



A Book of Songs

colin john holcombe

Ocaso Press 2008

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by Colin John Holcombe

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Youth

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

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

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

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

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

Tangled in her Arms

From all day tangled in her arms
I climbed her chambered hair,
and felt that heady perfume in the hour was
dropping from the air.

You do this and we do that: the fingers stalk
round in their red shoes.

*We can have the turning world as well
in anything we choose.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I am here, I'm not, was always going:
proof that no man dare
to take eternity to climb up through
my long and winding stair.

Without Consequence

Quietly, without consequence, all night long,
such fragrance in the room. The soft fruit fallen
showed itself in her pretty toes. Later
I shook myself, pumiced. Strap-hung with others
I could hear their blood ring in the capillaries:
happily the cased bodies ripen on their stalks.

I am not hurtful, intrusive or ever gross
to those going to the old shires and cold markets.
To houses that entrap them in dust and glass,
I offer in the lucence of passion and
in the thick occasions of possession
wide forests and prairies where they can dream.

Which they must have. Small creatures affronted
with breasts, and escutcheons in their stride —
where can they run to when splendour of movement
casts off the cloth that would call out indignant:
Woe to the world's end, daughters of Cain?
From such terror and suffrage I take them in.

There are seasons for sowing, as for reaping,
for husbandry fallow under the earth.
Rain presses itself on the small upstairs window,
dark flows in the same in books they read. Sometimes
for weeks there is nothing, for many names nothing,
till, copiously patient, the guilt is shed.

My Parents Both

My parents, both, were strict with me,
and I knew what to do,
but grew the while, obediently,
more tangled up with you.

*You do not have to smile, they said,
some other route would do,
and do not stop or shake the head:*
but I was still with you.

You did not see and could not care
how love in silence grows
nor ever feel how softly flare
the petals on the rose.

All shed, all gone, to leave the stalk,
rose-hip and the thorn.
Well, there's an end to idle talk
of long nights to the dawn.

How long ago that you made eyes,
and years and years have flown:
my love, I'd hear again those lies
though heart be hard as stone.

Coppelia Café

What man attending to his present task
can note the loose unbudding of the rose
to flounce of petulance, or stop to ask
whence comes its suddenness, or where it goes?

The waiters, spinning round, consult and flit
from tray to table while the startled air
is thick with glasses and the beauties sit
as though unconscious of their gold-streaked hair.

They only see themselves, or those as well
who know the pirouette and stratagem:
such art in artlessness will simply tell
how short the interval to come to them.

The Brightly Woven Braid

In that brightly woven braid,
and lift of eyebrow, heady shade
of dark mascara's masquerade
what has blossomed, what has stayed?

*I would not take that path again:
the heart deceives us: men are men.*

The shadows on the arms that fill
their supple creases through the skin
to blur of darkness far within:
what is it those eyes fulfil?

*I would not take that path again:
the heart deceives us: men are men.*

A drift of perfume hardly there,
the dust drops patterns on the floor,
the noontide stains the sunlit air:
the beauties sit and are no more.

*I would not take that path again:
the heart deceives us: men are men.*

The swell of body through the dress,
the hand's long bending as the swan
that hold the head, the arms that press:
all are shadowy and all are gone.

*I would not take that path again:
the heart deceives us: men are men.*

There is no country of the wise
with smiling faces, golden toys,
but sadness only of sad eyes.
The springtime passes, all its joys.

*I would not take that path again:
the heart deceives us: men are men.*

In jet of eyelash, polished nail,
the hand that points a laughing tale,
in very breath that we inhale
the body weaves tomorrow's veil.

Fabulous Night

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

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

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

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

I Kept Any Man I Caught

I kept any man I caught
sleeping, laughing through the nights.
I changed my partners like my tights.
You and them, or so I thought.

When you sought me out with sighs,
a great dog dying of its thirst,
I thought perhaps I should be first,
but then I doubt it, not with lies.

What can the given body do?
You manned my galley, dug its oars
both long and deeper for those shores
whose prospects well I knew.

You sailed and sailed me, I would go
breasting parties far away.
What is it that people say?
What is it I ought to know?

When on those beating shores you cast
at me your troubles and the blame,
the tears, the heartaches, all the same
I knew that innocence was past.

And when on other men I tried
there came my sisters, one by one:
I told them battle's not begun:
how I laughed at them and lied.

The Moon in Heaven

However unfathomable those bodies were
or the wet fervour of their breath,
their forms were orphaned long ago and not
on their twentieth or thirtieth
advent do the phantoms stir
in this ungardened plot.

Though warm they were, and their voices meet
in a rich vellum to a fall,
all was decrepitude, the body's starched
exactions on the sheet,
yet still the same the voices call
as pubis bone is arched.

Though much I learned of tendernesses,
of dark eyes blinkered and afraid,
the tarantelle the eyelash made, what Braille
was in small fingers laid,
set by the quickstep of the dresses,
forgo the cuckoo's tale.

Come, return to me as I was then
as the past pummels through the head:
the pulse was in the heady blood, the course
lay always through the bed,
and not as now old gentlemen
put back the days' remorse.

As ineluctable as all was then, who knew
what the dark trees carried in their train?
That love was inexhaustible but leaven
only in its gain.
Chaste and thin the light falls through
from that still moon in heaven.

It Was Not Well

It was not well what we thought,
nor what we spoke,
we who have sought
to be ivy to oak.

*Whatever pursued us,
will you not pay
an allegiance to prudence
a little and stay?*

If I won't come to you,
open my hand,
what will you do
to make fruitful this land?

Whatever pursued us . . .

So many are the questions
that rise up and start,
it's vain the defections
that lay cannon to heart.

Whatever pursued us . . .

Hear me: I will carry
your kind words away:
where would they tarry,
though, and what would they say?

Whatever pursued us . . .

As it was first, so
I would have it again,
For you do not know
how harsh are you men.

Whatever pursued us . . .

So gather or spurn me,
whatever is best
will never concern me
who am cursed now and blest.

