

# A Book Of Places

colin john holcombe



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by Colin John Holcombe

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The poems are arranged in the order of various travels and postings, but not necessarily the date of writing. I apologize for not acknowledging the small presses in which earlier drafts of some of these pieces have appeared: composition extends over many years and I no longer have the record of what was published where.

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# POEMS OF ENGLAND

## 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, rolled  
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 in large commission. 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  
a miscellany of bones prick out the earth,  
where the air is unhealthy with their fumigation  
and 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.

## Country Weddings

A month of weddings. Fuchsia, organdies and haze  
on wheat fields thick as milk or new-mown grass:  
*Verily hath it come to pass  
that the Lord God is come unto our days.*

*Homeward is anointing. Copses in the evening light  
move as unshorn sheep upon the hills. Beetles chatter  
over streams and scatter.  
The bat looms up the shuttle of its flight.*

*'We are a simple people on the brow of evening.  
Our thought is open to thy quarter and thy curse.  
You plant and cull and intersperse  
terrors with the justice of your seeming.*

*'Not to claim thy worship is to spurn our doubt,  
To bless the unclean folk who couple in thy grove.  
Things tumble to a close.  
Take care, O Lord! to keep infection out.*

*'These are our kin, for whom the thumbscrews turn.  
We flagellate ourselves as their blood we spill —  
Oh we do, Lord, we do: You fill  
us with the spatter as their entrails burn.*

*All that is past. Past. In quiet and at school  
our kith in coloured pinafores and hours  
see not thy promise dowers  
our land with sadness and with miracle.*

*The generations pass but I have marked thy ways  
from festival to festival, by altars dwelt.  
In earnest I have felt  
Thy sweetness flourish in me all my days.'*

I cast these country manners as the sundials weep  
their ciphers in the stone. Hours retreat  
into the Albion of heat.  
Rest, past hope or wickedness, old man — and sleep.

## The Botanical Gardens at Kew

What I like about them is their immaculate  
order in trees, lawns, flowers, the crisp  
flutings in the clouds, so that even the great  
wind-irruptions of the visitors drift

To coral pools of quiet. Here they unpack,  
collect and picnic. Thereafter, uncomplaining  
at five, six, children trailing, they trot back  
flushed and pleased as from potty-training

To go out whence they came. The ground stays  
modestly in pocket. The propped-up trees  
spread a little to catch the stretched-out rays  
of a late sun extending in tar-macadamed ease

Across the lawns, where soon the tutelary powers  
will rise again in darkness through the long night hours.

## 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.

## Funeral at St. Peter Port: 1797

Captain Blaines, if he could,  
would step into his narrow bed,  
stiffly, briskly, military fashion,  
salute, lie down and then be dead.

Tide and compass and the albatross  
take me through the seas I cross.

One to read, two to pray,  
four to heave the box away,  
heap the gravel, leave it at that:  
not this empty, whole caboodle.

Smoke unruffles, and the bugle, wailing;  
coast and battery the shore light hailing.

Not my daughter, less my wife,  
brought to spinster- or to widowhood.  
Let their virtuous thoughts inflect,  
spired by fingers, heavenward.

Full the clouds, and my captaincy  
is broad as daylight on the sea.

So clang the bell now, my good man;  
pipe last orders and be done:  
in rough good humour, as the sea may run,  
unroll the mizzen, chart and rum!

## The Devil's Visit

First railways — high-pillared in brick and bringing  
boas, top hats, and a strange notion  
that the sea sanding the promontories was not singing  
of the Lord's handiwork but its own, frozen

In sea-fern and coral in each shore-strewn drift  
tumbling as ichthyosaur through the sunlit chalk.  
Trade continued to thrive, though, and each tide's lift  
brought in fresh stowage to cash or cork.

But all of course changed when out they came  
despicably in their thousands from cliff-face and ven:  
shells, teeth and bones to be given name  
by societies of soon-to-be-quite-famous men

In spectacles and waistcoats. The whole place was caught  
up in a colourful tumult of twinkling picks.  
*Will the Lord help us?* cried the locals, brought  
to the brink of starvation by such tricks.

Some things still got through — the rum and baccy,  
but the coastguards gathered, and if they walked  
smiling in twos, they were watchful and lackey  
to these eminences toiling, of whom the country talked.

Suspicion, I suppose, falls on the local stonemason  
or lobster pot makers, though no one knows.  
*So we'll make 'em a creature as should place them  
back in that Ice Age as far as their theory goes.*

Something like that, which you can read more  
of in the Nat. Hist. Soc. Proceedings, I.  
O.W. A large tooth was found, a long claw  
in pieces, and then finally the entire

Skeleton engirdled with splayed-out horns.  
The vicar came down, shuddered. *There's no doubt who  
this is, my brethren, and his unearthing warns  
us to read carefully the bible - whose word is true.*

Well, that did wake the country, and for a year or two,  
till the hoax was examined — when in hushed undertones —  
churchmen disputed, and public — a market grew  
for boxed sets at Christmas of these 'devil's bones'.

A Godsend for natives. But when children now race  
up, down and screaming, yelling for more,  
I'm inclined to think, here, in this sunshine place  
the Devil may literally have shown his claw.

## Waking

Waking in our bodies at the small  
flare of dawn, trying as they fall,  
untroubled but fearful, we have them wilted  
into some apparel of what was wanted

When we entered, years back, on our married states,  
we find day is about, and that nothing waits  
for us to dress, wash, get the car out, snatch  
a kiss from the kiddie, and with hand on latch

Pause and look back: a glass turned away  
from the playground, the pictures, the sunlit glade  
to a thing unsettled, half packed-and-gone:  
it always seems now a little later on.

But bed it began with: not to sleep alone —  
to have our own doorbell, put down phone  
on purposes all out lives belonging  
to bills, papers, to status-seeking —

Inseparable, part of the steady concessions  
that folds out our life to brand possessions  
which really contained us, were not absurd,  
though the clergyman rise in his long black word:

*Returns to the earth this thing of dust:*  
*as in Thee, Lord, only we repose our trust.*  
Still, if that's what we end in, here we begin:  
each of us turning and turning his small hopes in.

## Commercial Hotels

If I have to stay over, it is the run-down hotels I go for, stuck away behind car parks or railway stations, under bridges even, with two or three rooms only to weigh

In with. They are the same: antiquely furnished, the linoleum polished to nothing, the curtains with a wry pucker in their welcome — in short, loathsome places that people would not want to die

In, you'd think, if they took them at all. Hours are tight, observed, remarked on. You cannot put a 'Mr. and Mrs. R.U. Smith, one night' in the book here. The shoe is on the other foot

All right, with a vengeance, and you must learn to make yourself acceptable to the fly-blown haddock who keeps the desk or one-time bar. Stake out time with her, play dominoes, or tie

Crepe on your arm for an outrageous aunt whose funeral has brought you, you say, and very sad it is the elderly are done down so, and can't you please have the room the others had?

But I like them, as I would perhaps with so much time on my hands, before dinner — provided or not — in the evening anyway, when climb around the room like a clematis the soft, hot

Hours of someone else's life: when you lean on the small, grilled balcony and look at what former incumbents have looked at, a scene pregnant with endings, not depressing, at least not

To one of a bookish temperament, for whom days are diversions — trees in the square, under the street light or neon minstrelsies, where come the men who walk later the air

Out of their lungs as you do, or would if you stayed here a while — months, years, lived here of course, or anywhere really, since what we intrude we cannot evade or dispense with, it seems, so that when the

Whole purpose of moving around, of being here and there present but paying, with no one to thank or fit in with, or blame, or even be near, it's best, if you're asked, to leave the 'Comments' page blank.

## Local Histories

(In Memoriam: J. H. 1910-93)

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, before 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 stayed back, 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.

## All Stations

Both of them jumped in — first he, then she — just making it before the doors screeched shut.

And as they caught each other and the train took off, smoothly syphoned us away

To Neighbours, low cholesterols and kiddies' chatter, we all of us I think watched

These two young people fling themselves exhausted into empty seats, open

To the rough abundance of each other. For it was odd them being here with us

Paid office workers, PAs with smart exteriors, the odd works manager

Who as the train gained daylight grew more angularly man. At Wembley Park the two

Got off. Others too. And those of us remaining found our thoughts had centred on that first

Full sexual congress with our wives, which wasn't cataclysmic or the same, so that

As one by one we all got off, far up the line, we hardly noticed it had rained.

