

Kennet



Colin John Holcombe

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Kennet

South and southward looks the dreaming boy
where lines climb steadily but still employ
odd railway cuttings, signal boxes, rails
that veer on outward, curving, giving view
of summer tablelands of pure white sails
in distant cliff-falls to a dazzling blue
with coloured ices, court and cove. How far
that was from farmhouse with its blazing fire
and wife not heard above the evening news.
He felt through boots the flagstones linking shire
to shire the prospects which he didn't choose:
a boyhood that would ever fade away
into a millstone-hardened Daleside grey.

To start at the beginning: a market town
that mixed the manor house with college gown:
a Georgian coaching stop with summer air
that smelt of hayfields and of far-off wheat.
Amenities, wide streets and three-star fare
from AA hostelrys with showers en suite.
Properties well pointed, that had no need
of fish shop, cut-price mall or video store,
with signs hand-painted and its paths swept clean.
The haunt of well-heeled citizens who went in for
a church and duck pond as their rural scene,
with cream teas latterly, and tourist stops
around the vicarage and antique shops.

Across the trout-pooled interludes of stream
patrolled by dragonfly and nosing bream
there comes the memory of fragrant hours
beside the Kennet where the rain-sprent grasses
collude with idleness that time devours,
and all too rapidly as boyhood passes.
But not to emptiness or total loss —
he thought its aptitude would be remade
in things as tangible, as real as they,
that if they vanished even, something stayed
as sunset lingers after some hot day.
Here could he wander as the midges fret
above the weeded runs of green and jet.

A friendly child and popular, I lost
no time exploring Downland ways, and crossed
its quiet villages on foot or biked
great distances about it, always knew
there loomed some other continent I liked
as distant opportunities not much in view
but glimpsed on outings and on school events —
which I would treasure, long for, count the weeks
until I stood there, gazing out to sea
past donkey rides and deckchairs, small boutiques
to summer's rimmed and silvered alchemy.
Between the cliff-tops and the sea's blue sweep
I found a country that was mine to keep.

As sea air sharpens with the tang of salt,
I heard the crump of surf, delayed assault
on promenades and pier supports: that air
that reams with pungencies our nostrils clear
then swelled the tangles of my limp, damp hair,
as I stood lording it, the puppeteer
who pulls on waves or holds their weltering rush,
and flings the lead out with the conger baits
to feel continually the cold wash rise
in foam and bob of whirling concentrates
of shrimp and flotsam, where my straining thighs
returned the tug at them, while overseas
and not far distant lay the best of these.

And then all changed, at once. My thoughts came home
and never afterwards by choice would roam
from one who trotted past that day. I saw
a blaze of eyes, short nose, a pointed face
that bobbed, so delicate, that it too bore
an embassy for that slight elfin grace
with which she held herself. Back home I asked.
Whatever for? my father said, the boy's gone daft.
It's riding lessons now: whatever next?
I'll give up pocket money. You would? He laughed,
but looked at me the same: suspicious, vexed.
But, though he'd sanctioned it, the awful cost
still kept me thinking that some line was crossed.

And so I learnt: not well, not easily,
as something needful, which was new to me.
I got to ride and jump, to mount, dismount,
to have control and keep my posture straight.
Among the regulars I didn't count,
indeed I hadn't meant to, though of late
had come to cause a certain stir. I'd pass
the girl the locals called Miss Emily,
and passed her loftily, my head held high.
Whatever the occasion there might be
I merely nodded, kept on riding by,
and there, but for the hazard of a car
things would have ended, neither close nor far.

We saw it, both of us, and blaring as it neared.
She reigned, the horse now terrified. It reared
a few yards off. I cantered, took the reins
and held the creature till the nuisance passed.
Then, doffing cap, I would have gone. *These lanes
are dangerous*, she said, and smiled at last
the look returning to that startled face.
*So tell me therefore why a lawyer's son
should take this way to ride, or even ride
at all? Perhaps it was a cause begun
by some such figure in this countryside,
or so they say.* I laughed. *I cannot tell:
my sweet Miss Emily, I wish you well.*

She coloured and was cross. At length she said
*It seems like Ampersand you've lost your head,
I'd ask you to correct your forwardness.
A passing stranger's kindness is not claim
for true acquaintance, is it? Please address
me as Miss Davenport: that is my name,
and one your father anyway should know.
Good morning to the gallant stranger.* Then
she reigned and turned. *To Anthony*, she said
and laughed and cantered off. Again, again
I stopped and wondered where such prospects led,
and what of it or her I had to win,
so asked my father breathless, soon as in.