*Whatever pursued us,
will you not pay
an allegiance to prudence
a little and stay?*

All Day Long

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

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

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

Your Tune

All day I've sat around my room
dressed and dressing: now it's soon
you will hear me and assume
I grow in likeness to your tune.

Small the flowers, yet they grow
the still more brightly in their mime:
you will come to me I know
sometime, one time, all the time.

Mine's a fine body, my two hands
make warm the inlets for your arms
but here are also cloudy lands,
and lightning turbaned in my charms.

I am the purveyor and a tinker
who will give you heady rings:
it will not pay you to be the thinker
when my silver laughter sings.

I am the court magician and
the bringer of great clouds of dreams
and a smoky torment also and
what that sharp fire redeems.

I was one and will be two:
listen to me, where I go
the musk of dresses and my shoe
will tap and laughing let you know.

They Grew Up Too

The places where he grew up, grew up too,
and all around him — not in parallel
of course, intentionally, with him in view,
but held around as in some hermit shell,

Lumbering but natural. They were his home, haunts
of onetime happiness, the very gloss
he'd put on playgrounds, football, shopping jaunts —
the scenes and sounds that clothed him as he was.

But more: they kept his real thoughts whorled inside —
the playground tussles, the frequent hopelessness,
the blurring pavements when his father died,
the roads all going nowhere, no success.

But these were yesterday's, and had improved
beyond all recognition. True. He'd find,
in going past locations, shame had moved
and there was nothing settled in his mind.

So all went well then, and he married, had
two girls, both beautiful, who moved away.
The town went on developing, grander, mad
with leisure centre and its annual play

As he the while grew smaller, looked for sense
in old school photographs, as though they'd say
here were his wife, purposes, future tense —
But no: they gazed back blandly, far away.

Little Girl

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

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

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

not the samba, not the rumba
will the sober years renumber
fortune not for forty winks
flatters that grave elegance.

Unopened days and crumpled mornings,
nights of voluntary like lead
flecks upon the coffee turning,
somewhere still the sunlight's burning.
One large ocular for head
to feud upon the humbled lair
of scar, of nipple and rough hair.
In stain of red the veins give out
their bitterness, their melancholy,
part all counting is the folly,
past all meaning fawn and pout:
drab the morrow's rain-washed awnings.

Think not then to turn the face
of ecstasy to sage exemption.
Limbs have been both light and true
and fuller of the heart than you:
rioting, beyond redemption,
drunk upon the golden tresses
of the sunlight: moonlight presses
on the monuments where old
men cannot think that forms
so large in beauty loosed in storms
are pale as putty, stopped with cold,
of ave glorium not a trace.

So dance imperiously. The race
goes not fortuitously, my girl.
And if your daughters can hereafter
stem no part of careless laughter
not in fine-cut jewels or pearl,

or flowered gardens, or the vault
of cold cathedrals is the salt
of human wisdom, human tears.
Out of passion's fearsome cost,
the tenderness when all is lost
comes the acceptance of the years:
the quietness and satined grace.

O My Love

One

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

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

What is the dressing then but the long day's folding
up of the body into its shining length?

Yet I, O my love, who cannot go with you, but
endlessly vacillate, being ever running
to door, lift and car, thinking before and after

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

Two

I have felt too much and always the imponderable
factness of the feet pressed down, the large
containment of the haunches, the whole plexus
of muscles as body and willing and, O my love,
I am webbed now with what I can never fight.

Your tongue in my speaking, and in your distensions
are my jointing, digestion, that not a moment
will pass but the seed pod be rattled, the stamen
whirr; weave with tears that are not thick enough
to clothe me in raiment of this, O my love.

Such teeth in such gums. The breath has its mansions.
deep in its promontories the bones swell up.
Not a rowing or gentle, but as a light-house keeper
racing from coccyx to pubis: O my love,
I am rolled in the giving as in heavy surf.

Febrile, tentacular as only the smallest creatures
know in their inwardness, sensing swallowed.
To what depths of bright sunlight am I not admitted
but feel, O my love, how the ventricles burn
to be wholly digested and have no heart?

Three

Breasts have their cupbearers, the long legs holsters:
there are many dimensions as the tube train travels,
rattles and stops, your breath shadows strangers.
Beneath you is London, in your blunt escutcheon
is the tunnel, O my love, that winds away south.

To be locked up, bruised, my sharp looks stigmata'd
in a great blaze inward so the body consumed.
For is it not certain that with all the centuries
of having and sighing, that, O my love, hands
have an infinite scruple over the skin?

In their trespass are cities, hotlands, refulgence,
vast turbans of whiteness and the flowering out:
dark eyes have dominions, as lace dimensions
impenetrable gorges of uncombed hair
that still have their hunger. Of what, O my love?

How can I hold each brief or bra-cup when always
is seeping the body in its luminous trace
away, O my love, and its putative breathing
infects with its longing these small silk dispersions?
With this butterfly gone I shall have no home.

Four

Sometimes I think that in this small person I
must put away, fold and in scented paper
dispense with such petals as the autumn wind scatters
on bed or on sofa the pieces of , O my love;
so fierce is their passion they lift to air.

Immediate as your heat is and into shadow
hair falls on the shoulder and tangles a neck
where it meets and extends and, O my love,
as sunlight passes into something inexplicably
gentle that looks at me sadly and shrinks away,

I know there will be days importunate and thin
as condensate when I shall not love you,
when I shall be far off and foreign and even falling
unthinking and reluctantly and, O my love,
sweet, without purpose, as the summer rain

is dark without issue as the city's shutters
whirr the once, silent, and the travelling nexus
continues in hands, feet and laughter and, O my love,
there will come, won't there? surely lightning and
thunder to mark and desperately how we're gone?

Five

Perhaps it is only in diaphanous
elopements of the clouds that fall away
to a trailing radiance, a tarnish of silver
over the vaulting of the astonished sky
that you, O my love, who are never unchanging:

a small thing of membranes, a web of bones
(but a crushing to fragrance in the clotted being
of limbs, O my love, and you turning and smiling)
thrust yourself outward as the last great splendour
turns gold in the southlands as evening comes.