## Madge

*Now, Madge, I said, you think about it: what we've known about each other, forty years or more, must be. And in all that time I've never been the one to poke my nose in have I? No. Just counsel when you needed it. And never wrong, now was I? So when I say you've had it, leave this place and all its memories, well that is right. And Tam's not coming back, not ever, Madge.*

Of course I thought he might. Our Tam's a rogue, but oh so charming, quite unscrupulous. No doubt she'd have some nest egg tucked away — That's what he thought, I'm sure of it, for there he was, as large as life, the first week of her move. Repulsive, wasn't it? Poor Madge, she's always put upon. But not this time. Oh no, she may have cried, gone on her knees, but nothing came of it. I'd seen to that.

She'd bought the unit here. Had to. Madge at first was very hesitant, but glad to let me take her through it, decorate the one small bedroom and the kitchen — all you need, I told her. Should have been, but like the goose she is she fluffed it, turned her back on other residents — I ask you was that sensible? And worse: she even intimated that she wanted out.

No backbone really to her, little soul  
she was. They get a few like her, the Warden  
says. They change — they go to pieces, sit  
for days in silence, solitary, can't be reached.  
You would have thought the opportunity  
was something wouldn't you for making friends?  
Like going back to school from summer hols?  
But not for her. Just flipped and left it all  
to Tam, the goose. We might have guessed. Poor Madge.

## Babs and Me

Just the one? I'll take it, shall I? You jump in.  
It's only Heavitree. I used to walk  
it, there and back, but Barbara worried — dickey heart  
and all that, so that, well, when we had some money  
given us we rather thought we'd go for gold.  
Not bad for somewhat minor academics.  
No, don't protest: that's what we were, and very happy.  
Wouldn't do for you, of course — Oh no, Babs  
and I could see that. Why we got on well together.  
Of course she liked you — thought you mad though, I mean  
where was it that you went to? Yes, that's it — Iran.  
Hardly what a woman dreams of, is it, really?

You didn't marry? No, I thought not. Not the kind  
to settle down to garden, kids and mortgage . . .  
Well, that is right: it's not for everyone, and really  
I don't know whether Babs and I were all  
that close, although devoted, so much attuned.  
I'd have sold my soul for her, but she —  
well, you know Babs — so airy-fairy . . . Beautiful blue eyes  
she had... I thought if I could see them every  
day then I'd be happy. And so I was. Oh yes.  
And Barbara didn't say that much. I didn't  
know, until the end of course . . . Strange to think  
that all those years she'd kept you close to mind.

No, please. That's not the point. Don't need the money.  
The last thing I'd have got in touch for.  
No: We ought to talk, I thought. So many things  
I didn't know about my wife. And wife for thirty  
years you know, which makes you think. Except  
we're being rather maudlin. Look, see there:  
our hall - that hasn't changed, nor Lopes's, or Queen's,  
But for the rest: you'll be surprised. 'Course,  
what with last Vice-Chancellor, and industry,  
it's not the land of lotus-eaters now,

but still a little dreamy, homely, respectable.  
A land of old contentments, yes, that's true.

Don't mind the dawdle, do you? Thought you'd want to see  
the promised land, the hallowed ground. What's happened . . .  
not that it's too good. Cathedral's the same. The rest —  
new shopping precincts, one-way streets, etc. —  
town planning's done for more than Jerry managed, but —  
that's progress, yes. We liked it. After Oxford,  
all that mock humility in stone — the old  
formalities with nothing left inside — it was  
heaven to have a small detached and cat —  
Perkins we called him — and we weren't ambitious.  
We got about. We both had conferences, and then,  
well, small things kept us going, usually.

So that is that. Not much to speak of. One could wonder  
how it is the years have slipped away,  
and all so cosseting, without reflection. Nothing  
all that marvellous was done. Of course  
I had my papers, not too bad, and there was Babs . . .  
But then the will was quite a revelation.  
And yet you say you never saw her, corresponded,  
met in all those years? How strange. You think  
her gift a lifeline to the past? Not even that?  
The ship was going down far out to sea,  
and no one noticing? I see. Yes. Wouldn't say  
too much, then would it now, for Babs and me?

## The Nightingale

(Some observations on an illustration by Edmund Dulac in a children's picture book.)

The foliage of the apple and walnut  
are dropping green into the peridot  
of sky. The fig-tree ripens into glut,  
for now it is both autumn here and not.

Moonlit by the lantern, a nightingale  
pours such viva voces on the air  
that truth is in the music and its veil  
re clothed the garden, which could be anywhere. . .

But then the guns barked, and the children fell  
all over Europe in their uniforms,  
and, as they did so, their great muddled spell  
of antique knights, of Ali, and the unicorn

Shrank, looked different, not so eloquent —  
indeed was fraudulent, a repugnant joke.  
From halls and garages the books were sent  
out as jumble, and a new age spoke

Of working men, of destinies, that views  
of gardeners, not their gardens, form the state,  
and nightingales were birds — *Luscinia* — that use  
larynx exhalation to attract a mate.

And so the past we fashion is a door,  
which, if we enter, is by something dimmed:  
and wrong to think that in these pages, for  
a moment even, what that music hymned.

## Dear Books

And I'm the last thing this lot's going to miss.  
Dear God, just look at them! What have we come to?  
There goes Mrs. Potts with her poor feet.  
She couldn't cope, that woman, with a bingo coupon.  
But she and I and all of us are here  
paid acolytes to literacy. Frankly,  
it's more as money changers. Books are bags  
to tip their thoughts in for a week or two  
before they find some other frame. I tell you,  
a good ten years ago I would have quit

But thought of course of my retirement pension:  
damned if I was going to give that up.  
But now I am the last to feel for books,  
breathe in their essence, feel the care  
with which the learning's laid across the crisp  
white pages - despite our thermostatic hours,  
the stifled lighting, faded regulations by which  
we reach, eventually, the stage my staff are at.  
I smile at pensioners and mark out loans.

Long years ago, when I was single, I walked  
the length of that Greek ground, living rough  
for months on end. I can't forget it.  
It gives some sanity, and why no doubt  
I chose Thucydides for leaving gift.  
Gloomy and so practical, he haunts  
the morning landscape of that early world.  
My staff have added comments, not in Greek  
but very kind, most generous. I look  
around, turn down the lights. Dear books — goodnight!

## Candy

Oh right. I'm Candy. Yeah. Likewise I'm sure.  
No, Candice is my stage-name really, but,  
Rachel Peters doesn't sound quite right,  
now does it? So then. Cheers. Oops —  
I must be tiddly. Look, I nearly spilt it.

Yeah? I think it makes me boobs too big, but Des —  
that's my agent, see. And what he says is:  
if you got it then you show it off, and er . . .  
Oh yeah . . . right: every day I've got to say,  
I'm blonde, I'm big-eyed, and I am beautiful.

You do? It works then, don't it, I suppose.  
Self-projection. You talk posh, mister, but  
you don't fool me none. That's my Harlow bit.  
Y'like it? That's what acting classes does.  
No, you got to have a range these days.

No. No — he's done his bit, has Des.  
Got me eight auditions. And the contract.  
The rest is up to little me, so — yeah,  
I think so. Why I'm here like, celebrating.  
Yeah, I do feel pretty grateful to him.

Even though, you know, he does, you know,  
exploit it. Does with all the girls. That's him.  
You've got to go with it a bit. She knows,  
his wife, she must do: all of them are like it,  
not quite kosher but they treat you right.

So yeah, why not? And — well, I have to, don't I?  
That's what he said. So — if you want to.  
Yeah, I'd like that. Do my bit and that.  
Sure. You ask them here for Rachel Peters.  
Yours? It doesn't matter: I'll remember.

## Office Workers

But, as you'd expect, they are very impatient, the buildings, having much in them of the heavy surf of the North Sea, flurrying the grit, lifting the pebbles, flinging them with a hoarse roar against the aggregate

They are composed of - the cliffs higher of course, more burdensome, underwritten as it were with past days, overcast and glinting, obdurate, part of the silicate of tough lives, distant and intricate

As the papers shuffled by the bureaucrats settling with coffee in their concrete pallets, awaiting the post and the department meeting — except that these do not know it, at least do not seem to, being busy, generally.