10. *Well, that's as far as it will go with her,*
he said. *Not now the force that once they were*
but still good family, a county name.
Let be, my boy, and pitch your hopes elsewhere.
Sound words, but still we met again, became
at length inseparable, the constant pair.
Through her I saw the countryside as use,
a place for generations, husbandry:
the crops, the fertilisers, costs, the pests.
It came alive, an unwrapped memory
with humans minimal, mere passing guests.
I went to agricollege even, books
there more of Emily and her good looks.

How much she laughed and teased him all that time.
So how much mulch, now farmer, how much lime?
Tell my father what you would have planted,
what seeds, what preparation, expected yields?
What could he tell her that her looks enchanted,
he saw her clean, taut contours through the fields?
How could he tell her that he heard her laughter
run through springtime music of the brooks?
That in her hair he saw the evening trees
fill out with sadness of the cawing rooks?
His whole world turned about such sights as these
but he was dumb to say so: felt alone,
and bit the matter off, replaced the phone.

With her the warmth and sighing of the wheat,
the heavy odours in the high June heat.
He saw the legs go striding and the tapered knit
of limbs with body and the freckled skin.
He felt about him in the simple fit
of face with innuendo, wearing thin
the what he told himself he would not do.
He feared in pressing her he'd find instead
some calculating and too forward creature
with female needs that stained the life they led,
in which her waywardness would never feature.
Let come what would, he thought, though what she said
repeatedly went round that dreaming head.

A life in waiting and another cup
to drink of were his prospects conjured up
in worlds where men were men and took a stand
on things that counted, mattered, always won
by craft and energy and not backhand
but still, in all things, kept their sense of fun,
which was the need in her, and which he felt
above, beyond him where the body hides
more depths of happiness than one-night flings
can source or summon up a countryside
caressed and entered with such whispered things,
which ease but cannot undo all the locks
the body's heir to with its thousand shocks.

More awe, more reverence and magic where
the foot mounts lightly to the midnight stair;
where trees are fortresses and clouded air
disrobes itself before a glowing moon:
a land quite borderless and never there
beyond the tedium of a shuttered room,
but unsubdued where ever bursting May
spills out its chill and pungent sap,
where owl goes out hooting and the foxes stray
far from the head laid down on willing lap,
to a world now otherwise and come what may,
unloosed, unbidden where the turbaned hills
lap quietly on the open window-sills.

The night air heady and the moon is riding
above the wainscot where the mouse is hiding:
unfathomable the eye but whisker twitches.
The snail spins silently its crinkled trail.
An hour to wakening of churchyard witches
when graves swing open and across in Braille
the scattered tracery of leaves go sailing.
Unheard and falling on the plots, and down
the grassy path go stepping country brides.
In fragrant white and pink each petalled gown
there falls the frothy mark of chestnut tides:
a vast effusion that must hurry on,
oblivious, unhusked, despoiled and gone.

Here he could wander on while flowering May
threw out her colours and was put away.
Such drifts of petals out of wind-struck trees,
resistless hawthorn's ending in the grass,
the fragrance billowed out that summer sees
but unrecorded as the hot days pass.
Here was the sweetness that unlocked the veins,
the ripening fruitage in each freckled face,
the hopscotch and the catch me, mooning round,
unclothing, bathing in that childhood space
which must elude us and which streaks the ground
in moths and rodents and those vapour trails:
regret, contentment and the country tales.

With thoughts of Emily those thoughts were spun
into a future wealth of warmth and sun.
Protracted childhood and across the acres
there rose the vistas of that waking dream.
The Berkshire countryside where turnings take us
towards the visionary on days that seem
but flat and ordinary, worse, provincial.
I have in memory that winding street
of shops, accountants, local press,
its smoked glass lettered in gold paint and neat,
my father's place as well, that real success:
a place where breeding and position
underwent a steady, slow addition.

