



THE
WOODLANDS
DARKEN

poems by colin j holcombe

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by

Colin John Holcombe

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1. Introduction

We buckle up and watch the needle spin
as, prospects narrowing to straight ahead,
the coloured cavalcade of days begin

to take us through that shadow-world the dead
will dandle out before us, constantly
beguiled and shifting in each wind-tossed head.

And then it's light again, and we will see
some diner, garage or communal shop
tear up and blaze on past. A fence or tree

trails off companionably until we stop,
when clouds go on before us and the blue
of far horizons settles on some mountain top

whose climb is part of us, as though it too
rose out of adolescent lands, that space
we bear reluctantly in all we do.

It's then we think of young Battuta, trace
the Qarakhanids or the Golden Horde,
the whirl of dervishes to resting-place.

And think how Huanzang's journeyings accord
with wisdoms winnowed out of days' deceits
in scriptures recollected, versed and stored.

Or merchant totting up the day's receipts,
Pizarro marking out the lands he'd rule,
the Arab voyager in tropic heats.

Of how the caliphs fought with jinn and ghoul,
for faiths their followers would soon deform,
as barefoot villager returned from school.

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,
repentances from simply warm and near,
and not the soul at one with its disguise.

2. Dante and Beatrice

Sent on reluctantly, compelled by fear,
they passed the solemn warning overhead:
abandon hope all ye who'd enter here.

With footsteps faltering, by Virgil led
along the pathway to the steep descent,
they gave up sun for hell's dark fumes instead,

and came to Charon, when they no wise went
across the turbid waters of the Styx
as those in whom all hope of good is spent,

but turned off downwards where the lightning picks
out apparitions and the rasping sighs
that come from mournfulness no tongue depicts:

the innumerable and countless dead, whose eyes
see nothing of this world, not good, not ill,
nor mind's encompassing what breath defies.

Still clambering down, they ventured on until
they found great Minos guard the fractured air:
where winds' great buffetings left nothing still.

A funnelled pestilence, which everywhere
must feast on sores like leopard's spots, the Cain
that rules in councils of the she-wolf's lair.

In this they occupied a world of pain
and downward went, to drenching hurt and dross,
beyond what documentaries here contain.

To one forever exiled, with his loss
of home and livelihood, there came the press
of someone who could take him safe across

those vile propensities, to there confess,
whatever part we play, however cast,
we must continually each other bless.

A rapt beholding ever, first to last,
a creature in a crimson dress to stay
unspoken to until nine years had passed,

and tell her love upon that forward day:
a wondrous miracle she seemed in white,
although attendants moved her on her way.

To him the apparition was a sight
most sacred, beauteous, of rapturous show
that made the shadows even blazing light.

He gained his room at once, and would not go
about the populace and peopled town
but thought of what the heart should know:

that love has glory in its own renown,
and truth the splendour of the Lord's own stay
with us, as beauty needs but simple gown.

3. Romeo and Juliet

The place was Italy, where city walls
observed much pageantry and costumed strife
in swordplay, poison and continual brawls,

where sons of citizens must seek a wife
from daughters beautiful and well endowed
with wherewithal that makes for cultured life.

Engaged to Rosalind, fair Rosalind, whose proud
and nubile loveliness we have no sight
of, ever, in that gilded youthful crowd,

to Romeo on such a star-hung night
it fell as one in whom sweet voices bred
a radiance wherewith the lamps shone bright.

For there an innocent and gentle head
was bent to mystery that newly weds
will meet though soon from this harsh world is sped.

There laughing girls will lose their maidenheads
and bloodily, if not their lives as well.

Relentlessly the tide of warfare spreads

to city, town and fields and upland fell,
when wolves are ravenous and none withstand
the full calamity that churchmen tell

is surely merited. They have no say
in what their social betters have to do:
it is the suffering who come to pay,

that have no preference or point of view
but live and let all others live, and be
as wise in tolerance as you would too.

Alas that men must lust, and destiny
descend to loot, for all that pious folk
chose situations where they will not see

how history passes, how the measures broke
the Constitution: still before their eyes
their man was reputable though never spoke.

So comes it conscience is consumed by lies,
by sly inexactitude, by where it's at,
when that most precious in us slowly dies.

And afterwards? A world of TV chat,
of worked-at marriage and the brief affair,
the brochured holiday that's strangely flat.

But in imagination, how we care
for keepsakes, letters in their attic box,
the lock, unfading, of that golden hair.