So perhaps it is only on those spun out to nothing and airless afternoons, with tier upon tier of concrete like rib-bones arrayed above them, and they light-headed with the blue airiness spinning around, and muzzy, a neuralgia

Calling at random like frail relations, a phone ringing at some office they can never get to, that they become attentive — the planners, the architects, the constructions themselves, and we living ourselves in these webs of buildings, which,

Caulked like great whales about us, are always aware that some trick of the light or weather will dress them as friends, pleading and flailing — and fill us with placid but unbearable melodies as the lift drops us down smoothly through the plates of glass.

## The Great Dinosaurs

My friend: this is the land of bank-clerks, mostly.  
The pugnacious, the dutiful, the brave?  
The rank  
upon rank  
ride on plate or in cenotaph. They  
airily to earth graves have gone  
who fought at Plassy or Verdun.  
We, in our own lines, orderly and grey,  
take as stipends whatever they gave,  
we, who follow quietly, laid as closely

In our cemeteries the same. My friend,  
this is the land of consort, not content-  
ment, here, where  
small lives flared  
vainglorious and seeded as summer's end  
in parks, allotments, or knots  
of thistles in council plots —  
which clouds envelop, and the hills blend  
in rain-smudged contours that are not consent —  
not here, not now, in England, where empires end

In injured mummery, Malacca pride  
of old gentlemen swashbuckling and spruce  
in their pedigreed  
waistcoat and tweed  
of social engagements on rain-bowed hills  
dotted around Esher, Godalming, Chorley.  
Gone, all of them, just as surely  
as the lichen extends and its fibre fills  
the eyes of the angel that without excuse  
shelters the fallen on some far hillside.

Unwanted, ridiculous, the broken harp,  
crossed bugle or cannon to the future now.  
In suburbs nearby  
the great names sigh.  
through brambles the riding crop cuts a path —  
incomplete and not straight  
to the tradesmen's gate.  
Here at the laurels the staccato laugh —  
the oppressed who oppress, as all times allow —  
now descendents whose teeth are cut very sharp.

## 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:  
on graves past naming or enumeration  
stand the trees, the bracken, and a small patch of sky.

## 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?

In bright shapes and dark the hot earth goes  
radiant and gossamer in its fragrant train  
of fruit, crops and pastures, till one by one  
the quiet hills grow farther, fainter, gain  
an effulgence of Eden in the midday sun.  
Goosestrife is yellow. Dandelion and rose-  
bay willow splay  
out to a spinnakering. By a single thread  
hanging, of its making, the spider is fed  
off as winds lift, and is winnowed away.

Dust, drowsiness, and on the earth  
a tincture of autumn in the velvet plum.  
Distending the gourd and on waxed marrows throwing  
crocodile blotchings till the fatness come.  
Seasons as ever have fullness but in this a sewing  
up of their sameness and sadness on the russet turf.  
We who come no more  
now in our seeking of pattern in the patterning sun  
lean to our hard time, our course near run,

Silent, inconsolable on that bitter shore.  
elderberries thicken, are picked. Companionable days  
mope among bracken and birches. The gossamer threads  
criss-cross the brambles with silver drops.  
Sorrels soar upward into burnished reds,  
thistles turn ciphers and whiten, empty tops:  
all is an absence and a mouldering space  
like trees in watery spots  
and yarrow turned splintery as harsh grey stalks.  
After the summer come the winter's forks,  
and the gold leaves are gone and the dark earth rots.

Again there will come, won't there, out in early May  
with the skylarks soaring, to dwindle away  
in a raindrop of circles through a sky-hung day?  
As under the rain clouds the green-ribbed clay  
is ploughed and planted that we as they  
turn with the dead though we nowhere stay.  
Whether we can now or no  
be so enraptured as on we walk,  
aching with the springtime and the springtime talk,  
this is our yearning and always if we will see it so.

## Lowdnes

### One

A brushed-back, formal garden towards the end of June: the lawns were steeped in sunlight, the trees as great drifts across. Intense, the evening shadows smelt pungently of earth as if the summer days stretched lazily through the grass, and night held rhododendrons. A long way out of London it seemed to the inhabitants, late down the previous evening, reading, saying little, till Gavin brought them from the station.

Next day, sat out on lawns now deck-chaired by the lake which, willow-fringed, curved backwards to the east side of the house the two of them were sitting — women, mid to later twenties: languid, animated. Gavin out on business, Hyslop followed his instructions and a lunch of sorts was made. Later there was tea in the pergola. The chic denouements of the city dwindled into chatter: the heartache settled out.

*You thought it would be Peter. I did too. Peter was the sweetest, kindest, most satisfactory man I'd ever met, or hope to, probably. But you know me.*

The half-drawn summer dress gives colour to her skin, flares to a lustre of its own. She wraps it closer. *I took a gamble. I don't know.* The clouds sail on regardless, urgent but far away. The wind freshens: rain is coming soon.

*And so he has to. One thing Tony has to do. Yes.*

The older woman picks up secateurs and cuts the bronzed stems of the roses shorter. *Yes. I hope so, Maddi.*

*There, that's rather nice. Is Tony coming down, you think?*

*Oh well, we'll see him soon enough, no doubt. . . You think me mad, now don't you? Maddi, I don't know. I really don't. Except we have to go and change sometime. Let's talk more later.*

*I'm talking now. The last barrages of the cumulous fling out and fade. the lake is flooding into deeps of crimson. The heart is not a captive animal, dear Maddi, is it? You'll get by; you always do. Could marry Gavin if you wanted. Worships every particle of you, you know. Please, Flo, don't go on. I know. Of course I know. Well then, there's hardly cause to worry. And take these from me, please.*

Two

*I think it may be clearing up, said Gavin, peering through the high french-windows. Yes, there's definitely some blue. Much too wet for walking, but there might be something on. Hyslop willing, fine, said Maddi. Gavin laughed. Fearful busybody, yes I know. Feels I need protecting. Always telling her: Now, Mrs. Hyslop, be sensible. What sort of country martyr would want to take me on?*

*Poor thing, said Maddi, put out to grass already. You know, you ought to paint the town a bit, park yourself with us. Stuck on your own like this, it can't be right. Tell her, Gavin, would you, not to be so patronising? Frightful kid. And always was. Got the two of us thrown out before we even danced at our very first hunt ball. Would you mind, said Maddi, if I went and made some coffee?*

*She's real, said Flo. I see. It is that obvious, is it? Yes, but I wouldn't bother. She's awfully fond of you, you know, and why she comes. What, not to get away from men? That too, sometimes. She doesn't really know her mind, poor Maddi. Sits in, puts on the automatic pilot, flies off straight into the hill. You wouldn't think that, looking at her. Men are all her trouble. And the latest! You think I'll like him? No, Gavin, you won't.*

*Well, there you are. No, Maddi's right. You should come up. You know, if you could get a place or something fairly close, we'd knock around together. Flo, now look — how can I? I've got a farm to run, a large one, not to mention this whole place. And anyway I'm not a Blimp administrator*

*back home from God knows where who's got to have a wife.  
Gavin, please listen. Maddi needs supporting. I could help, you know.*

These thoughts are softly crenulated in the room. The gates beyond sweep open to the prospect on the south. Clouds hang over the blotched blue skyline of the Weald, and Maddi coming back is hardly noticed. *I see there's been some powwow. No, not really. We wondered if you'd like to call on Trish and Eddie? What, the Caulton's? Yes, why not, of course,* says Maddi negligently, *Ages since I saw them. Perhaps just as well,* says Flo.

### Three

He saw them off. Flo hugged and kissed him. Maddi waved and waved until the train had concertina'd out of sight. Back home, belatedly, their laughter and their chatter still falling round the place contended for a while with the cool light off the plate, the candlesticks, the polished table tops: matters, he noticed, Hyslop was setting back to rights. The clocks ticked on. Monotonous. Slid down the walls, his thoughts, and out.

