth Uhlans,
expects of you a conduct illustrious as its past.*

Ride well, bear your heads high, your swords sheathed. Ride!

I know they did so, across the Bug and Soane —
returning, if at all, in twos or on their own.

Flanders

Such are the poppy realms of the astonished dead,
these permeable rich uplands of the wheat-clad Chalk.
Winds stir each steely, perforated seed-pod head
but only whiffs of barrages and mortars talk.

No fumes of long forgetfulness, no sensual charms,
Persephone reborn or Ceres' ripening care.
Nothing, an emptiness in which a sea of arms
excoriates the landscape and, waving, showers the air

with fierce expostulations: how it should have been
beneath a long and drowsy empire's spending spree:
good food, sound sleep, an outdoor life lived clean
alike in freckled comradeship and decency.

But when from their pressed sleep these millions wake — ah
then,
what shall we say to these deceived, much purposed men?

Us At Last

Two

Dawn aches, and in the distance groups of men
flounder at the rock face and the puffing smoke
carries from the crusher with a chortling sound.
Later come shouts and whistles. Searchlights poke
out their long blades, when
for a second in the fen,
a backlit figure stumbles and goes zigzag
into the softly-felted moccasin
of darkness, now to sag
as shot and shots go in.
Afterwards nothing but the thick-piled snow
sealing us forever in an underground
asphyxiation of the northern lights
in conical shadowy rites
high over watchtowers, wire and rifle sights:
unbroken as the wadded white wall round,
unuttered as the orders that a world ago
looked on innocence and laughter but now confound
us with dockets and quotas. We improvise
once more, redo the figures. The arc-lights flare
into an alliteration of halogen
flare and infrangible darkness, when again
there falls but heavy snow, and figures there
are silent under wind-shut eyes.

Three

The whole frame judders, and the rotors thwack
and thwack above us as each three-man crew
is ferried out. We pull on over, when
it's the thick, warm sunshine we are lifting through.
High to the light, back
round to the attack
upon the smoke-thick trees. We come in close,
the turrets rattling hard though out of range
at heaps set out with clothes
smouldering, and a strange
acid smoke that billows up. We roar
on over. The scene diminishes and one
by one we see the bombers hung up there,
spiked into the bare
blue sky with their hard, wing-stretched stare
absorbed in calculations till the odds run
quietly in our favour and the bombs pour
out in long threads: hundreds of them, ton
upon ton on what or whatever. The ground
steadies but there comes a tree-trawling
apocalypse of crimson, a deep red to black
opening of the canopy, but at the back
of minds, and so not part of us, and falling
signally far off, without a sound.

Heinrich Ludwig Arndtsfeld

I often look at her. My sister smiles,
as I do in the photograph, yet through
the shadows phosphorescing are the miles

of coarse buffooneries I can't undo,
nor resurrect the wasted lives that bleed
into the noontide blaze of light. Not few

but sixteen hundred of them, so I read,
that Operation Paperclip has lent
to proud America, that it succeed

in acting otherwise to that descent.
But where I went to one good home in Maine
my sister Emily long overspent

her scuffed forbearance, and could not remain
as untermenschen or the yellow scum
but serve as groundswell for a new campaign

of racial purity, as people come
slow day by day to see themselves undone
by slimed miasma from the east, the sum

of vile depravity that never won
a manly living in the Celtic realms
of damp and moss-draped trees, the lack of sun

for days on end, but where their sacred elms,
and blood-drenched pools were more than nationhood,
and underlying primal nature overwhelms

mere rational thought. So to that shadowed wood
they went, to lights, and wire and torture shed
in trucks and manacled, for long hours stood

exposed to elements, each shaven head
alert to what their doctors could devise,
with loathsome details better left unsaid.

But I will name them lest their fearful eyes
be lost to us, and we forget their pain
and vast betrayal as each image dies.

Without good clothing some on ground were lain
whole nights together as surroundings froze,
and in vast boiling vats revived again.

Some were gassed or injured, desperate throes
of agony recorded: if not dead
were killed that cranial sectioning disclose

new points of deformation. Some were led
progressively to feel high altitude,
or with disease-infected offal fed.

Some were slow-garrotted, strung up nude,
or tortured, electrocuted, driven mad,
or perished miserably, denied their food.