Suppose they'd set up home, with him well stocked
with tiresome platitudes and racist jokes,
and she more shrewish, with her hair close cropped,

What then? What daylight-irised air can coax
what was so vulnerable, so soft and tall,
from heaviness that cautious age evokes?

And so the silvered spectacle we call
a two-hour traffic of the crowded stage
is not the voyaging, the long-sea haul

to times and countries where our words engage
the lost horizons and the mounting cost
of numbing spectacles we can't assuage.

From such presentiments, however tossed,
we come as pilgrims to our crowded place
in happiness for all the hard ways crossed,

but still denied that lasting sense of grace
that's apt to vanish, and acquire the mood
of sturdy truculence, and never face

the what and why we were. The years intrude
what this one felt, or what another said
in one-time courtesies, but also hued

in bitterness and scorn of what we've wed,
the lives betrayed, by both, and, unrehearsed
as once it was with every storm-tossed head.

4. Scarlett O'Hara

Why, fiddle-de-dee, she says, why are we cursed
to wait and dilly with such likes of men?
Her prospects go with that from bad to worst.

But still there's Ashley: how she sighs again
for someone wavering where she is strong.
'My own, my dear beloved, tell me when.'

He married Melanie: he got it wrong
and barely managed at the mill she ran,
to bustling enterprise did not belong.

But then the heart delivers as it can,
and dark, unscrupulous and dashing Rett
was scalawag of course, but more the man.

Not one for self-inspection or regret,
our Scarlett married, though the boy soon died:
'It seems our partners dance a strange duet.'

At that she put her grieving role aside
and in her widow's weeds broke each taboo
that, if not scandalized, was sorely tried.

Then burned around them all the south they knew.
With Tara devastated, slave-hands fled,
what is a plucky Irish lass to do

but scrimp and patch and work the fields still hers:
it is the land that lasts, that cannot fail:
a legacy that years will reimburse.

Invigorating though that be, a gale
of commonsense unlaced in deity,
she's out of bounds to Rhett, who's still in jail.

So then? Miss saucy southern-born will see
her future fashioned from another's beau,
her sister's rich intended: fiddle-de-dee!

She wed him, took the store and — don't you know? —
paid Tara's taxes, managed cash and men
until a stray shot laid her second low.

So there we are: a widow once again,
but now the independence she intends
to keep as Rhett negotiates the wildcat's den.

But she accepts — the talk of town — and sends
at once for jewellers, drapes and milliners,
or anyone that outrage recommends.

Why not? She thinks of all the slights and slurs
that once as Tara's girl she underwent;
besides, her dashing husband also errs.

Who knows what dive or drinking club he's lent
his reputation to or southern air:
fine gentlemen are rarely homeward bent.

But why with pride and bustle should she care
what her great brute of husband does for bed?
Her Ashley waits for her most everywhere.

And so the quarrels and the vile things said,
that hurt them both no doubt but don't inter
the part that rots as fish do, from the head.

And if, half drunk one night, he ravished her,
as much as house and lands and timber mill
she was his property and would defer

to him, and only him, not one who still
remains the ideal husband: yes, the scene
had Ashley loving her: she's sure he will.

A child originates, that's soon as been
and then the death of both-loved Bonnie Blue,
at which the animal is no more seen.

Between the ideal couple, well-to-do,
the distance widens, though they still appear
polite, as many do, and not untrue.

But Rhett, the scallywag, the profiteer
goes off to find some southern, other way
with' frankly I don't give a damn, my dear.'

And if tomorrow dawns another day,
the wreckages of all those bridges crossed
arrive as obstacles and mean to stay.

Those wider latitudes our childhoods lost
in tag or hopscotch hours than even then
were hardening into age's rheum and frost.

There is no buggy ride to back again,
the land is locked against us, everything
we ever had or hoped for is as men

will stare on what is gone, as hope must bring
some glint of gold beneath the unstirred moats
of matters hardly thought on, though they cling

the same, and do not leave us, which denotes
the same bewilderment at cold repasts
of women pretty in their petticoats.

5. Heloise and Abelard

We make contrition all the same: our pasts
contain this world and then the next. I know
that God's benevolence forever lasts.

And so, my dearest Abelard, I go
in sinfulness that's ever been
the source of inwardness I cannot show.

So write to me who'd be the libertine
for all your words and ever wise precepts.
From one small look remembered grows the scene

of hearing you expound the heights and depths
of God in majesty whose searing pains
the humble and the contrite soul accepts

as real, as necessary, indeed as gains
in their first paradise of earthly bliss
which our foul nature only blights and stains.