Much was hardly consciousness. Across the fields, or at the junction by the lane, whatever, the house addressed itself. The girls had brought it home to him how much his native being was bound up with his place: reflective, undemonstrative, a straight-backed, narrow rectitude, made of small additions. He found himself at sevens; sat down, wrote cheques, was restless,

Rang once to get a catalogue; mooned round the place and round. Later, from his bailiff's, in the early evening, he walked the short way home. He knew each field here, paddock, gate, where the stream in pebbled leaps ran swiftly to the wood, where his tongue drew speech, imagination from the soil, where trees were old reminders — buffeted, fighting the stout wind that took his boyhood fancies over the long hills and beyond.

Here he had been happy throughout his corduroy days: born among the fragrance of the green fields and the wheat, companion of the fox loping, the badger shuffling,  
the scamper of the vole.

Small boy drenched with shadow of the great flamboyant trees — of elms, and hawthorns, of the sturdy, grasping oak. Broad as its clusters were the clouds now gathering as he turned towards the house.

Sometimes, it is true, he thought of Maddi. Fondly saw her prance and kick her high heels through the stubbled fields; smile as the last consignment was packed off through the yard: wait, negligeed at evening when he came home late and tired. Some hope! She couldn't ride, she didn't walk, and as for the winter months when the mist lay in the fields and dampness through the house, well, she'd go abroad, would Maddi, or stay up late in town.

Four

*He'd not expected her so early. The problems Maddi has you'd never guess, said Flo. I'd opt if I were you for neutral ground, so nothing swish, romantic — you know: concert, gallery, zoo: that sort of thing. . . The what? Yes, perhaps it would, the Tate. She'll prance about on those long legs, laugh and set the whole lot talking. No, it certainly won't be squares of canvases that visitors recall.*

*Come on — east Anglia mostly, though he moved about. And not to my place, Maddi. Wasn't built. Elizabethan sham, you know that. Doesn't Constable say anything I mean, to you, apart from showing how it was? This painting here, for instance? This — mud, sky, clouds, wet greenery. . ? What do you want? I'm not of country stock. Born there, yes, but hated it. Bummed it off to London the first chance that I got.*

The compactness of her answer, its directness, didn't cause him pain, but the body he was feeling was in and with the blow. Like a boxer stripping off at last, preliminaries were shed and here a woman reaching out for him, but mostly on her terms. *You understand now, don't you, Gavin ? You can come back for a meal we can talk if you want, whatever; I'll make the evening free, but if we sleep together, remember, you'll never shake me off.*

There was a haunted, worried look in the blue eyes stabbing him. He looked away at first. A bluntness that astonished.

Where could he manoeuvre? What was there to say? *Look:  
you didn't ask me for my mind, and I'm not a picture freak.  
you call the shots for once and we'll see then where they lead*  
— *I'm asking*

*Gavin, if you want to, really want to. Otherwise,  
I have enjoyed our meeting and we can always stay as friends.*

Perhaps he should have sued for terms, or stopped, or told her wait upon a better moment. All this was very rough and very forced. Still, there she was and asking. He felt the urgency, and knew as well that he must match or leave it well alone. Not twice to be humiliated is an offer made. *All right.* And if no doubt as time would show, the path turned here well, it was but early evening and the sun still shone.

## Five

They were in London, meeting in the square they'd often planned to live in, Lowdnes, upon a flotsamed summer's evening. They drank the warmth in, its contentment. All around the traffic hummed. The trees were dense with sunlight, green as bottle glass. Canisters of clouds imploded in the sky. It seemed the final gilding of a perfect August day, and one within their giving — so, how strange it was, and awkward,  
that the months meant nothing to them.

*You're going back? You know I have to. No, you don't, it's me.  
You, me, what does it matter? Don't you understand?  
I'm tangled up with wanting you, with having you and finding  
everywhere your breath, your body, everything you are  
reach into me and stain. I hate this terrible subjection.  
Everywhere I look I see you, your laugh, your face. I have  
no rest from you, no hope of you, nothing but turn around.*

Maddi who was pressing her small feet into the grass, looked up a moment, pulled a face and said, with gentleness,  
*Gavin, you should have talked to me, I never meant to hurt  
you, even to have played around, though that is how I am.  
I did warn you: a bad lot, I said, but still you carried on.*

*I told you from the first that I fasten on the heart, though here for once I've hurt myself. I'm really awfully sorry.*

No more was said for several minutes. It was getting late. *Gavin, if you have to go, please go, for Heaven's sake, just go. Maddi, goodbye, then. I hope you will be happy. Yes. I hope at times that you will think of me, will look for me, but then again I don't. Expect I'll come down sometime when the two of you are married. You and Flo together. I'd like that very much. You think about it. She'd make the wife I can't.*

At length another person sat beside him in the car — in accomplishments the same, in general style, in clothes: in embryo a re-enaction, who barely seemed to hear. *Hyslop was pleased to go, he ventured. I rather hoped you would.* As they turned into the entrance

and the gates whirred quietly shut behind,

he sensed there falling round him the grounds, the clouds, the trees, and days not over-bright, particularly, or even yet beginning.

## 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 that 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 local 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 through 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 rollered, 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.

In 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  
are prophecies like these? — 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.

## Mountains Maketh Man

If it is mountains that maketh man then  
it cannot be, or not wholly, in these clay lowlands  
where clouds roll levelly over the scalloped slopes  
of coppiced wood and paddock — over a wide  
scatter pane in fact of lush green fields  
brimming with yellow alder and with willow  
that are rag-tag pastures close to, made up with  
oaks, solitary, and of course old elms  
glutinous with the weather and therefore almost  
vacuous today, if not imploding under  
the equable courtesy of a rain-fringed sky.

And you feel everywhere here a softness  
as though the soil itself extruded lengths  
of red-bricked terraced houses, abandoned as  
in railway sidings, these eighteenth-century coaching  
inns and vicarages that stand dilatory  
on bypassed thoroughfares, by lock-gates, streams  
that run meanderingly, taking the scenic route  
to haunts of moorhen and of Sunday punters.  
Nothing is what you feel of the manly here  
that is not eventually asphyxiated  
in a thousand, well-intentioned and kindly acts.

## Exegesis in Maida Vale

Lost as platitudes in cloud-distending glass  
are stucco colonnades of Jewish Venice.  
In lodging houses, calm under vague afternoons,  
large in their disabilities, but indulgent to us,  
the poor, like night-soil, stiffen in our dispositions.

When the wealth spilled out of London, the railways arched  
to viaducts, and viaducts were bolted down,  
in the interstices, on the cut-up earth,  
the poor huddled in their unclothed thousands, hungry,  
sleeping five, ten, twenty to a room sometimes.

How was that Jerusalem? So many thrown  
into the quicklime charity of institutions.  
Of the golden, the autumnal cities as Spengler called them,  
there were the domes, high up, on sunlit afternoons,  
above the gin halls and the grim Bethesda chapels.

I had, all my dark days, out in Uganda,  
the souls of men to roll in my orations. I pledged  
a God who stretched His healing forth, who cast His hope  
of faith upon the tribe of Cain, inheriting —  
I must tell you — mirages, mere catechisms.

Each week, therefore, we have our readings, but in Greek:  
the rich-tilthed soil from which these phantasms rise. My friend,  
beyond the arch of travail, the carapace that stoops  
about His roughcast words, that word survives.  
Give us each day to hear thy breath upon the word.

Such is my mission, as I see it, in this parish,  
this narrow, bypassed place between the railway  
and slip roads to the west. I tell you all is well.  
Be assured, my friend, the millennium will come.  
God grinds in our diurnity the bread of His new life.

## 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.

## Norman Lands

They died in their small bones looking  
from rained-on battlement and keep.  
Each year the clay crept closer and steep-  
backed banks led down to clearings still thick

With raven and with rutting boar.  
At length, in the land, they made Stephen king.  
One saw on the coins his image, grimacing:  
it was so ordained, yes, but strange.

Especially evenings when wind would screech  
and wetness infiltrate the piled straw:  
impenetrable, dark days, no steady draw  
of manhood through the gored shutters

At the women brought for our seignior's sport —  
creatures half-mired that, like a leech,  
would swell themselves up to breach  
bloodily onto the ferned rough floor

Of the forest extending always, which  
was as the clouds over them and wrought  
with nacre and mystery, such as the minstrels brought  
singing of jousts for the Holy Land,

That again was further for them to roam  
as they had and would do from their harbourage  
on dead-flat waters, under dark-pined ridge  
which murmured above them when the longboat burned,

To build a new Christendom and so to keep  
all that they had of their polychrome  
thoughts, of mettle or chalice or golden comb:  
far from their kinsmen, in this their home.