This, I may say, of the apple and nacreous
encrustation of the tarsal bones:
that the hairs sprout, the skin folds, and following
the veinlets, the surface is lost as, O my love,
large the day spreads on its watery stilts.

Mild and full-mannered there is only peace
immense and still permeable, and in the limbs
nothing and no one, just a bland absorption
in the wetness, the cessation and still a winking
of colour that will wake to you, O my love.

Let No Radiances Conspire

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

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

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

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

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

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

Seeing

Seeing that she was kind, was patient, wise
beyond the high peaks of her circumstances,
also that her deep-set, sheltering eyes
would not set coldly on our ordinances,
I said that each day I must turn away
from her, and though meet friends, take meals, attend
to her small needs, shouldn't now outstay
the calls on which the further world has end.
I would not say she smiled, indeed said anything:
and if she grew a little sadder, there was no speech
to mark it, demonstration, pitying.
All she moved were confidences out of reach,
though I could hear, sobbing behind the locked door
the voice saying: *Why do you do this? Why? What for?*

Going Home

The days that prick upon the conscience, smoothed patterns of withholding, the tintured nights: all sewn within the eyelids. A cold rain clothes the litanies of temperance, forbearance: she is at one with the appurtenances of the quiet house.

The maid has banked the fire up. Still it flares on walls and further, to long days beyond, to lawns and meets and ballrooms, events as white in recollection as these arum lilies: untouched, the stamens shake out flagrant pollen.

To her, though, sleeping, beyond the surge of wind, high trees, the drift through melancholy rooms of voices tangled in regret, there comes a sound of expectation, going home at hols to teas and outings, and all her sisters' chatter.

St Pauls

In Memoriam: R.W.H. 1910-89

What there might have wavered on that tall and peopled shore
you did not acknowledge, indeed you shut the door.
Litanies at day's end flamed into the blue
when, finally that summer, the light went out on you
and all that had been hoarded, memorabilia of the years,
the photos and the flotsam, the rents of past arrears
fell in a moment mine, mine to understand,
divine perhaps a purpose in what at depth was planned —
although I doubt it. We weren't. In this strictured place
what were we but chapters in your climb to grace?
Yet in a world of status, of days piled up on days,
there is more to ritual than the swell of praise,
and so I ask for candour, uncomfortable, that showed,
of you, monk without order, ghost on the stony road.

Under your cathedrals of cloud-banks and of trees
that time, long over now, but listening as the breeze,
rose in distant canopies, rose with such a hoarse
and penetrating sorrow, with such grief, such force,
I could see as the wind soared so was left your thought:
we all of us are passing, but this is not for naught?
What philosophies you read up on, what faiths avowed,
debating in your classes till rationale devoured
even what you had asserted, not that this was much,
not anyway to us, outwardly not in touch
as you were with that journey, that providential source,
stronger than you could fathom it, the ultimate 'of course'.
You who would have taught us good book-keeping ways
could only carry forward the small change of your days.

The ending was extinction. Your wish, but it denied us
witness to your living, grace when grief surprised us.
A service you'd have hated, so slovenly, yet word
you did not leave us of the services preferred.
no readings, no music. Nothing. You did not exist,
did not even think of how you could be missed.
All that was for us. You had worked, got on, and what
in some ways was accomplished held you to no spot
in anyone's accounting. No, you were off now, still
climbing through the summertime up the fabled hill
through scabious, through harebells, the dance of chalk-hill blue,
the further from the laughter. May I ask that you
who never found one soulmate to truly call a friend
have kindness and some comfort at that journey's end?

Sometimes what the dust troubles us with are but cased-up fears:
yours the unemployment, the weak heart, the grimness of the years:
the cycling after money — pointless: no one had it —
the penury of shop work, grey with smallness added —
five million out of work, a new war looming: no
one then had time to think of it, or dared, although
so plainly there were portents in expulsions of the Jew,
in Catalonia bombings, atrocities — and you?
sat for accountancy, passed, moved out and on
into the green hills of suburbia, into the halcyon
analects of good living, finally on your own,
established, but for background, that hung there like a stone:
poorest are the poor of spirit who from a troubled birth
are promised only passage and a sifting of the earth.

Running the Downlands, I remember, with my sisters, where
summer sailed around us, and we were drifting there,
you had strict itineraries, striding, not left or right
diverted but dropping, with our mother, far out of sight
into the earth, the white cranium, the popped land
of Cronus and of rituals we could not understand —
not perhaps that you did, with that guarded need for should
that would see our mother half in spinsterhood.
How strange that you could tell the squirrel, fox and stoat
by tracks only, the trees by leaf, the birds by note,
and never tell what terror in each speck of grass
trembled as the weather sank within the glass,
nor know for us how sadly the Sunday trains depart
as we must go walking the country of the heart.

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

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

I Watch Each Measured Step

I watch each measured step you take
and add its mischief to my book.
Still you laugh at me and look
the less demeaned by each mistake.

You wave at me your folding phone,
you call me early, call me soon,
but I am tranquil as the moon,
and curled up there, the aged crone.

In seeing you I grow adept
in fathoming the wiles you keep.
The long days hide themselves in sleep,
but legs have tarried, paused and stepped.

Cast no magic in the air
nor make the evening shadows stir:
I will have them as they were:
the ungroomed casements of your hair.

You are reckless, you are brave,
and all too urgent and alive
with your pointed fingers five:
I will every gesture save.

You wonder at me, tilt the head
and give the face to sorcery,
but I will win him, just you see,
and flash his ring at you instead.

Family Counsel

They came to her in their hard times like hungry birds,
querulous for comfort, and she, as if the ache
of living out their alibis could be borne by words
shouldered the blame for journeys they wouldn't take.

Then, in her sixties, she had her own marriage fail,
accepting it. And why not? There was no fear
of shame or complication or betrayal:
but only as it was, and every year.