I gave myself completely and in this
have known not heaven or earth or any day
without the serpent in the garden hiss

that sinfulness will make the body pay
for its indulgences, that sun and storm
disrupt the senses in some deeper way —

as moon does water, when the heavens form
a star-hung canopy both close and deep
as mother keeps her nursling safe and warm.

But, like the lunar mansions, I too keep
my face toward your glowing happiness,
and if that's dimmed at all I also weep.

And so across the boundless distances
as when no letter comes from you, or what
you write is incomplete, does not profess

eternally your love for me, does not
perceive me as your ever waking self
in constellations that the stars begot

at our nativities, that inner wealth
with which the stars rejoicing ever move
and so more needed than unnoticed health.

But marked, stigmata'd on me, still they prove
how much propitiated in my thoughts
you are and stay with me at some remove,

that neither chastity nor prince's courts
nor silent cloister nor the haunt of prayer
when evenings' melancholy chill comports

with darkling worldliness I have to bear,
repeating with the knotted lash or strokes,
that left without you brings but nothing there.

No burst of springtime radiance that soaks
into the evening, nor a stubbled land
with fruits of autumn and the heavy yokes

of oxen hauling what comes first to hand,
rewarding faith and toil and husbandry,
that gap in giving which I gladly spanned.

For what? That little son they took from me,
the fruit of marriage and a mother's pain,
that growing handsomeness I shall not see.

Why do we write and write, and do not gain
a peace or remedy but darkest night
and long dependency? There will remain

beyond the citadels of earnest sight,
a city fabulous, albeit none
transcend uncertainties in clouded light.

6. Tristan and Isolde

It's true that Tristan, the adopted son,
was ever foremost in the wildest chase,
in any trial or hardship always won.

And true his open-hearted, manly grace
betokened kindred royal blood. The king
was glad at such succession to his place.

But not the nobles. It's a grievous thing
to be displaced by such a haffling boy,
however prettily he joust and sing.

They were resolved the king employ
the man as emissary to Ireland's court,
that from a consort there they would enjoy

a son and regency. For what they sought
was grave uncertainty, an interregnum filled
with flattery and what that pleasing brought.

Besides, the upstart Tristan might be killed
since enmity prevailed between their realms:
and as their statecraft bid them, so they built.

And Tristan went, for duty overwhelms
all fear and compromise when one has sight
of beauty riding at the sea-tossed helms.

But yet the paragon Isolde might
be won by courage only, one who'd meet
the fearsome dragon and would slay in fight.

So Tristan did. Near died, but with the feat
accomplished, claimed Isolde, as he ought,
for lord and king — but one who'd not compete

with Tristan's comeliness, her mother thought.
She brewed a potion, sent it on as well
as those two travellers to Cornwall's court.

For that they then embarked. Around them fell
the bright day's stateliness. They sat and laughed,
and drank unwittingly the loving spell,

which brought on all that followed. But one draught
was all they needed to be tangled fast
as rose is grafted into briar's haft.

So came luxuriance and, though aghast
at each one's recklessness, they went their way
as sails in billowing led on the mast.

So onward furthered all that cloudless day
with gusts of warm wind round them buffeting,
they watched the waters in their sunlit play

rise up in waves, oppose, dissolve and fling
themselves in froth and molten sun-filled drop:
they felt the happiness in everything.

They ran their fingers through each frothing top
of waves, and watched the fish glint deep below,
the gannets circling round them, squawk and drop.

They were so young and innocent, and though
much sorrow waited in the sea's dark pound
on rocks, there was no joy they would not know.

They woke in time, refreshed, and no doubt found
the world was similar but not the same,
now edged with abnegations all around.

Their fault eternally, but that is tame
beside the tawdriness their love would bring:
but neither was for conscience then or blame.

She, the voyage over, wed the king,
while he, the loyal subject, had recourse
to frank imaginings, a fearful thing.

But love's impetuous, must take its course,
and worse, imperious, when all they did
was cold adultery, without remorse.

The king divined or didn't, sometime hid
to test his wife, or what is worse, to spy:
an act his royal status should forbid.

The story differs as to how and why
they were discovered sleeping, clothed but near,
how made a naked sword between them lie.

New trysts and tangles then appear.
Some say she held the king the summer long
but lived with Tristan the remaining year.