## 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.

## 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:  
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.

## POEMS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

### On the Isfahan Road

Why not stop here and get out?  
And leave the engine running, right —  
no haulage service hereabout.  
So empty isn't it? The slight  
blur of distance enhancing nothing,  
nothing missing or is bluffing.

But then perhaps it is the skin  
of silence that will resonate  
with yearnings that are sewn within.  
A sounding board that has no weight  
but as a skeleton picked clean  
will tinkle as a tambourine.

So let's go back now. You will find  
the shadows from the selfsame hills  
which stretched before us rise behind  
in palisades the evening fills:  
those caravans which do not run  
nor bow at evening to the sun.

## Dasht-e-Lut

Even when this salt-rimmed, criss-crossed  
turbulence of hills has swooned  
to arabesques of rubbed-out blue,  
our minds still ruminate on what's beneath.

And that intrudes so slowly in the trees  
you might never notice it — that is  
until it reaches and then chokes the branches,  
breaks them into skittered leaves.

From under boulders then the shadows  
eye you. Lever one, and it's whipped  
away. But left a sloughing of something thick  
which could crush you if it chose.

And each grim sunset sees the dark,  
still felted with the underground,  
invest and rise upon the burnt-off crowns  
of mountains, silent-thighed and huge.

## 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.

## Afternoon in the Mountains

Impregnable in blue and a rich magnolia  
the mountains are and will be all afternoon  
and within their contours our simple thoughts  
harden into what's at hand.

But hours elapse and purple gullies  
extend and soak through mountain flanks.  
Go on — ignore the spectacle until  
the evening hems in afternoon.

Shadows are flung then, blank on blue,  
blunt as my boot's imprint on this path:  
we may step over but dark does not:  
us it treads on, after the days.

## POEMS OF THE FAR EAST

### Rubber Tappers

The glimmer grows slowly to daylight;  
thick mist infuses the trees.

The body revives, but what one feels  
are the cramp, saliva and sweat.

Hardly a wisp of smoke is rising  
for the fire has long been out,  
when out of the lean-to, and very quietly,  
the men file off ahead.

Their lunch and a pouch of tobacco  
is tied to each trouser band.  
and over their shoulders a cotton sarong;  
a parang, a knife and a can.

These five tap rubber in spaces  
of a week or two at a time  
in the old plantation where root-stocks mat  
over the Dutchman's grave.

I spoke to them briefly the evening  
my work in the place was done.  
*Man is born, and does, and is done for,  
and lies down where he can.*

## Wang Chung-Ssu

All the time, at each turn of the road I was looking  
at the hills in their fastness, the high limestone faces  
sheer falling, grey-bearded. The monkeys shrieking.  
On, like the swallows, he goes: but not to come back,  
Old Governor of Wei. Without banners or soldiers  
I bowed to officials, who file their reports.

No one can tamper with fate, and, if fortune  
for a while shall raise him, he will know,  
the wise man, the bounty of following Heaven  
is uncertain as the weather in the mountain pass.  
I wash in these rivers, ignore reflections.  
We serve in our stations the allotted span.

Dear scholar An Chan I should have listened,  
and wizened S'o Chu at whose demotion I sent  
no words of regret or of consolation, I, first  
of the generals at war with the Hsia. My days  
were of couriers and assembly, with no one resisting,

sunsets closed over with the banners of Tang.  
It is true I felt in these northern regions  
affection for all who were kindred peoples.  
Life as a bucket wound up is too early emptied.  
Homecoming, birth of a son, full harvest:  
these are attainments, but were not for me.  
The commissions I held had to carry me on.

I am worn like the hills, obdurate, plain-spoken.  
I could not see why my plans were discarded.  
I told them the Khitan were leaves in the autumn,  
that north winds to the gates would bring them in.  
We both have gone south. They in triumph and I sadness.  
Who will mount up when the trumpets ring out?

I thought for a time I should write my memoirs  
here in the south, under filial duty. Nothing  
I'd say of these thoughts, but only events as they  
rolled like the boulder dashed heedlessly on.  
Yet why, and what for? I have no descendants.  
No one will light incense at my tomb.

Soon leaves will turn yellow in the northern lands  
and then will come frosts that make a man  
punctilious of orders but keep his counsel.  
What does it matter? I sit under awning  
here in this town on a hot afternoon, watching  
the tea leaves in the water drift slowly down.

#### Historical Note

Wang Chung-ssu was military governor of the northern provinces of China in the closing years of the first Tang Dynasty, i.e. before the great An Lu-shan rebellion of 755 A.D. Though a prudent and loyal commander, his success abroad and influence at court aroused the enmity of the chief minister Li Lin-fu, who contrived to have Wang arraigned on trumped-up charges of conspiring with the heir apparent to usurp the throne. The accusations were without substance but Wang was relieved of his command and sent to a minor post in the far south-west of China. The Hsia and Khitan were tribal peoples, not expansionist at this time, but good horsemen and dangerous when united under inspired leadership.

## Penang

The dawn is beautiful. The clouds,  
now pink to order, open out.  
The sea shifts listlessly. The mist  
streams off the hills, and each hotel  
seems fitfully to draw the sun.

It's early still, and made of milt  
the roofs and wharves and towers waver,  
colours yet to coagulate.

With peach and orange, rambutan,  
pale-cheeked duku, artichoke,  
the stall's arranged, the fruit in rows,  
by one fat woman and her daughter,  
who are silent. A lighter hoots.  
Boats are anchored off and bob,  
dipping and sipping the spangled silver  
that nonetheless has hues of olive —  
dingy, elusive, of mackerel runs  
over the gloomy Malacca deeps:  
those endless fields of furrowed water.

Now who comes walking here? And look!  
she stops, she laughs, she runs to kiss. . .  
so who is it her eyes enlist?

Oh him? He's a sometime visitor,  
and she's a certain light love of town.

Brm, brm, brm. Well, who was that  
reeling in the windy miles?

No one knows. American?

Maybe he's Australian?

Sure was welcoming that glance  
alighting, dancing on and down  
the wondering lines of local girls. . .

Golly, kiddo, act your age:  
all the same these servicemen!

Where were cloud-umbrella'd hills  
waving green, a grey mist rolls,  
darkening sea to celadon.  
Rain and her droll sisterhood  
come whirling, dancing on the pane,  
back of which in chill discomfort  
tourists sit. The rain swills throats  
of the frangipani which  
on an air already full  
must pour the same its flood of scent.  
Pedestrian are now dismayed,  
the trees and flowers disarrayed.  
Maybe though, and soon, the sun  
will — yes, it rises, robed again.

The day is bountiful and calm.  
Long garlands of the afternoon  
are whirled about by boys at play.  
Around them, slowly, the laughter settles  
to form a carpet at their feet.

Happily the sound of bells  
bubbles up and leaves the steeples.  
Blessing, rejoicing, the rich stream runs,  
giddily as little girls  
or a couple of terrier pups  
racing, wrangling round each other  
in a moment's happiness.  
This the sonorous clang of St. George  
cannot break or bring to order,  
make this mad-dog minute pass  
till the music pools beneath  
widespread banyan where, asleep  
to all the turmoil since the fifties  
a crabbed old scholar prods his page.

Lunch long over, long till four:  
must we work a whole hour more?  
Oh drop an atom bomb on school  
just once, please God, and let us off.  
All right, you watch, I will not work —  
Till the librarian bears down  
when back and neck again are bent  
above a little pencilled note:  
see you, usual place, at seven.  
Some have beauty loosed upon them  
as will vanish on their marriage.  
Most are ordinary: only  
One, ah one, with frank applause  
all her features weld together!

O what a tantrum! Tell your mummy,  
yes I will that Booboo's bad:  
he's very, very, very naughty.  
No sooner said than I consider  
how the fire that fumed and bought her,  
buckled in its heat my body,  
finds such kind remuneration,  
quiet, quiescent, in our son.  
But are those other sons and daughters  
trotting with contented parents?  
No, they can't be. Ah! But look!  
Their eyes parade the same proud air.

Orange and unruffled the sun  
settles in descending. Cumulous  
fold up canopies and form  
dropping through the deep blue field,  
crepuscular chrysanthemums.