The family, however, as families will be, was outraged:
her part in it so devious, underhand.
She replied quietly that much in life is staged,
that always to act well is not to understand.

So? More in this, surely, than we are used
to say, when all her words flew home to roost.

For You the Most Missed

One

Most loved and most missed, and now inseparably
one with the wild Romany earth,
what shall I say to all the contemporary
recipients that wait on the dew-wet turf?
The blackbird is burnished with silver metal.
The old cat is stretched out in the sun.
Finally gone and yet the memories settle
in the hopes and absences: the not-begun.

Peonies flood open; the flowering roses
fill the air with their crimson scent;
the spoilage again of the evening poses
itself as glitter and is quickly spent.
Around the delphiniums splatter to leaves;
jasmynes burst yellow and shred to green;
chrysanthemums glisten — the garden weaves
anthems for winter, where you were seen

Ambivalent and silent. For all the strictures
just to be working, I'd seen nothing yet:
huge pots, vast histories, terrible pictures —
what was the terminus where all these met?
Soon you would show me, but melted away
into night sweats of cancer, the growing lame.
What is it now that you meant to say
though all these long months that you call my name?

Mother, I am busy. I have a life to lead
beyond you, without you, as day by day
things turn inveterate or run to seed.
How could I help or that moment stay
as sedated, aproned and on your own
you were pushed into surgery on rubber wheels?

That which was living the knife cuts to bone —
I pray you lie quietly, that the heaped earth seals.

Two

Only sometimes, at evening, you cannot imagine
what days are lost in this querulous doubt.
Spectral and silent in a piteous fashion
the old are remembered and the names cry out.
In frenzy they lift from the very stones
of walls and old walkways; the shadowed eyes
are black with their caried and stumbling groans:
penumbral they pass like the summer leaves

Which the wind heaps in drifts as it comes to us
each in his prospects to which he hangs on
to all he has worked for, hopes is or has.
It slips from his grasp as he too rolls on.
The roar fills my hearing; in hastening to sleep
I turn on the radio, have the music keep
far from me pity, the tide's turn to neap
horror around me that the dead speak.

Three

Without compunction I shall have this house
cleansed of its murmurings, the words about
what chair needs moving, what vase have flowers.
As at first I shall make it, swept throughout.
No walking stick propped on an unmade bed,
no sofa replaced by that frame instead.
No more will the bright day from high windows shed
a radiance like silver on that troubled head.

No one will sit through the afternoon
passing from stupor to comatose,

no long days spent sorting an upstairs room
the photos, the letters, the unworn clothes.
The past is deceptive. It was never well,
the farming throughout the Depression years.
Fondly you said: hard work would tell,
to the kind heart all comes if one perseveres.

Four

How is that true? The years lift away.
Estranged from our kinsfolk at end of day
we count up the cost and take for pay
life itself as best we may.
All in the future: mere straws in the wind.
You stand in the acres of sepia hills
half lost in the haystacks, in foliage, twinned
with the first breath of summer as it warms and fills
The woods and high pastures. Soft, ragged explosion
of cumulus the length of the rain-torn sky.
Rough ways, footways, paths not chosen
by farmer, grazier whose men stood by
from counting the quota of live-stock measures:
oblivious of all you raced far over
the wheat and wild roses to reach the treasures
of slow-worm and bird's nest and four-leaf clover.

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

No French blood, no titles, no high breeding,
but simple tinkers from the Warwickshire hills.
From your mother, Flo, a love of reading,
and manners, straight speaking, truculent wills.
Baronet with farmer with labourer breeding?
Not in that country, not those days.
It comes down to me, the silent, unseeding,
walking the boundaries the years erase.

Five

I suppose, to go back, it's an inn at Bicester,
with a young man fervently pressing claim
to a girl so pretty, captious, that even her sister
took in the child despite the shame.
Flo that daughter to whom convention
meant what was foreign to hoyden kin.
The matter progresses, causes dissention,
even to the story where I begin.

Strange, I think, that in each of us
children, so different, it burrows on
incalculably deeper, an incubus
flagrant but clasped at, as soon as gone.
Yes and perhaps. Here the small words sigh
their hopes into marble, and the names above
are neat and in full. And still you lie
close to the man whom you could not love.

Not at the end. There were fifty years
to quarrel, keepsake, make up, find
passion is a sweet thing but marriage steers
fast to commitments that cling and bind.
Three children, moreover, all of them stirring
to be brought up, made foremost, clothed and fed
with reasons for settling, not wandering or erring:
perhaps it there ended, that marriage bed.

But then I don't know, only found
it, no, not abhorrent, but something grown
incestuous with bodies that wormed around
a selfhood that I must remake alone.
Much too innocent: of course I knew —
the coldness, unkindness, deceiving: yes —
myself I should fashion as you two grew
the further apart into rootedness.

What can I say? That I sought on paper
the longings, the heartache, the invocations
to what I can't know, the sun-lit vapour
of cumulus far off over distant stations?
Perhaps it was simple, with a whetted knife
to sever the phantoms that phantoms raise,
so, and be happy, and make of life
a passion or a nothing, simple days,

Hungry for each other. The sharp words tout
a common decorum. The distant thunder
unsettles and passes. You twist about
in the green lawns unsleeping, mouldering under
the iron entailment that did for life.
Again you are Dorothy Gwendolen
Carpenter, of the aforesaid, wife, wife —
once, but not now, ever again.

Six

To feel is to know, see with compassion
how the pallor of lives must wind away
to homilies, heart-aches, the usual ration
of truth out in conflict with the common day.
Then I was young; I tried the other
door from the inside to go and play.
Where are the keepsakes, my sisters, and, Mother,

where have you hidden childhood away?
How then was yours? Belongings sent
to auction in Banbury, a brother packed
off to Australia, inheritance spent
on a passage to nothing, a sandy tract
of gum trees and wattle, where cloudless days
hung aimless as leaves in that shiny dome:
beyond you forever in thought he stays
friendless, in a raw land, finally home.