Some say he married to undo the wrong,
in Brittany perhaps, but with a poisoned blade
reward for gallantry that came along.

It was the queen he called on first for aid,
when wife, a virgin still, keen felt the slight,
and made a vengeful but unequal trade.

Isolde came, but in the dawning light,
the rival at her ailing husband's side
could see, she said, the sails were black not white.

For her, the beautiful, rejected bride
it was the first and last deliberate lie,
but also fatal, for the husband died.

No doubt the holy angels tell us why
such penances are made long years ago
as sins within a faultless body lie.

7. Odysseus and Circe

We came upon an island good to know
it seemed, with vines and fig trees, fruits, and fed
by springs that fell and sparkled far below.

But I, most cautious, sent my men ahead
who were to reconnoitre, watch, and tell
if we with this rich prospect were misled.

We were. One Eurylochus came pell-mell
back to warn me that my trusting men
were changed to animals in some fierce spell.

Encountering, he said, a wooded den,
they'd found strange apparitions, no doubt wild,
that only growled to warn them: quiet again.

Each came up to them like a trusting child,
thrust out a long-haired paw as though aware
they were at threat or sensibly beguiled

by some admixture to the scented air
that made the wolves and pacing lions tame
but kept the den, he said, a dangerous lair.

And what there seemed soon was. For promptly came
the denizen, or keeper of the place,
with looks to set the wizened heart aflame.

She had a pleasing, slow and sovereign grace,
and bid them sit and feast and drink their fill,
and stay with her at least a little space.

Eurylochus, as though expecting ill,
refrained from eating and had drunk no wine
though loudly roistering with them, laughing till

he saw their manly gestures intertwine
with smooth-faced oafishness and troubled eyes
as bit by bit they turned to brutish swine.

In this I recognized the sea-god's guise,
but Hermes then produced the needed flower
as antidote against her fearsome lies.

He knew of Circe and too well her power
to make a man become but brute desires
that all encounter at some evil hour.

But such magnificence I met, such fires
within the eyelids wavered, met and crossed
to make the interlude that now transpires.

In wine and Circe's soft embrace were lost
the love of homeland and of everything
that lay beyond the stormy seas we crossed.

A woman's body is a wondrous thing,
and more was Circe's with her wiles aglow.
I knew the intervals that love would bring

in haunting softness to the heart, the flow
of contour lengthening out from limb to haunch
and mischief that those hooded eyes would show.

I knew what kiss or tenderness would launch
a thousand sallies on that smiling face
and that deep giving's urge she could not staunch.

I knew too well that nature: every place
was saturated with her subtle spell
and deep attraction, which I could not trace

in look or lineament, or even tell
what need it was that held me to the heart,
or if a happiness was there as well.

Yet men have destinies, and each one's part
is as the flower to blossom, fade and die:
I knew my journeying would now restart.

Yet hurtful to me was her tear-wrenched sigh,
her earnest hope to stay me, understand
the inward wailing like the seagull's cry.

I came to Ithaca, my favoured land,
and found Penelope, and freed by force
what none of those false suitors would withstand:

the love of homeland, our true inner course
that leads to home and wife and what we own,
contentment surely from a blameless source.

And yet there dwells within the lands I've known
the well-wrought bodies and the reachings for
the scents inherent in each sun-blessed stone,

the cry of osprey and the ocean's roar
that throws the pebbles up and in its salt-
bound headiness revives the long-lost shore

that we were young on, strong, and not at fault
for callous tardiness that age condones,
or shameful compromise the years exalt

to earthly gains. For in my very bones
was Circe holding till the sweetness came
as that long rush of sea in pebbled groans

will strew the nature out of us, our name
in endless visitings, by which we men
are not impregnable nor long the same.

8. Laila and Manjun

Marriageable, she would no other then
consider, look at with those wide dark eyes
and overrode sage counsel once again

with pleas, entreaties: it seemed not wise
to countermand so obdurate a sight,
but wait for heart to change, and temporise.

And Majnun similarly was counselled right:
just be responsible: she shall be yours.
So Majnun promised, and the day dawned bright.

But love's rich overflowing's ever cause
for disappointment. On a schoolyard pet
Majnun first hung a flower, then kissed its paws.

The boy was mad, and well they'd paid their debt
to tolerance, and wanted no more part
of lunacies a marriage must beget.

And so they left, and Laila lived apart
from Majnun's family, though still she felt
no doubt the same upwelling of the heart.