Death Throes of the Republic

Thapsus was frightful. Pompey's sons
rushed at us, roaring, and with dogged runs
tore at our standards, detachments, supplies:
a vast pool of horror when to our eyes
rose heavings of bodies and bodies downed,
heads lopped off, arms, and the slimy ground
churned with wet flesh, as stomachs with sound
high-pitched and stilling, that well-nigh drowned
our sturdiest soldiers. The blood as rain
fell now as furies hacked on in pain.
The human only anathema
to these now fighting with all hope far.

Then to the worst: Corduba's plain
bleached from the winter and the wind's stain:
battalions assembled like stiff stands of wheat
were broken, discoloured and in retreat.

I ordered them counted. There were thousands dead.
Thousands upon thousands of high names bled
of lifeblood in carnage of all Rome bore:
I beg of the gods that there be no more!

Gonzalo Quezada

Let good Gonzalo greet you, once a Moor
but then a prosperous name, well known about
each rich Toledo bourse and trading floor.

I had a daughter: beautiful, devout,
and brought up in right Christian fellowship
that holy fathers even couldn't find her out

for all they saw high beauty's full-blown lip,
the lifetime-long remembered blaze of eyes,
and languorous hauteur of the sauntering hip,

and so would think of her, but she was wise
enough to smother that and aim to be
aloof and counted as a rich man's prize.

And so she was. In quiet humility
she kept the state on which all virtues call:
reserved, munificent, though each could see

how soft that measured step would fall,
the face that could inflame the blood of kings,
where eyes, as Spaniards say, conversed with all.

How comes it that a fevered madness sings
about the stony lands of Aragon
and high Castile? Or sanctity that brings

these all-compelling, strange decrees? Be gone
you Christian converts on whose late disease
our Lord's benevolence had one time shone.

We were to leave the land which centuries
have seen us love and cultivate, had built
great schools and libraries in, prosperities

that set great store by honey, grain and milt,
by vine and olive groves, an industry
ingrained as rivers lay their unseen silt.

Most were only poor, content to be
a much-abused but uncomplaining folk
where Church and State expunged the memory

of how we'd toiled for them. Although I spoke
through good acquaintances to men at court,
to priests and magistrates, that unjust yoke

was laid on all and equally. I thought
her high-bred husband might protest the ban,
or plead the sanity for which I fought.

But no. In truth the troubled days began
for his Angelica, and also mine,
the lawful wife he turned to courtesan,

her dowry forfeit to him. By design
or fear of law, or all the sorry rest
by which our sinful purposes combine,

he cast her off. The Prophet's way is blest
in Berber lands, I thought, but though in need
we hardly came ashore as honoured guest

as custom indicates. So I concede.
No, more as locusts or a plague abroad
that pressed at mosque and gate, where we would plead

for simple charity. The Prophet's sword
is just as absolute in Muslim lands:
as apostates we came to our reward.

To death: immediate, by many hands.
Who sunk our ships. Or cut us down. Or led
the thousands out to die in desert sands.

A few survived; the hardiest, those bred
to trade or commerce, those with airs
and looks that might still grace some stranger's bed.

And there I lost Angelica. It bears
no telling how the two of us were sold,
as things contaminated, public wares.

I work in market wharfs, but am too old
to fairly reckon up each groat or drachm,
or weigh the cinnamon or varied gold.

Whatever is most wretched, so I am:
forgetful, sometimes brooding why was done
a thing so evil. God of Abraham,

of your good Prophet, of our sweetest Son:
so tell me why your mercy never shone
on us, and why such good was overrun

with hurt for my Angelica, a daughter gone
to who knows where, but still condemned
for reasons God himself is silent on.

Old Manor Walls

Much of me is in old manor walls,
the moss on flagstones, homely loaf:
you find me in much-folded, ink-stained wills,
the patched and mended bedspread cloth.

I am the chipped, rejected, second set,
the mute acceptance which the standby has,
the rusted gas ring that is never lit,
the flare the damp match makes, the earthy kiss.

Knowing mine is not of regal wealth,
nor even spendthrift but as softly lying,
accepting much of age is ague and tilth,
the husbandry of harvest and of sowing,

I am the old, worn-out that always is
beneath the gaucheries of summer green,
before the paupering that winter sees
retrieve from homelessness the tribes of men.