Seven

Your refuge? Reading. Apprenticed at Folkestone,
you went on to London, the very centre
of life where you bloomed like the prodigal swan.
You took from mother what her youth had lent her:
hauteur in movement, an easy weld
of body to movement, that tethered grace
of long legs, lithe figure, calm eyes that held
glamour and kindness in that sought-for face.

Severed at last were the bumpkin ties,
here you were made to a warmer south —
a luxuriant complexion, luminous eyes
and laughter, always laughter in that full mouth.
One man and yours. Weekends away.
Of course there was gossip and wild alarms:
but there and unending until he lay
fulfilled and dead in your damp arms.

So came the worst, most wounding shock.
Mechanically after you staunched the cost,
didn't recount it, if still the clock
marked off the loving and lifetime lost.
You went off to rambles, dances. Days
brightened and trembled as on you fared —
a woman beautiful, on whom laughter stays

a moment only, who hardly cared.
As for the silence, I have no sense
of a peace in that ever inner grief:
nothing to grasp at. No thoughts went hence
to a sunshine tomorrow, not real belief.
My father you met. You turned his head
more I suspect than you intended.
He wanted the music, to what it led
as you the heartbreak to be ended.

Eight

The bombers go over: your son sleeps on;
a breathing, a contentment; he doesn't cry.
Into this loving was packed and gone
the notion forever of asking why.
Yours to return to that hostel bed
single and hoping for less and less.
Here there was something, as the journals said,
to work for, to hold to, for happiness.

Him? He worked late, did not relax,
redoubled his efforts to annotate
the main provisions of the Company Acts:
set down and clear as his copperplate.
Kind and unfailing to us and wife
he did as ever a man is bidden.
If the letter killeth, the spirit gives life:
far from the rainbow is real gold hidden.

But then you were happy. And never his whim
to end it in silence or heartlessness:
If someone waste time that time wastes him.
No one drudged harder and into less.
Sometimes I think as years closed in
of him counting the prospects, for us providing
a home, a future as both wore thin,
shunted off in some railway siding.

Nine

One, two, three: the small hands wrought
braggart disaster at catch and tag.
Bounce went the ball in the alley court:
down went the flowers at corner flag.
Garden a disaster at twice the size,
home a muddle of thoroughfares.
Here we raced through: by a thousand ties
you clambered with us as we climbed the stairs.

Was this ever for him an ideal life?
How could it be? No, insisting more
what he would have of his house and wife,
he argued, he ranted; his word was law.
Your daughter fought back; there were wild infractions.
Still she resisted and still he raged.
Wounding attacks: worse exactions:
month by month the family aged.

Weak hold? Weak spirit? I've seen the stages
played out in office or market place.
One has tantrums, the other pages
and pages of comfort for every case.
There isn't, there can't be. You were torn two ways.
First to the man whose ways you'd wed,
then to the dilatory waifs and strays:
you cried, you dithered, did nought instead.

Ten

Lastly you moved, in fact the county
to which as housekeeper your mother went.
not to forget, even discount the
prospect of shimmering discontent.
Kent was built over, prosperous,
retreating into its small-town way:
I think of my father with his abacus
counting the words that he had to say.

You never went home, although the village
was a drive of one short hour away:
no, not the once: it was all still spillage
raw on the land for the years' delay.
Holding, withholding, as your father's
turn to the wall when his Florence died:
So the hillbilly Carpenters
refashioned the failings as yeoman pride.

Again I go back to those sepia acres,
to harvests rotting, the insolvent land
burdened by bailiffs and still no takers
to dig again into Warwickshire sand.
These were your starts. And surely never
for real was your charming rogue.
Nor yet your husband: the lost years sever.
a burr in the wind is that far brogue.

Across and through, the generations
call to me from my only home.
I see them still as small gilt stations
erected upon that Rorschach land.
I have toured the country — up, down and ever
it spreads before me, indifferent and tame —
hills and more hills, howsoever
I travel, it is never the same.

All's gone, all's past. No memorial:
a lifetime travelling, then a going hence:
that even this last and small locale
has nothing inherent or in residence.
I come to the end, find little to tell
but rage and a homewarding less and less:
I pray all the same these past thoughts tell
of matters yet larger than happiness.

Pottering About

I shall die in April on the flooded streets
with the traffic clamorous and the sky dark,
getting the milk in or the morning paper,
drenched under trees as in heavy rain,
hemmed in a doorway listening, and you not hearing
the hiss of years running, or me at all.

I can see it as London, on which hard winds beat
in pillared doorways, with the lights extinguished,
at windows in white as at a first communion
in which there is nothing but a sudden squall,
a flash on the path and then the headlights on;
in the big house the shutters, when tea is served.

Far from my thoughts will be any Downland ways
with the green grass growing, spring deceiving,
and not to be asked for, life's topmost branch.
Or even a smile at the young things said
in the years half-sprawled, the superseded.
immense are the days at which we shake our head.

Why make an issue of such thunderous
occasions? Why not keep them in boxes with
a government issue or an indexed pension,
and not be an old man pottering about,
still fierce for the spring and the far beginning
of the voice still calling the further on?

Marya

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For you our thoughts were visions: for me they leant upon
emptinesses at midday, on heat without substance.
The wind whirrs across the fields, and what it brings to us
is only what we dreamt of, what you and I put in.

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

Eight Small Notes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As If Immemorially

Immoderately, and improvidentially, the rains fall,
without occasion, that it seems, withal,
you and I stand here, and watch through the blurred pane
how our lives, reforming, dissolve again.

Vague, imponderable are the earth and sky,
half folded up in mist the trees, so why,
when all the summer firmaments of air
rehold their festivals, shan't we go there?

But the hour has come in and put its flaccid,
large feet flat on my table and chair. Nor has it
come conciliatory, obliging, sad,
but to shoulder aside the few things we had.