Of course in time she told him where they dwelt
and equally he followed on despite
the pains and hardships that the journey spelt

and with a camel driver travelled day and night,
until, emaciated, in a mosque he lay,
where Laila came and tended to his plight

till that miscarried. 'Here, and to this day,
we're cursed continually by this fool boy':
Her parents moved her on without delay.

Of course they did: a daughter is a joy
eternally, as every father understands,
and worth the stratagems he must deploy.

But here, in this hard land of foreign sands,
the far Sahara, now the lover found
but waste and rock and wind-dried stands

of tattered thistles, where the ground
glowed incandescent, and the tawny smoke
of dust-storms whirled about them, far around.

No lion menaced him, or jackal broke
the code that bound him as a holy man
who seemed rejoicing at his heavy yoke.

Odd strangers came, a passing caravan,
and Laila also, maybe, it is said,
and where her uncurbed grieving then began.

She saw a thing so desiccated, wed
to desert elements, to wind and sun
as is the thorn-tree broken out of rocky bed.

He hardly noticed her, and there was won
no answering softness to her tears
or approbation she should ever shun.

her parents' call to marriage that the years
were roundly ripening in her hopes instead
beyond the press of lengthening thoughts and fears.

He was not one alive. So Laila wed,
perhaps lived happily, for all she thought
continually of Majnun on his stony bed.

So passed the years, and what was sought
in love eternal was betrayed to trust
in mere proprieties and what they brought.

They served their time, were buried. Their soft dust
was then commingled, and unwavering laid
itself inscrutably, as so it must.

9. Marilyn

So Marilyn, dear Marilyn, who made
the bubbling blue-eyed bombshell such a hoot
in all the comedies she ever played

as dumb and unaware her swelling fruit
in lips and eyelids and developed bust
might in a moment burst to birthday suit.

That Marilyn of adolescent lust,
the tramp of seedy bandhalls, coke and drink
when both the Kennedys betrayed her trust,

from which idolaters can never shrink
from questioning the unsolved way she died,
her strange associates, compelled to think

of murder, overdose or suicide —
each book digs up some strange and darker find,
which, for the godly, means that doubts reside

within a commonplace and prurient mind:
who sleeps with whom and how the pattern sifts
out what is worst from worse though ill-defined.

She had the gamin's genuine acting gifts
of soft projection while still underneath
the body was less easy in its daytime shifts.

The frank development, the perfect teeth
of chorus girl and so the hint of vice,
the ripe abundance in its autumn's sheath

that like a maize-god spoke of sacrifice,
absorbed the worshipper but with a gaze
that smart suburbia would not call nice.

And was so always from the earliest days,
that doubtful child attributed to Mortgeson,
that Norma Jean her mother couldn't raise.

The homes, delinquency, the moving on,
the long if intermittent use of drugs,
the independence that's too briefly gone

to gross voluptuousness: the figure hugs
a Magdalenian tomb's embrace
in mother buxomness with heavy dugs.

And die she did, and left a shifting space
fast filled with rumour, though with nothing proved:
the last great image of another race

when giants filled our early years, and moved
in their Neptunian and hidden way
with traits propitiated, not removed:

the fear of falling in each casual lay,
the body's shameless giving down a path
of urgency we cannot halt or stay,

that brings us nowhere, not to inner hearth
of pleasure, manhood, nor the way we court
what is belatedly our better half.

10. Radha and Krishna

The woodlands darken and, absorbed in thought,
comes Radha, lingering though keen to wed
her waiting avatar in honeyed sport.

So many dancing there, by Krishna led,
and unafflicted by the love-god's pain,
at which the worldly friend to Radha said:

'But who from reckless falling would refrain?'
It is an ecstasy that none will blame,
that joy of having with the love-god lain.

So proud, deliberating Radha came
to taste of Madhava and then concur
he was commensurate with local fame,

and find, as warm malaya breezes stir
the wild kambalda and ketaka trees,
that dancing Madhava was gone from her.

Not wind or moon or sandal paste can please
the one who's solitary, provoked by cares
as is the lotus by the chilling breeze.

But Krishna laughing at his honeyed snares
is ever dancing on with practiced ease
from shadowed leaves among his forest lairs:

the great progenitor, perpetual tease,
but also urgent, ardent, well disposed
as wind's possession of the love-sick trees.

He pleads, he whispers till at last reposed
upon what charmed and wheedling word could fear
and so whatever cowgirl had supposed.

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 multi-global, 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, what banking serves,
the thousands that a single day devours.

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.