St. Paul's Cathedral

As the wind gusts and the candles genuflect and flare
it is as though your passing has its canticles in air.
What you could have told us in that anxious, harrowed way
is gone from us, rescinded, and not by night or day
comes back in its ascensions, its hesitations, depth.
All that man is you are: a little stoppered breath.
Sundered and alone we stand beneath the cross
you did not believe in, but cried, *Why? And so? Because?*
What will you say to us when we too mount the block
and, no more reconciled, whistle to the drop?
Lonely you were at the end, and lonelier still we stand,
waiting for news of you, for music, loud in that land,
but here faint, not to be counted on, here where frost
and steel
fashion in cold piety the griefs you will not feel.

Sat where you have sat, therefore, and on my own
more now, hearing in the voices that from the stone,
vast sepulchre rain down and echo through the years:
what is there to look for in such wealth of form, in tiers
of descant and sad melody? What survives the gains
in us of heaviness, of deafness, the slowly numbing pains?
In requiem or plainness our end is still the tomb —
from which there issued music as from an inner room
which all your life you heard and reached for — past marriage,
friends,
past living altogether, with its vague, unsorted ends,
wavering, uncertain, unplaced, but piercing to the core,
domiciled beyond me and all I could be for —
but of you and about you I am nearer and fonder,
and of the earth here, and the footholds in your blue worlds
yonder

Teresa Sherley

I see it as a loathsome land, consumed
by enmities, divisions, burning faiths
that on enquiry turn to blood-soaked wraiths
hallucinating in that desert air
to thinned-out pieties and things not there.
I see those shimmering vaults of faience tiles,
their fiery messages in Naskhi styles
of sweep and wonder at the Prophet's word,
the holy surahs and the ways preferred
by custom, law and blind obedience
as things abhorrent to a woman's sense
of comeliness. Italy is home
to me, where church and customs make this Rome
a sanctuary for hope and future grace
where we may one day glimpse our Saviour's face.

Radna and Krishna

*The vast, accumulating dead each year,
the hunger, overwork, the suicide
the threat from landlords and the constant fear*

*of sprays and fertilizers misapplied,
the grape and citrus fruits that do not set,
the sterile cotton seeds new strains provide.*

*The taxes, penury, increasing debt
that makes their husbandry but dwindling gains
and independence but a foretold bet.*

*The vast miasmas that await the rains,
the bullocks working in a million plots
and overburdened as the battered trains*

*that take the city workers past the knots
of bright-clothed villagers , industrial slums
where pressed humanity is fetid, clots*

*in drains and sewer-ways, or fairly hums
as flies that propagate in open sores,
the brute relentlessness that overcomes*

*the creeds, the missions and the rural laws,
the UN technocrats who show them how,
but serve a multiglobal, western cause.*

*Unwise austerities, the figures now
are best regretted, overwritten, lost
beneath the endless passage of the plough*

*between the solstice and the autumn frost
across the hard interiors that do not feed
their populace but likely add to cost.*

*For what? For enterprise or so we read
in business summaries from business schools:
to earn the articles we do not need.*

*Yet still it's commerce, and that commerce rules
the crossways of our scattered earth, and lives
are not for sensitives or squeamish fools*

*but for the thrusting with their trophy wives,
the world of ministries and bankers' hours,
with practices at which our news contrives*

*to never see the fault of western powers,
the burnt-out villages, the wasted fields,
the thousands that a single day devours.*

*The over-weaning power that banking yields,
that tight-drawn web of debt that none escapes,
the craft of tariffs and inflated yields.*

*The beatings, electrocutions, brutal rapes,
the fear of others from which torture starts,
the lack of evidence, deleted tapes,*

*from which our sense of justice ever smarts:
the criminality, Pavlovian lies
by which we web-indulge our private parts.*

*Those murky inner worlds that terrorize
us day and night with acts we might just do,
those gross confessions that we can't disguise*

*but be a party to, a breaking through
to vile perversions that we might enjoy,
but always furtively, then flushed from view.*

*But not entirely, for those sights employ
embodiments that our poor thinking serves
for what is not a tame, galvanic toy,*

*but all we have: this mass of muscles, nerves
and organs, tracts and fibre ways, with skin
to hold the organs in their heavy curves.*

*We navigate the darkened wastes of sin
with ever dangerous and brute desire
to share with others that fierce joy within*

*and find, before these failing things expire,
at least an intimation of that deep
invigorating, still abiding fire.*

Cleopatra's Last Speech

So must the lordliest in their season go
beneath the earth or as salt waters flow
across the Corinths of the world, to end
in strange misfortunes that the high gods send.