So it's as if immemorially the rains fall,
with such negation, that it seems that all —
whatever the thankfulness felt at heart —
with this cool breath of autumn will depart.

Still Winter in the Trees

Still winter in the trees, my love: hot days and dead leaves.
columns of shadows, darkness, the stems bare,
mostly, and a stilled shiver in the air
and something deeper, which still grieves.

Like pigeons we sit around, my love: early to late,
watching the mornings unfurl: who sits, who goes.
We have new dresses, all of us, which shows,
so they tell me, how long we wait.

If you'd look carefully, my love: our breasts lift
into the fabric of our being: how they rise,
as the hips do, flowering to aggrandize
themselves in the day's plain thrift.

In the morning I dress, my love, in a rapt dream,
each day different, though I wear a black bra
and embroidery that only you'd see, though far
away, how far away now you seem.

Prayers and incantations, my love, rain in the south,
the debris of the year shifting, and I through the cloth
pulled out of myself, drifting like a moth
but glad to meet you with a warm, soft mouth.

Afterwards

To stop the car and get out is to grasp
at nothing: a prosperous, rather 'thirties suburb
through which with socks untwisted and our polished shoes
gleaming in the chill, wet-sprinkled air
we walked those mornings to communal prayer —
obediently, on the whole, or I did, but you
of course were skipping about and chattering,
impish, beguiling and not forgotten. Miss dancing
shoes, would you please tell me why the south wind blows
the deeper and sadder for those cast-off clothes?

And it's not, as you would think it might be,
that much changed. There is the school, the pub,
half-timbered, and the loose, rough straggle of
the streets that sidled off, vacantly to
the far side, waste ground as it was, but now
a municipal car park and office block,
gleaming and heartless, where the scurrying feet
know nothing, care nothing, that inches deep
beneath the tarmac is the shadowed keep
of the lands we live in when asleep.

Perhaps it's that time and that time only,
among the tracery of days that fan
outward slowly as the green leaves open
in a garden suburb or on schoolroom ledge
that the small boy looking is half-entrammelled
in the cress uncurling in its effervescence,
the sticky-buds stretching, and, most of all, the thick red
bean pushing through paper its tendrilled shoot. Down
to what sensing did the body, half-wanton,
disclose itself goddess when I was gone?

Perhaps I supposed so, or longed to, I do not know.
The fata morgana of such a child — pert ears,
long neck, a strange way of walking, that the legs, deftly
extended, should but touch on the ground
a half-moon of heel and five perfect toes. Away
went the grasses, the gravel, and who can say
whether the ankle, the instep or gangling thigh
stepped the course carefully to what it knew — that out
of the freckles, gobstoppers, and turned-up nose,
should come in stemmed splendour the summer rose?

But that is to hasten through what I should say
of the runaway child, the breakneck demon
who won all the races and made havoc of games,
stole bat, lost ball, was late and light-hearted,
took ever the short cut and didn't care. If
I who was leader came always home laden first with
the birds' egg, the sixpence, the four-leaf clover — chaste
huntress of meadowland, clay pit, of wasteland and brook,
hold out your hands to me, close the book
wherein it was written the paths we took.

Gone is that boyhood, and with it the seasons
of running in gym shoes from brimstone to white,
racing the field vole, looking for slow-worm, squirming
through thickets still wet with the dew. These
were our forests and hide-and-seek castles — cow
parsley, burdock, goose strife and grasses. These
were the sense of it, start of it, this remaining
for all that's written in the years that came after: under
the heaven's perpetual but not unclouding grace
you draw your legs up and you hide your face.

How innocent it was when we two met
with only hopscotch on the heart at evenings
when our parents with their neighbours still
were walking and meandering and slowly
came back from garden fence to dark inside.
What was the drift then of the ice cream vendor's
glowing jingles through the sun-stilled street
but a promise and a listening and a blessing for
the words that you whispered, blushed at, said
abruptly, till you stopped, and then hung your head?

Yet all was forgiven, forgotten, when out with a short
step, a skip, a flounce, you lifted the body
to springtime indifference in your first high-heals.
More than heel, or ankle or instep, I could imagine
neatly tucked in the little toes — evenly
pressing and spreading the tentative stepping
to the future, to the foreign, the world you knew
would sway to your movement. It would, and then you'd tremble
as though the intoxicating but yielding air
contained more happiness than you could bear.

Strange, long afterwards, to be writing this,
like old friends with thoughts that will sit with me,
to swell out a past that I have not wanted, like breezes
that sometimes will catch at an old umbrella, filling
this most drab of things with their own afflatus:
dragging me here, beating against the sense,
to these streets, these houses that meet me with folded
arms, censorious looks. The bus passes
importantly on, whirling like dead leaves the fates
of lives in factories, the shops and the raw estates.

Another town: two different lives. You
the actress, or soon to be, of film and theatre,
I the writer, traveller, scientist, many
things but at that moment a young man only
standing diffidently at your door, waiting and
above all looking as the warm light widened
for a girl remembered who was now a woman,
who might not recall, or want to, but still in hope
that just as a smell will, suddenly and with tears
bring all to mind, I should reach you across the years.

You clasped me, hugged me, brought me forward, round
the home that you had made — cooker, freezer,
all the accoutrements more real and true
than I remembered, could do, clutching at
someone vast but shifting slowly into you.
Yet I could see, as we went on talking, all
the words collected had repaid their debts.
Till like children pampered and with kisses fed
slowly and so happily we trooped to bed.

For days, weeks, years together I could see you
half-sfumato, languorous, nothing on
but that small crucifix and chain. Dear God
how avidly and tenderly again
and again with all concession I should kiss
the bulwarks and the crossing places, richest
burgeoning of what the past had built
in taste of you, in breath of you — until
I knew the angels in all heaven sighed
over us and tenderly as the daylight died.

My heart you were, my life, my sinews, so that
even mornings on the tube-train travelling
I would make more space around me, be
fearful lest though inadvertently
touching others I should taste of them,
absorb their sweat, their suspiration, all
the alchemy that made up you. Dear
first, dear last, dear soul of being, who
but you to kiss me, hug me, till the view
of all I ever held to had been wholly you?