Pinafores 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  
backlit in a twisted sheet.  
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,  
petticoat, 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 drawn in with mine?

In a clouded phosphorescent  
softly glowing purple gloom  
are the outer roads and suburbs,  
kampong, paddy, and pagoda,  
roundly blinkered up till day.

## 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, then 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 Ola, 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.

## Night Thoughts in the Tropics

In their brutal and impregnable gold  
and blue,  
the days have no duration:  
ocean and nation  
they hurtle through.

Sectioned off as trains in tunnels,  
or drawn out by syringe,  
goes light;  
the walls come in  
and we have night

That is fragile, luminous and full.  
For as far as we think  
distances shrink.  
What, where,  
blooms on the air?

# POEMS OF EUROPE

## A Short History of the Northern Peoples

Whole from the beginning, coeval  
of waters, of the winds that rasp  
on rough-limbed stones where rough things last,  
the north is not a country of arrival

But of hoarse irruptions. Hemmed in, broken  
by its cirques, its bitten isthmuses  
to fighting men, it through its history  
like the giant sleeps with one eye open,

Hand on hilt. We watch the darkening rent  
replace the cloth of evening, the settle  
of the water with the oars, the travel  
out from impact of a sharp event

Into blatant shock. At Lindisfarne  
the meek, fat monks are butchered. Blood  
splatters, filling south. The sword  
hacks off the polity of well-consorting men.

*O save us from the Norseman peril, we  
are weak, and they are merciless!  
On your Christendom, Lord, they press.  
Such echoes down the judgement day*

Recede to nothing. Norman chieftains build.  
Their antiquated chivalry goes forth.  
The smoky burden of just wars falls  
far from the crenulated Christian fold.

After Adolphus the northern land  
goes back to cropping and to herring fishing.  
Dotted over the past all day, not lifting  
into sense, the peaceful clouds extend.

The centuries turn back. Peoples great  
in industry and learning forget the welt.  
Trains clink softly into Buchenwald;  
and Elbe and the Thames dispute the night.

## The East Lands

Always, in their words, it was further on  
and eastwards, than any could understand.  
Acanthus they supposed, classical,  
but strange on the Neve, those colonnades.

Some portions came back. On Freidrichstrasse,  
Tuesdays, there was a dance band. One could sit  
drinking good schnapps and coffee, look beyond  
the tourists assembling the shattered past

Of leader and empire into photo albums,  
to great-bladed chariots, the Scythian horse,  
to the reich-hub of conquest that was not Vienna  
but here — here was their Asia, their fatherland.

Gold bit, steel armament. Between them lay  
the much-trodden fields, the warm pumping blood.  
In frost-whitened faces, the Protestant silver,  
the forty pieces that the tradesman threw,

Was a cyclical emptiness, a drifting  
like lemmings seasonal over the steppes.  
In the aurora of winter the tooth-shattered pledge  
that man makes to man would redeem that blood.

Perhaps, then, their eastward was always within them,  
so that even the trip-wires and incessant glow  
on curtains of conifer, and fenced-off tracks,  
had urged on their destiny, which had come.

## 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, when they did so, in knots or on their own.

I speak of things as I remember them. At first  
an awkward meeting, the two guards closely in attendance.

I hated him for honesty and fearlessness

in what I had to say: *Conduct insufferable. . .*

*intolerable... destructive of proper discipline. . .*

*Play doubting Thomas anywhere but not with serving men.*

*There's no one here not forfeit on this field of war.*

*'That is true, no doubt, Excellency. I'm making no defence  
but ask for understanding. In a life gone out to waste  
perhaps your words may soften condemnation and disgrace.'*

How angry I was then. We all were in the room.

Wilhelm brisk. With decorations. Small fire on his mind.

By the Code Part 4: Keeping to the letter,

as we have to. . . The regiment comes first. . . Verdict

as expected. *Therefore a conundrum, we have, gentlemen.*

*A good officer, indeed exceptional, but refuses to advance.  
in possession of his faculties, but places conscience first. . .  
in keeping with that honour may not von Macke serve  
in the first van of danger, where death is always near. . .  
No rank or preferment. . . I will answer for this court.*

Accepted, but by him? Don't know. Again von Macke  
in that cool, unruffled look. Salutes, is gone.  
Wilhelm after dinner took my arm. *'A bad business,  
Rudy, this really is. Not at all the first.  
You know I have a hundred miles of glinting, unmapped  
marsh and forest. Impossible for cavalry,  
hardly easier for foot. What can one do  
but move upon the order? We're not politicians.  
Men? they're blown to pieces, usually. If not,  
they bleed to death, you know that? Officers the same.'*

February 20th. Another day in Prague. Still cold.  
The walls above the Bahnhof and the Castle blanketed.  
The last few falls of winter. Soon be moving on.  
The snow was crunching evenly as all this afternoon  
I walked around, this business on my mind — thinking  
very much no doubt of men like young von Macke  
dug into their foxholes or dwindling through the snowline, trees  
and hollows shielding them, and then not seen again. These stray scenes  
in my thoughts still open in a shriek

That is always silent, faceless. . . Cracow, Prague,  
Vienna: heavy with their clocks and heresies  
of Hus and old Copernicus wrapped up in their bones. . .  
A medieval somnolence that's measured out in blood,  
the funeral perhaps of what old Europe stood for. . .  
Every day the invitations rain down endlessly.  
Landscapes of white forms: accept, report, acknowledge. . .  
I see the shifting landscapes of Sudan and hear  
the bugled call at sunset rally in the air.  
and read this morning:

Your Excellency,

With deep regret I write . . .

## Note

The incident is entirely imaginary, though its speaker was real enough. As a young cavalry officer, Count Rudolph Carl von Slatin offered his services to Gordon in the Sudan, was appointed Governor of Dafur, holding the position until forced by the Mahdi revolt in 1884 to surrender. After the battle of Omdurman in 1898, von Slatin returned as Inspector General of the Sudan, again under the British. His distinguished last years were spent as head of the Red Cross in his native Austria. A typical adventurer of the European colonial period? Perhaps. But von Slatin also studied Islam when a prisoner of the Mahdi, became a noted figure in Viennese society at the turn of the century, and is remembered for his warm humanity towards Allied prisoners of war.

## South

And then all thought of home we put away,  
and each of us with rations, slowly walked  
on in full kit, leather creaking, up the cold  
hill-moorlands. Pitiful for us when honour lay

Out on the turf or taken. No one talked  
or lingered with libations, for we had learned  
not to look forward, not to hope. Turned  
south at each ridge-line, cross-path, spur-fold.

Smoke kept to the distance. We were amazed  
that clouds rose as standards. Garlands each day  
that we woke with our victuals and were alive.  
So passed the first week, the best of our days.

Remnants we found. They joined us, to make us thrive,  
we, that were many, and in close array,  
poured off the mountains. And each of us thought:  
get through the forests and we may survive.

Sombre but empty. Silent. Only there lay  
close mists in the morning. Thick curtains of firs  
were phantoms at evening. They gibbered. A curse  
of shadows beset us, besieged us. We fought

And doubled our caution, set veterans about  
us, around and behind; scouts went ahead.  
The emptiness lengthened. Only came back,  
bloodstained, the trackers, their tongues cut out.

Departures turned sluggish, the more so when whole  
groves we must walk through were strewn with red.  
Not vengeance. Not warning. For each matted head  
turned its eyes mildly and swung aside.

We left them, the forests, faint blue as pine-smoke, dropping behind us. Black fields and dead cattle we came to. They died, all who ate plunder, but made no sign

Of knowing or protest. We few tried to reason these matters; sat silent for days as though in attendance. Ritual the blaze of the strange stars above us: the water foamed

Cold through our fingers. This was no home for comrades still dying. We killed them. Moved on, careless of pasture. Miserable. Kept nothing of watch, let our hunger roam.

All was not as it had been: not ordered. Slept fitfully by streams, in long grass, on slopes. The country seemed closer, seemed kinder. Our hopes rose at the prospect, but faltered. We wept.

It was true, nonetheless, as one by one we found we could name them, the rivers, the bluffs large to our homesteads, our fields, our loves, when each with a wild cry had run and gone

First to the fort, the sentry place. Nothing. No one. Then to our homesteads as fearfulness grew. Here quiet, almost peacefulness. So then we knew in truth our hardships had just begun.