Where is Priam and those stalwart towers
or Menelaus with his manly powers?
Where is Helen's ever dreamt-on face,
her world of moving in that mournful grace
for man with his thin, paltry forms to fill
that we poor followers must turn to ill?

Ah, what wealth of ravings this has been
though I, who smile and leave you, still am queen.
Again I'll see my rams-horned ancestors
who ruled the Caspian and Caucasus,
at Ctesiphon and on the plain of Fars
have worn the coronet of circling stars.

But that was passing nothing, no, for I'll
assume the temperament that all the while
we women cherish in our stormy hearts
before we wake and play our tawdry parts.
With Caesar or with Antony I'll take
my place in sovereignties such soldiers make.

Ah me, ah me, what is this solid earth
but fume and endless fretting from our birth.
We are as life will make us, all our joys
but cheap bordellos where the feckless boys
will try us on for pleasure. I have gained
a moment only where the Pharaohs reigned

as thought forever and have built their might
in monuments that grazed the topmost pole of night.

(Drinks the poison cup.)

Let all remember how I made my end.
Whatever time and circumstances send,
through howling distances I hasten on
to where great queens before me all have gone.

Death of Satyawati

I do not know what more she sought
who staggered, recovered, caught
the sari-lengths of dress as breath
again filled up approaching death —

*Prince, be valiant, and if
victorious, be compassionate.
Life is a strange dream, sharp but brief:
the wisdom in it comes too late.*

*Make virtue foremost. Do not pretend
the example empty of our kings
who ruled before you and will tend
our people to the end of things.*

*I wish you wives, honour, blest
with sons about you all your life:
stirruped in blood but honourable,
think of me when you have rest.*

*The pain grows deeper, I can feel
the ending on me sharp as steel.
Listen to me, Prince, when all
you have of life is as the dust.*

*Here you walked at times, and with
an arm stretched out accorded conquest
for me until the wastes of Sind,
to Kashmir, Ghazni in the west.*

*What is this now, Prince, to me
when family are gone, and fame
of home, faith, land and name
are empty as a childhood game?*

I caught her but she swooned, heavily,
the last breath spilling out with blood.
Her eyes turned in, and all I'd won
was glittering and silent and undone.

Time turns raptures of the air
from radiance to emptinesses:
of those high lands, hard lands, where
is conquest when the fever lifts?

So I, the son of the Dilawar,
went on the same, yet where I fought,
in shimmering mihrab or in marble court
became as though the memory —

not because the concupiscent
shadow chisels the soft stone,
nor because her blackest umber
glows in arches after noon —

but because of some ineffable
embodiment of birth and fall,
the ineluctable that governs all.
The court collects: my hour is done.

The End of It

Though always we moved, for the most part she sat
taking in little as days unfolded.

No matter to her what place we were at:
a shadow, a wraith, out of silence moulded.

Her mischief and laughter had long since gone.

I knew that and she, *'For all has been',*
she said, *'a delusion, a thing to dream on.*
Smiling, I leave you, I who was queen.'

No sighs, no speeches, no funeral oration:
the figure beside me one morning lay chill.
A small town it was, no special location:
we buried her quietly when the air was still.

Left of her hopes was a small piece of jade
she clutched at, a buckle, a talisman kept
to speak of her fortune when the last stones were laid.
Bridling, I rode: afterwards wept.

And yet I still fought, won battles again
till Geikhatu died and the new Ghazan
converting to Islam made peace with my men:
in detachments they melted, in a month all gone.

Even my best, my own bahadurs
the grizzled, most loyal, the veterans of wars.
Dry grass is our fortune which the wind hardly stirs.
I settled and waited for the Mongol laws.

For months there was nothing, no detachments came.
I wandered at leisure but mostly alone,
and still what I saw was ever the same —
mountain and steppe-land, desert and stone.