Huge days and warm days, coloured days on days!
In my office, walking lunchtimes, at
the weekends, travelling on the tube-train homeward
I would have the minutes, heartbeat seconds
vacant till I clasped and smothered you. Then
to bed and out of it, and so some
party, then another, you more reckless
laughing, wild and vagrant than before
until under the warm sequins of the stars your feet
danced their patterns down the silent street.

In that rapture must I remember how
so briefly and so fitfully the sunlight
passes in its brightness, streams away
in warmth of comfort, the convivial home?
Ours the country that is all around us
still our heritage and common joy,
only the path that bears us here will stop
at boundaries always, though I remember
you'd set them laughing on the homeward bus
to call out wistfully goodnight to us.

Things remarkable, what are they but
the wealth turned up by the duller cast
of days as they must be, and en masse returning
to a routine ordinary, sober, plain?
Surely I saw that in your downward glances
in the eyes, home later and with lame excuses,
the looks grow keener and the pricking tears
gathered disordered in the burning glass.
Our days to stop, permanently, unless
I should pull the thorn out and acquiesce.

Like an old man faltering in his native haunts
finding all different from what it was — filled
with thoughts still tender, though the outward flesh
had wrinkled, had thickened, had grown grey hairs:
a poor man with nothing who must stand aside
from the tumbrel of legs that mount and press,
urgent, resourceful, with their stockinged tops,
from which as all else he must avert his glance.
A scandal, perversity, to even touch
the bodies in tumult that are known too much.

Days of anger and of thundery heat
that filled the inmost process of my thought.
Yet once I remember in the evening, with the great
reluctant and velvet plummets of the rain
cascading, glittering and blurring on the pane,
you turned and said: Console me a little tonight,
I am not happy. And I heard, in the garden
below, the one bird singing, still singing, on and on.
Today, as the inward and reflective man
I must look deeper now to what I am.

But not for you, forward, and just as friendly
through all those cocktails, lunches, parties,
in which I liked and loved you, had you walking,
swirling, turning that full figure out.
Since they'd fete you, book you, surely, why
should I re-route and have that love restrain?
Go you forward and lightly with all good fortune;
with all of heart I should urged you on. I hoped
only to see you as those beings are,
shining as you will be and were a star.

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

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

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

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

A Victorian Interlude

Narrator:

Whatever it was they'd sought for on those dream-encrusted shores faded on arrival. When put down they were as ciphers of themselves — still purposed on their plans, loud with their hopes singing, as with tribulations — but also distanced, shadowed as with journey, cast upon a landscape that was not ingrained by days that they could enter into. In rock or tree or river or in the trailing clouds they sensed primeval Eden: nugatory, other, not of their descent.

They chartered wagons, went deep into the interior, found only that the red dust excoriated, long twisters of the wind tore at their face and hair, fire crested in the clouds. Perplexed, they travelled back, built homesteads near the coast, settling there more thickly as the mirages took root.

Bill:

Too right it's not a paradise out here but, Frank, in time she'd grow to like it. Ask her, will you? Say "Bill needs his answer shortish. Marry him or no?" "He'll do you proud," you tell her, "the farm's a little beaut." Otherwise, well it goes hard then, don't it? Like it was before. I plough up all the rough stuff hereabouts when blow me if the lands tribunal toff don't say, "Bill, you put that back for starters. It's abo land round there." That's what it's come to. Reckon anyway it's time our Eleanor set sail, or sat it out for good. Be a shame, though, Frank, it would. I've got to know it here, miles out of town, like: me, my thoughts and the sky looking down on all the things as in a dream I did. With Eleanor beside me, where would I go wrong?

Kate:

What a predicament I was in, my dear. Think of it:
Hubert with a small-town floozy. Quite disgusting.
I resolved at once of course to leave him, even
went so far as take a hotel suite in Melbourne.
But there came Hubert, all protestations. He is
so charming sometimes, and is bored: hates the posting.
I told him give it up, all of it, and gambling.
Which he has. In penitence he's bought a farm,
a William Briggs' or someone's property. Met him:
a self-made man but very nice — though so shy:
stands there with his hat off, blushing, when he sees us.
At my insistence we've appointed him our bailiff.
And so it's country folk you correspond with,
Marjory. I hope you will. All love from Kate.

Narrator:

So there they are then, in a heat-enfabled land.
Hubert, chafing at restrictions, sports a waistcoat:
Lords it. Bill is absent with the horses: waits.
Kate bustles between them: worries. The farm hangs on.
Winter passes. The seasons over the half-bare hills
hold their short-fused festivals. Shrubs flare
and go white. The windless days of summer follow.
Incandescent, the sand singing in inland places.
The sky balloons to the borders of their world in blue.
Small bushfires blacken like caries in the cricks of hills.
Around them at evening the land is thick with shadow, but never
leans to rain. Stillness. Presences in the dry sticks.
Anger as a plume over them. They do not speak.
Kate busies herself. Bill mutters. Hubert is moody.

Hubert:

In short, old boy, I write in confidence. Say nothing,
I beg of you, that Katherine could get wind of here.
Matters are damnable enough at present. Sometimes
I must confess I think my wife's gone mad. Now she

tells me that our future is assured, this playtime venture, as I call it, is capital to start.

Was very kind, I told her. And my thanks to Briggs.

However, I did make bold enough to wonder whether London had not given what we both had wanted: she her society and I my theatre column.

She says she has grown up. It's different. She is happy.

In a rough-necked country, then, I asked her, raw, that won't be tamed? No answer. So speak to Saunders, would you?

I imagine anywhere would suit us for the present.

Narrator:

Well before of course there had been rumours, twists of a scorching wind, which came, accosted and was nothing but what they had imagined in that spot.