## Us at Last

### One

The cathedral bells fall orderly down streets  
of workshops, shunting yards, high loading bays,  
through which the fraying wind now rails at shutters,  
shrieks at faces with their locked-in gaze,  
bites through tunics and beats  
long shuddering retreats  
into the huddled waiting. Stood as guards,  
we tighten armbands, stamp out distances and stare  
across the rails to yards  
where, sulphurous in the air,  
fresh crowds are driven forward: packed and frightened.  
One makes a run. We have him back and see  
with what a wild-eyed gesture he will . . . crack  
and the snow is black-  
splattered for a moment, broadens to a track  
of blood that runs and bristles with hostility,  
eyes baying at us. Then, with cordon tightened,  
we lead them into batches, stand them quietly:  
a new world order where they know the weight  
of things being different, with no more deals  
and rake-offs from the rentiers, the furred elites  
who made their money out of our defeats.  
We butt them forward as on sleek, oiled wheels  
the train clanks in a minute late.

### 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.  
Then there 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 docketts 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.

#### Four

Ours the dominion they have learnt to hate  
in the hard lands of exile where the rockets go.  
Surviving the searing, and a littering flash,  
the senses scattered and a vertigo  
emptying to a state  
of shocked gasp and dilate  
into pain unimaginable, and the head  
inflated with nausea, and an emptiness  
for the limb's stock instead;  
a wet, black stickiness  
stiffening into clothes or then dribbling again  
from the breathing-in-tatters, blown-off skin.  
For this both night and day  
we have locked on prey:  
our reckoning acknowledged as they lift away  
to fall from the infidel as we within  
those missiles took fire from the lion's den.  
From a nightmare of total and eternal sin  
incandescent into darkness where flares combust  
high over the watchtowers and the written word:  
the holocaust returns should we hesitate  
a moment out of weakness and precipitate  
a deluge of blood-rush where the world has heard:  
conflict is perpetual and is just.

#### Five

Emptily wind blusters, leaves no trace  
on the 'Do not proceed beyond this point'  
of tangled posturing in the skeins of wires  
from a world so different and then out of joint.  
Each of us now face

a yet more testing case,  
and turn bewildered as the news crowds in  
of our legions beneath the unfriendly skies.  
Governing to win  
out of dust and lies,  
called up to help in the hot lands of prayer,  
co-opted to sainthood for the simply led.  
We shall make sense of it, a line in the sand,  
have them understand  
whatever the innocence they will be cuffed at hand  
hung to a third day while the battered head  
sweetens by blood-scent all the cell-block air.  
We shall not look now on the thousands dead  
but as numbers displaced as the die are cast:  
old summers of boyhood are newsprint tales.  
God knows that we stand in our own state of grace  
before Him and His mercy in this one-time place  
we have all around us as the vast earth stales  
to what is only us at last.

# The Normandy Landings

(A Requiem for the American Dead)

Late for them here, in these broad-leafed summer days, to lie  
out in made-up ground. With chained-in roses, beds  
of laurel, chaste walkways, do they sleep now, heads  
not pummelled by the tides — those who went out, who knew why?

And if not yet, though boxed and regimented, face  
set foremost to the poles, they will know, won't they, sifted  
as they are from time's all-felling, they are conscripted  
and here perpetually to a green-soaked place

That cannot be as home? At evening as the rays  
of the westward-warming sun fling out their shadows, a throng  
of voices rises. Homeward are they calling? Long  
towards their homesteads, to their childhood gods they gaze

With recollections narrowed as in the drawn-up rows  
we read: 'a much-missed son. . . we shall remember them. . .'  
What shall we say, not to shame, condescend to them,  
we, walking in sadness, where such sadness grows?

Those that are here remembered gave but unformed years:  
the gilded reputations a generation wears  
without caparisons of glory that regally were theirs —  
before, that is, the springtime threw down their glass of tears.

All that are around, so many — the weltered, the luckless ones,  
spoilage of the orders, the flotsam, lemmings of the tides —  
turn them, would you, to heroes, vicariously to ride  
fashioned out of thunder and recoil of the guns?

No, no, you answer. There is no ornate mould.  
All that are here were men, not gods, not life-defying:  
say that in their small way, they, with no man vying,  
stood as loadstone ever, shepherd to their fold,

So even this thin settlement may signature our lease,  
and traffic everywhere this morning that glints across  
the green arterial roads of Normandy draws, because  
of what they gave, a web of surety, of fullness, peace.

But what of then their sweethearts, their hopes of hearth and kin?  
The bourn of these lies scattered, their bones cry up the wrath:  
the vengeance and the fury tower round the path  
that looped its way beyond them as new troops rattled in.

We were of the new world, and when our sun dropped down  
at evening over furrows, over crimsoned, tasselled corn,  
there was for us a patrimony. Moonlight and the storm  
in summer and the wind — these held out our crown.

Fields once green turn golden. Over the rounding earth  
our sons had driven tractors to call their harvest brides  
seeding with their laughter the ever fruitful tides:  
none of which can reach us under thin, conscripted turf.

We are not bitter, remember, but would have made the choice  
so differently of honour had we but seen what went  
with comradeship, with loyalty, that sacrifice had meant  
the vastness of the silence in our maker's voice.

Lover with lover in the springtime, the generations cease  
nothing from their desiring, the sensual fief of grace.  
These we are amazed at, gratuitously we trace  
how wanton are the happinesses that day by day increase

The acquittals that we died for. But how is it we know  
who have no part of sorrow, cold pebbles in the loam?  
Perpetual and unfinished remains our longed-for home —  
till the trees move and the winds stoop, and over us they sow

Discord on the continents, on flagstaffs, wreath  
and cenotaph, on empty barrack grounds, on call  
of bugles over waters that range out wide and tall  
to beat their fists on the rocks and on the shoals beneath.

Gone out and gone over, the warm-hearted, the profiteers,  
the principled and the feckless who make up troops of men.  
How safe they sleep, while we must turn, and turn again  
to the regimental calendars, and the thin, unribboned years.

## A Lunch Party at Villeneuve sur Yonne

(On a painting by Eduard Vuillard)

For one whole day — in glory of 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 is 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.

## For the Most Catholic Kings of Spain

Not now with heat to afflict them or with ringing hooves  
lie their most Catholic majesties of Spain.

Inside the sarcophagus, under rich-carved roofs,  
they are carried again into the old campaign.

You will hear, if you listen, as the armies march  
them calling for trumpets, for the clarion shout:  
Navarre! or Castile! That pitiless church  
is almost resurrected in what is about

Them built out of marble but not begun.  
Far from this sanctuary in their single files  
the roads wheel on elsewhere, and the Inca sun  
hardens on fountains, and on red roof tiles:

On the poor most of all. The vast plains lie  
aside from their purpose as a wayward shrine:  
lives scattered upwards into a clear blue sky  
that fills in the evening with the blood and wine.

## Andalusia

Always there is paramos, bloated or shimmering.  
Compacted of heat, on limestone bluffs,  
ornate, the villages, as carriage clocks,  
tick-tock quietly as clouds go by.

Incantation and incandescence Stupefying  
the calendrical power of the sun  
that by May or in mid-April even turns  
the rich green selvage of the crops to grey

Or white or florid ochre. Potatoes  
in the vellum of their old men's skins  
by turns are meditative or verbose  
as, thickly clustered, are the olives.

But indeed it may be that the simple lemon  
does best of metaphors for feast-days here;  
so much being colourful, toughened, pithy.  
A people that hardship can only lengthen.

So first remember that you are not welcome,  
foreigner, who do not fight to see  
each spring a little more how the rock is loosened,  
and no one to look down where the dead are gone.

In silence, therefore, they will keep their vigils.  
In a stiffening of water, in a siltier blood,  
a smell of cordite, and of wind-blown spaces,  
a frieze of emptiness in the reef of sky.