Her ending was such as all might applaud her,
but I for a long time desperately grieved.
Madrasas I joined of the darwish order,
remembering my childhood, almost believed.

Went even to Ghazan, though burdened my tread,
for tribute took only rough beads instead.
For a long time he held me, raised me, and said,
'May Allah sow wisdom on this grieved head.'

That's all that there was. I wandered away,
mumbling my blessings, the last of my race:
an old man with a donkey, hobbled and grey,
wanting his dreams and a sleeping place.

For You Have Lived

For you have lived, dear Dominique: your heart
can celebrate the heights I've never known,
those painful joys and sorrows that impart
their strange infractions to our lives. My own
careers, if I may call them that — which give
to book-lined sanctuaries their evening light,
illuminating all the timid ways we live,
forever fearful and much hid from sight —
are like some butterfly that beats in vain,
in gaudy helplessness, its tattered wings
repeatedly against the window pane,
and wanting — who knows what? Those far-off things
by which, and fervently, as with a child,
the day is suddenly unloosed and wild.

Of course at times we've been ourselves: a glow
of true conviviality with friends
that animates this world of outward show.
It spreads before us as the suppers end
in warm contentment and benevolence
to all around us as we walk on home.
Perhaps in new companionship we sense
an earlier world, and one in which we roam
long distances but knowing all too well
that happiness eludes our outstretched hands.
We are but instances, by which we tell
the tracks of others in those sunrise lands.
In this plain world we live, while unconfessed
go all the varied hopes we once possessed.

We age, said Dominique. Eventually
we lose the earnestness, and let regress
the fading distances that make us see
the past blocked out in warm forgetfulness.

At least I think so. Hope so. Madeleine
and Julie: unknown to me where either lives.
I think of them, and constantly, but then
with not that urgency, which yearning gives
to our perplexed and wounding paths. It's true
that something still can walk upon my grave
and echo what I'd onetime hoped to do,
but these are old exactions that I wave
aside, lest penitence and unforced fasts
become the staple of our smiling pasts.

The Kentish Weald

Here then we left you, reluctantly, far
from your kinsfolk, your friendships, home.
One with the quiet of the soft Kent loam —
you who were bluff and so jocular.

A shade in this green but autumnal scene
of surnames sprinkled over the Weald:
a speck unyellowed though seasons yield
only rough pastures where fields had been.

There is nothing to talk of. You got
odd jobs, were married, widowed, worked
on in timber, were foreman and shirked
only retirement and then forgot

the functions of skills laboriously learned,
gave them all up, took the bachelor part.
Jovial and wary, was ever a heart
consulted, so wanted, and unconcerned?

I did try, we all did, to call you friend,
you were phoned, invited, birthdays remembered,
You cut us all off, turned inward, and tended
that large green Skoda to the end.

I have placed cut dahlias although you cared
only for music — Mantovani, pops,
choral and church at your frequent stops
of a life down the slow lane that should have fared

further than this. For the last time I look
around me and lift the latch gate shut.
Immense and parochial, the past years glut
with sadness the roads you never took.

In affections unused our progenies die.
No thunder there is, or elevation:
by graves past naming or enumeration
stand the trees, the bracken, and a small patch of sky.

Then Comes the Winter

Then comes the winter, where the high head grieves
for what it loses, seeing over them
a sense of passage out, which interweaves

our life with others in that floating hem
of further giving: things inanimate,
which have their presence nonetheless, and stem

from our releasing them, that natural state
in which we lose identity, one got
so painfully and after such a wait

on this our grieving earth. All things are not
for us, nor made for us, who swiftly pass
beyond this briefly-tended garden spot.

Imperiously, in time's unclouded glass,
we lose the outlines of our lives, once earned
as winds consorting with the summer grass,

and so unconsciously, when we're concerned
with simple restlessness that is our lives,
while all around the smiling spring returned,

reseeding sight with wonder, that revives
the hidden nascent thing of how we were,
that sense, half lost in us, that still survives

beyond the hopelessness the years confer,
the grief in moss-trimmed headstone through the rain,
that wealth of memories we can't inter:

the wasted fellowship, the sweet, half pain
in syllables that made up someone's name
we hardly hear but were the long refrain

of all we listened to, the distant claim
we had upon a world we couldn't plumb
the depths of, ever, but in time became.