Nightly, their families in town, the wagons hitched, they watched a redness creak upon the hills, the flare to certainty, that faded. For days nothing — but farms incinerated, townships burnt, stock vanished: a livelihood gone up in the clear air. Behind which the land wavered, but held them as by bars. Dug in, each in his own place, they saw whole hillsides burning, their homesteads teeth with flame — terrors that shifted into thinking, into which they fell. The fire came on. Was real. First the profuse smoke, in puffs or creepers, pouring through the trees, and then a footwall roaring and reaching out for air.

Bill:

Big happenings in this place, Frank. Our friend has snuffed it.

So long, highness. No great loss, but something strange

I reckon. We had a bushfire here, a nasty little

bleeder, that passed us in the end, but awful close.

Fair put the wind up me, I'll tell you, but not his nibs:

Oh no, he hitches horses when the fire was on us,

the silly bugger. Of course they bolted. Afterwards

we found him on the ground, looking strange. And dead

all right. I'd say the missus took it pretty well.

she cried a bit, picked him up and shook him, stared

but didn't say a dickey. She's out there at the moment wondering if we'll make it. That depends I told her. If we can, we will, she says — a right good answer, I am thinking. Someone's looking at a bonny wife.

Kate:

Yes, thank you, Marjory, for those condolences. I think I would have welcomed, all the same, words a little more restrained. Because, I will admit, you were the first in his affections, and would no doubt have made as well the better wife — with your forbearance, gentleness and so forth — does not entitle you to lay down laws. Hubert had many weaknesses but strove to overcome them. Out here, in new Australia, he saw the opportunity and took it. He tried so hard to make this place a home, but couldn't. His spirit failed him, and I face spending years now cooped up in a farm I cannot rent or sell. Will you write again, please Marjory, and make amends: we owe to ourselves to try and stay as friends.

Narrator:

Above, in the dry funnel of their thoughts, the thunder mutters. Distantly. They are on their own more now, Katherine and Bill, working. Fences are mended, a barn reroofed, field by field the land locked in. At times Katherine will walk across the fields to Hubert's grave. There Bill will join her. With all the world before them they cannot find one word. So will the land empty of its purpose, the sky mosaic with clouds, and then rhythmically and as if immemorially the rains fall, the pastures brim, the rivulets bubble over, and on the rivers long sheets of nothing but the sky slide and pool in the interior. Where Katherine is, is rain, though. Taproots reach and grip. She twists Bill's letter round in her small hands, sits down and writes: her heart takes on the triumph and terrors of the day.

This Small Sketch of You

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I'd set out screens and trolley, place
things in order, wash the plates up, clean
the windows that the afternoon would grace
with candid quietness a body red
from glowing heater bars as you would lean
in patterns also of that sofa bed.

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

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

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

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

September

And so that downy evening, with the air,
infested as it were with shadow, with
a pulpiness inside, September-ish,
which said its ending had been late for her,
she hung her small things on the line — all of them —
beneath the house-coat she had nothing on:
Eve in veritas, though not so comely,
not that at all — although she felt in aching
physicality old Adam stir —
or would have done had she not placed her feet

Hard on the ground and held down strenuously.
It passed. Around her hung the chrysalises:
things that to this moment had been full of her,
pregnant with her body and its withheld sweats,
with stretching and with suspiration. More
than that, she saw these lace-frilled canisters,
so cleaned and delicate and filmy white,
were moulded with her, of her substance, mocking
with their innocence this long put-off,
unwanted ordination. She watched a long time

Until the whiteness glimmered, lost distinction,
opened into pools of water, offerings
to some strange god who stuck his tongue out, hung
haired paws upon the line, salivated. She turned
at this point, went indoors. The small room flared
with placings, fell to order. There was the bed,
with pressed white sheets, and plumped-up pillows — all
neat and tucked in, trim and comfortable,
just as it should be, yes: she made some cocoa,
turned in, quite happily, not even reading.

Yet all that night, in unsought dreaming, the long
flotillas of her things sailed out. And each
denouement shamed her, wading as she was
above the streaming, still more fetid waters,
the undercarriage of her sex held up,
rough-haired and crinkled, and disagreeable
to any man, except to one, and he,
unknown, a coarse projection, who did not care
at all for her as person, but only skulked
to roar and repossess her when she dressed.

The Teashop Meeting

In a high room, with the light falling as though
in tousled benediction on these blest
with the unremarkableness of youth, who were
betrothed, moreover, in this very place.

What could be kinder than this winter meeting?
If there were angel's wings would they not beat
about the thin lace doilies and the silver tongs,
though what they do is sort the mortgage out.

Not for them to be the long nights now,
the days put out as paper cups, the body
retracted like a rotted tooth from the unctuousness
of going about and on its usual business.

Its plumed banality, if you will, of pouting
breast or hip or hair, the leg tucking
its delicacies into pants or pantyhose
in its endless dressing and undressing.

So that if something of all charity was in that hour,
laying ahead as in heaven, nothing
was in the watermarks of what they chose
to speak of radiance, inverted, that was lost.

Country Folk

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How Middle-Aged We Are, Dear Lord

Bright and unwelcoming is the blaze of spring
in the wife's antirrhinums, and the hollyhocks,
in autumn fructified in jams and puddings
and all the begetting and giving of toddler's names!

How far and further are the children marrying and
moving on — from the heart's occasions and hopelessness
of rain in its requiem on the childhood fields,
which we have walked and shall not walk again.

Good fellows all, we pay our taxes, take
the duty roster, write our letters, look
not immoderately on the neighbour's girl
come dancing back from parties, which we did then,

That nowadays we cannot mind. How middle-
aged we are, dear Lord, who turn the wheel
from shopping trips, from golf excursions . . . gaze
in turning wonder at the trees that stand

For someone rather like us, with our shadows
dwindling, flattening as the evenings come
always brighter than we had thought they would be
and demanding, and exalting, and from these

Settling in the light that sometimes rings
the hilly suburbs. In doubts. On certain days,
whole days together. What has happened? Strange,
my dear Lord Saviour, to have come to this.

Dead Weights

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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