## Cadiz

The Atlantic tiles these steps two times a day.  
Fish twine upon the angelus. The cannons roar  
frostily across the waters for  
the grandee and the merchant gone to pray

Upon a hope made flesh, a stigmata'd Lord  
Who made the new faith possible. His red-streaked head  
admits of suffering, of error. Bred  
out of the Reconquista, Cadiz poured

Out its lifeblood on the Andean soil,  
on Maya swamps, on deserts, feathered groups  
of men got up as monkeys. The empire loops  
about the sinterings where the waters boil

In deeps off limestone-crenulated keys  
in Florida, Bermuda, Hispaniola . . .  
How blessed the world was then! How fresh! The roller-  
coaster waves come in. Evening shines, on cliffs and trees

The same. *Except that they were cannibals. . .*  
*An evil surely that should be cauterised. . .*  
*Not wrong, the Church, though sometimes ill-advised. . .*  
Emptily the bells ring through the mission halls

Of San Sebastian, San Xavier . . . They are the same,  
these pueblo walls, guano, the smell of rust.  
The wind retraces in its lines of dust  
a broken Cadillac, a lost shoe, an old name

From Spain beyond its colonies: content  
to walk these battlements, this cartilage  
of old world built on new, to pace and rage  
at worlds unclouded, distant, magnificent.

## 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  
cypress 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 cicada knits  
traceries of stone for its Bourbon kings,  
offertories out of lifeless things.

## The Church of Miracles

Leaving in the coach our wraps and valuables, we climbed  
up the neat seventeenth-century street.  
Innocuous as a balance sheet  
inclined the visit. This  
was the Church of Miracles, the maritime  
defender: a small edifice  
where local saints and sailors were interned.  
No doubt they were, we nodded, not concerned.  
Somewhere behind us the organ pumped into rehearsal time.

I left the guide, the others, went in further, sat,  
contemplating little.  
No victual  
for the inner man — a cold,  
plain, draughty and unfurnished place. Appropriate  
for the end of things, the old.  
The chancel was a reliquary  
of the usual bland statuary  
in marble: greying, passé, not immediate.

And then above me was the monument. In no way  
was it striking, not at all: just  
a votive tablet and a bust  
with angel  
holding out a wreath, head bent — cliché,  
gesso stuff, hackneyed, painful  
to this century, and yet  
for that moment a vignette  
of Heaven showed, they say, her pilgrims day by day.

They say. Do not mistake me: I am not, ever  
I think, given to such sentiment.  
I do not think that 'the event',  
'Ascension  
of the Spirit', if such it was, brought on together  
by music and the isolation

of five good days with our materialists,  
their guidebooks, cheques and shopping lists,  
was more than sudden opening in emotional weather.

Yes — that is all it was — although the light became  
so large and forward in her that the outward bliss  
turned piteousness,  
her heartbreak poignant and too lucid —  
such yearning for us, gentleness, such pain.  
I was astonished. More to lose it:  
for though it radiated  
through my mind it also faded.  
The marble, quiet candles and the cross remained.

I have no more to add. Though tempted, naturally,  
to read some portent in it, nothing came.  
Around me the same  
cold place: the curious centuries, the banks of flowers.  
A strange location for a colloquy,  
I thought. Still do. I thought of powers  
on earth, in Heaven, of Heaven's grace.  
The guide was blunter to me: *'Odd place,  
but liked by visitors.'* Yes, I said, *must be.*

## POEMS OF LATIN AMERICA

### The Mountain Wall

The music quiets the trees. The couple wait  
beneath the backdrop of the Andes wall:  
and young girls waking to their future state  
sit each in black dress with a coloured shawl.

The bridegroom reads a poem. The bride in tears  
stumbles at her words and has to stop.  
Around are the difficult, unburied years,  
where fathers sizing up the latest crop

Of no doubt usual beauties look on past  
new roads and hospitals, vast building site  
that is their city now, to bodies cast  
beyond that rising backdrop rimmed with light

That looms as barrier to one in this  
protracted interval of saying grace  
on joy and passion in a bridal kiss,  
and answering sadness in the colonel's face.

Cocktails, and then a blaze of hunger soaks  
into that tenuous benediction, wholly sunk  
by the music later and the men's tired jokes  
as the girls get raunchy and a little drunk.

That's how we are: life goes on from blame  
to brightness dropping from that mountain wall.  
I think tonight how briefly sweetness came  
and the girls once beautiful, beyond recall.

## Society Wedding, Santiago

*Only think, my children, how it is God's grace  
to abound in the firmament and attend this place.*

The guests glance at watches; the couple stand  
heads bent and uneasy, but understand

That here it has ended, all the nights out late,  
the laughter and the mad, half-married state.  
A rustle of impatience as the priest again  
descants on the penalties and the endless pain.

*Never will you know if you break these vows  
how happy are those who will keep God's house  
free of the serpent that infects with guile  
his innocent of reasons, her honeyed smile.*

At last, rather angrily following this,  
bruised into questioning the Judas kiss,  
I wonder how well the Church spoke out  
at the tortures, the murders, the stifled doubt?

The priest moves to sacrament. His hands in prayer  
are skilled in this reverence, though there's nothing there  
but words, most perfidious of all God's gifts,  
yet welcome and needed, as the party drifts

To cocktails, where the couple stop me to ask  
of the sermon: '*Uplifting, a most difficult task.*'  
Till leaving, much later, I hear the same cock crow  
and am ashamed, me too, yes, even so.

## The Military Church

Flowers, car, the funeral hearse,  
correct and formal: the usual terse  
end for a military not averse  
to overlooking each sharp reverse.

It's over. Doors open. First to last,  
dressed as becoming a social class:  
braid in the sunlight, swords from the past,  
the women glittering as polished glass.

Here, in marble, a plaque asserts  
innocence in those denied their birth.  
Past imagining how this converts  
to silences that sent to earth

Agitators, unionists: in strict accord  
men acted as ordered, as time conferred  
duty to the fatherland. Not the sword,  
but bullet or beating to keep their word.

Autocratic, still bound by codes,  
in a time disbanded, where anything goes,  
and liars hold office, the old Left bodes  
still mischief for its stiff-necked foes.

Into these I married, know by name  
the many who'd say 'never again'  
warmly, sincerely, but know the same  
the words may one day come to 'when'.

Reviled, discounted, the unyielding shines  
in academies and bemedalled lines.  
Pray God unneeded, as Congress consigns  
its summers to dark, full-bodied wines.

## Quinta Normal

Under an indifferent and cloudy sky a dog  
coughs and coughs and the rain falls:  
interminable the duologue  
between the wait and these thick walls.

The clock ticks steadily, and time will pass  
to scattered memorabilia that bloom  
in stains seen darkening in the glass,  
and trees are tangled in the room.

The years with ever now more bony hands  
will not hold back the new-found press  
of life against the reprimands  
in wills and letters, unworn dress.

The bowed-in ceilings, furniture so old  
that bodies seem to prop up walls:  
at grace, across each napkin fold,  
that generation calls and calls.

## Military Hospital, Santiago

Almost by rote, the lights go on, strip  
after strip in the long bays of rooms.  
All here is spotless as the evening looms  
in shadows leaning from each saline drip.

The liquids issue noiselessly, to drop  
through plastic tubing and be led away.  
While doctors visit and the nurses stay  
the lives are faultless and will never stop.

And no one thinks of that accounting day  
between the routine check-up and detailed scan,  
when bravery in 'doing all they can'  
as heels down corridors, will fade away.

As doubtless also in my own case —  
though not as costly, with the outside trees  
now lined up, regimented as the fees,  
or smiles then wary on each practised face.

So it ends: the different, at whatever cost.  
Sometimes I think I have blighted my entire life  
opposing family, my few friends and wife  
in fighting battles that were always lost.

Outside, the evening shadows have in tow  
the last of families now going back—  
to a life gliding along some inner track  
that time accustoms me to not quite know.

## Autumn Already

The drenching heats of summer come to this:  
the cafés settled but still threatening change,  
their warmth perfunctory as the spouse's kiss,  
and autumn dowager though nothing strange.

Except that we grow older, I suppose, and stake  
out our enjoyments carefully to show  
how distant, hopelessly, the far waves break  
on life's achievements that we shall not know.

The same for others, and the sun on leaves  
will dapple the sidewalks when we are gone.  
I think of them as falling, uncut sheaves  
in childish interludes, when childhood shone.

So, odd to be going where no one will hear,  
but this is our place still, our coat and tie.  
Whatever was promised was always near  
but indolent and different, like the passing sky.