Dead Weights

No admonitions, please, or speech;
I beg you think no more of it.
Without my stratagems, must I repeat
the dead weights in my thoughts this week?

Yes, I will admit they flew at me,
mocking, with their sharp beaks wide.
I was not in my right mind
walking on the streets that day.

Certainly, as through the city
street by street the houses lit,
the trees were in conspiracy,
and shadows filled each balcony.

From portents figured on the air
I turned all night as by fever crossed:
the blond, long body, the shaken breasts,
the brusque and heartless tump of hair.

Will you not hold me and longer in those arms?
Say, will you not, that self-wounding cease?
At that brief-made armistice
truly I shall abrogate all claims.

From nightfall riding, riding, I do not reach
the golden city, nor the steep
corral of thunder, but must stoop
to drink of your dark font and rage.

After, in the coronals of quiet, in the sunlight
laughing, you said, "Remember, I am
a woman. I am not won
by words held back or passionate."

Lightness in the air, and that air you leading.
yet when I looked again I saw,
endlessly replicated, the door
closing, your instep turning and receding.

Why? How can it matter now what happens?
What will happen happens. Great
buildings come down, and in their place
the small, the vernacular, in their patterns.

Torments winding from the air turn down.
We had our time, which was. It passes.
We stand in daylight and the glances
fade to nothing and are gone.

Do Not Leave Me

O do not leave me on this dark earth here
alone and wanting that expected voice.
What future pleasure is there given choice
in things most beautiful that are not dear

to ways I chose, or may have chosen me?
I am more pledged and true as now you go
towards that further world we all shall know:
more given to loving you I'll never be.

Whatever place we go to, heights above,
to nothingness, or to the hell below,
what is it we thoughtless children know
when all that's given us is how to love?

But let us keep those touchstones close to heart,
inviolable, intact, beyond the years,
for all, through sorrowing, this realm of tears
dissolve as summers from themselves depart

with many a dazed farewell and backward look,
bewildering us who know not what to say.
On each occasion and at each delay
our sense of passage out must also brook

a little restlessness, when all things end
in long imponderables we cannot know,
but trust the forwarding as on we go
and to the silent lands at last descend.

To Be Alive

To be alive and feel the spring begun
within itself and have the golden shout
in life that's echoing and never done

with names and places that without a doubt
we shall not see again, a world that's gone
though still, continually, we think about.

How is that possible? The sun that shone
upon a house or wood or field still shines
as though eternally, and yet anon

the vast and breathing world around resigns
itself to what was then and of a time
which, like the sun in splendour, then declines

to what is scarcely there. The youth in prime
of love or self-sufficiency, which each day draws
to certainty, becomes a distant mime,

a thin, faint shadow of itself, a cause
we barely grasp at, though the waking day
obeys habitually its self-same laws

that turn unconscionable. Can we not say
how brief and passing all our warm hours are,
that life is bountiful but doesn't stay?

And shan't we stand in tears at that, and far
from being comforted, would ever see
that sadness trailing in the evening star?

That's what I am and write from, what I'll be
to those who read my works, who with their eyes
regain the wonder once reposed in me.

Why do we live and with renewed surprise
pass by these miracles, and do not feel
in each day done with more a little dies?

We should in reverence and quiet kneel
and think of what is here as some new start
towards the purposing our works reveal

The Mistletoe

Most wantonly when coppices are bare
of all but evergreens in chilly gloss,
and there is only an endemic loss
in what we, walking, gaze on everywhere.

In sheaves the leaves have fallen: each clasped hand
lies cast aside, and whether up or down
is frail and decomposing, green to brown,
like invitations left from summer lands.

And yet the mistletoe is in the trees,
a parasite that with untidy leaves
is simply present, one that never grieves
at fall of leaf and fruit the woodland sees.

And therefore holy in the Druids' sight,
who went in awe of such unworldliness,
where nondescript and scattered blooms undress
their tiny bodices to globes of white.

The flailing tempests and the scorching snow,
emboldened hailstones hurtled from the sky
will have their purposes, though gods know why
they made the mute, unwinking mistletoe.

Blessings

The world is how we know it, what we wake
to in each opened moment of our lives
which otherwise are obdurate if not opaque

to all embodiments of goods and wives,
that blessed enabling that is always ours,
as promised surely as the pilgrim strives

to reach those self-delighting, heavenly powers
that rise instinctive in the air we breathe,
the light perpetual out of noonday hours.

With this I take my final parting, leave
to you this world of wonders, pray my tongue
was ever honest with you, will bequeath

a swelling sense of happiness among
the brethren of our faithful here below,
in harmony with what the angels sung.

Which we may hear, if listening as we go
about His purposes, and quietly trace
the lineaments beyond this world we know.

So blessings of His word, and may His grace
attend you always as you journey on
to sense the forwardness of that far place

that's ours in majesty, when all is gone
from us, our breath, our bodies, those we love:
and we but paths on whom His mercy shone.

Other People's Lives

The mourners mostly have gone home, but here
about these plots of other people's lives
I pick my steps, now noticing the trees
arrayed in canopies of sun-warmed leaves,
how sky beyond goes on diminishing
to placid but unbending blue,
beneath which lie the raw earth graves
and flowers large with messages:
'Much missed.' 'You were the best of mums.'
'Devoted to the family.'
All trite, and heart-felt, hurting those
who must not think of that soft body there,
with scars for eyes now wide asleep.

Nor let themselves feel older, sensing
that the dead are always travelling on,
beyond the body or its troubled nights.

Otherwise, our lives stay much the same:
we get up, go about our business, nightly
turn to sleep, as through a world
become more porous and intractable,
more filled with gaps as lights about the evening lands,
in farms and suburbs and apartment blocks,
go out abruptly into darkened rooms,
to after-images that wake us with their sudden
falls to emptiness and numbing pains.

And so it's quietly, one by one,
the living take their leave of us
and go out into instances,
adrift and tangled as the sunlight is
about these wind-touched trails of leaves:
beautiful and impenitent
of time's involuntary affections.

Fill With Praise

Our memories are part of us, their smiles
and comradeship to show the path before;
it is their charity will shorten miles
that lead us glad or wearied to that waiting shore

where we must leave our erstwhile friends and wives,
and bid goodbye to all this warm earth was,
its joys and bitterness, its hurried lives
that never answered to our long 'because?'

But why indulge such questionings, which come
to be but sadnesses that fill the trees
with urgent restlessness. We never plumb
the least of our most pressing mysteries.

We live our lives as other lives are kept
within the scope of shaped imaginings:
in dreams and conjurations we accept
the insights sudden rain or sunlight bring.

No more than that, although we still would wear
the things not made for us, nor shaped to be:
some shade inhabiting the brimming air
that goes beyond our brief identity

with this, the world in splendour, given us
to room a little in, and to spend our days
in thought and new-found wonder at, and thus,
through all our ministries, to fill with praise.

Original Sources

Please note that poems listed here as originating in *Julius Caesar*, *Aries Rising*, *The Nutcracker* and *Small Talk* collections can now be found in the later sections of *A Book of Songs*.

Let No Radiances Conspire	Verse Writing Guide
Morning in the Grass	Morning in the Grass
The Snowdrop	Petticoats Book of Light Verse
The Painter	Verse Writing Guide
The Nightingale	A Book of Places
Me Like You	Me Like You (excerpt)
Châu Minh Mai	Still Abiding Fire Two (excerpt)
High Homes in the Weald	Morning in the Grass
Youth	A Book of Songs
Penang	A Book of Places (excerpt)
Little Girl	A Book of Songs
Caesar Remembers	Julia Caesar
We Had a Little Farm	Meg and I (excerpt)
Wastelands	Some Other Person
For You the Most Missed	A Book of Songs
Wessex	Wessex (excerpt)
Out Walking	A Book of Places (excerpt)
Middlesex	A Book of Places (excerpt)
When You and I Were Young	Petticoats Book of Light Verse

The Summer Sky	Petticoats Book of Light Verse
The Primrose	Petticoats Book of Light Verse
Thunderstorms	Morning in the Grass
Special	Verse Writing Guide
Trailing Sleeves	Petticoats Book of Light Verse
Tangled in her Arms	A Book of Songs
Forfeits	Petticoats Book of Light Verse
Only Half Awake	Petticoats Book of Light Verse
I Am the Softly Yielding One	Petticoats Book of Light Verse
O My Love	A Book of Songs (excerpt)
Eight Small Notes	A Book of Songs
Manners	Morning in the Grass
Afterwards	A Book of Songs (excerpt)
From Consutia: Thoughts	Julius Caesar
Country Folk	A Book of Songs
This Small Sketch of You	A Book of Songs
Deptford	Some Other Person
Kennet	Kennet (excerpt)
Walking Out	Petticoats Book of Light Verse
One Earring Lost	A Plain Tale
Fabulous Night	A Book of Songs
Native Powers	Morning in the Grass
You're Matted in My Eyelids	Petticoats Book of Light Verse

A Toast	Petticoats Book of Light Verse
Mercia	Some Other Person
Summer Nights	Petticoats Book of Light Verse
Cookham	A Book of Places
Going West	A Book of Places
Norfolk	Meg and I (excerpt)
The West Riding Towns	A Book of Places
Far Out	Some Other Person
Careers	A Book of Places
A Tale of the Islands	Book of Places
A Well-Made Man	Dominique (excerpt)
I Was Older	Let Those That Have Eras (excerpt)
Local Histories	A Book of Places
Voices	A Book of Places
Baraka Café	A Book of Places
Still Life with María Jesús	Verse Writing Guide
The New World	Aries Rising (excerpt)
Villeneuve sur Yonne	A Book of Places
It's Time	The Italian Affair (excerpt)
Transters	Transters (excerpts)
Most Marvellous	Shuja Khan
The Stage is Set	I Saw It All
Chilean Politics	Small Talk

La Traviata	Small Talk
Leaders	Petticoat Book of Light Verse
La Carrousel	Small Talk
The World	Travels of Ibn Batuta
Climbing Free	Climbing Through
Under Orders	A Plain Tale (excerpts)
Mandu	Satyavati
To the New World	Book of Places
The New Chile	Book of Places
Budapest	Book of Places
The Poppy	Petticoat Book of Light Verse
Ely Cathedral	Some Other Person
Surrey Heights	Some Other Person
The Peak District	Some Other Person
The Windrush	Some Other Person
Greek Stater	Coinlands
Indo-Greek Tetradrachm	Coinlands
Indo-Scythian Tetradrachm	Coinlands
Roman Follis	Coinlands
Byzantium Solidus	Coinlands
Odysseus	Still Abiding Fire One
Home For Us	The Nutcracker
Winter Journey	A Book of Places

Old Embassies	Like Us (excerpt)
War	Like Us (excerpt)
Notre Dame	Mary Queen of Scots Play
Mammoths	Planet Earth
Snowdonian Ice	Planet Earth
Warwick Castle	Some Other Person
Magna Graeca	A Book of Places
Venice	My Gran Pitorre (excerpt)
Beyond	Like Us (excerpt)
The Temple Church	A Book of Places
Inward Journey	Petticoat Book of Light Verse
Us At Last	A Book of Places (excerpt)
Flanders	A Book of Places
Heinrich Ludwig Arndtsfeld	Still Abiding Fire Book Two
Death Throes	Julia Caesar
Gonzalo Quezada	Still Abiding Fire Book Two
Old Manor Walls	Petticoats Book of Light Verse
St. Paul's Cathedral	A Book of Places
Teresa	Shah Abbas Play (excerpt)
Radna and Krishna	Still Abiding Fire One (excerpt)
Cleopatra's Last Speech	Cleopatra Play (excerpt)
Death of Satyavati	Satyavati (excerpt)
The End of It	Shuja Khan (excerpt)

For You Have Lived	Dominique (excerpt)
Kentish Weald	Book of Places
Then Comes the Winter	Still Abiding Fire Three (excerpt)
Dead Weights	A Book of Songs
O Do Not Leave Me	Petticoats Book of Light Verse
To Be Alive	Still Abiding Fire Three (excerpt)
The Mistletoe	Petticoats Book of Light Verse
Blessings	Travels of Ibn Batuta (excerpt)
Other People's Lives	Verse Writing Guide
Fill With Praise	Petticoats Book of Light Verse