What girls I knew there as the camera stops,
tight-clad in jodhpurs and their riding crops:
stiff-backed, their buttocks waisted in with tweeds.
They came from paddocks, houses, county schools
not talking down so much but as one needs
to deal with yokels and with tiresome fools.
All this I knew and also, on their own,
how natural they could be, and unconcerned
that raffish assignations could dethrone
that well-bred haughtiness so clearly learned
at some expense to joint accounts. Who cares
when country manners breed their long affairs?

It's class with class and they are always riding
horse with horse across the stubble striding,
and I was one of them by sovereign choice
of girls and family and Emily,
but in that fellowship I had no voice
but on approval only, courtesy
of Peter Davenport and no one else.
I had the run of manor house and farm,
I knew their history and each crossing place
from old security to threatened harm.
I knew each lineament and chiselled face
upon their chapel walls, each plaque and urn,
how long the centuries that don't return.

20. And so we'd sit there, she and I
and watch the evening splendour slowly die,
but here most beautiful where setting sun
slants through the high lead windows, phosphoresces
on pew or lectern as the thread's undone
that links the family as day progresses
to squire and baronet and county earls
beyond the taproom girl and surly poor.
All have their entrances: the exits weave
their light steps quickly on the dust before
they too, dancing, bow and take their leave.
Old graves, new headstones, and the springtime's flowers
recalled but briefly what each life devours.

How many sleeping in this musty air
of quiet desuetude knew springtime there?
How many body's yearnings took on trust
those confidences uttered in a voice,
which once was reassuring, now is dust.
Do generations pass but still rejoice
in some such Michelmass or Whitsuntide?
And does the laughter and the bitter wrong,
the summer sunshine and the silent tears
pass on to nothing but an empty song
that stirs occasionally but with the years
moves on and fades as daylight on the wane
that floods, exults and drains from window-pane?

The bust of marble and the shadowed grace
in eyes that smiling inward saw a face
still looking at them, musing, in itself
not sad or haunted but in time betrayed
by mundane circumstances that mere wealth
or beauty's aura have not much delayed.
All had their moment, took it, watched it pass
as time moved forward: slowly, on each spoke
the tiny figures gestured, danced about
as though eternal till the instant broke:
a flare, a glittering, then guttered out.
Life is a continuum and on this floor
the pattern will be now as was before.

*This is the place where I shall be, she said,
beneath that dryad with the weeping head.
A plaque, a name on marble, nothing more,
but you will come here, won't you, sit and pray,
or step more thoughtfully across this floor,
and turn the once and smile and go away?
No more than that, dear Anthony, your pledge
that if you love me and you always will,
then I will wait for you till times be done
in life, in waywardness, for good or ill.
This is the enterprise we've here begun,
or something like that. Anthony, we trace
our destiny together from this place.*

As winds collecting turn the weathervane
we grew together in the sun and rain,
inseparable, an item, constant pair
in Marlborough, Reading on our shopping trips,
no ball or county dance but we were there,
across the county signalling as passing ships.
I knew her thoughts as she knew mine. I woke
each morning with her happiness and knelt
at the selfsame altars where she spoke.
Her slightest disappointment I had felt
when sunlight opened or when thunder broke:
two souls that circumstances couldn't sever
for all the interludes of stormy weather

We had our spats and stand-up fights
and words that put the tortured world to rights,
the things between that made the days incline
towards acceptance in her father's gaze,
that shuttered guardian's well-kept line.
Abrupt and courteous, but not in ways
much based on feelings or his children's hopes.
Increasingly I grew the constant guest,
at home was almost family, but still
was kept at distance, or a lack of zest
among the walks and topiary, a chill
I felt in monuments and mouldering stone
occasionally when left there on my own.

Perhaps I knew that, having seen the strain
if I should try to make intentions plain.
*Tom will keep the place, said Emily
Myself and Clare and James, will have to think
of other stratagems: the famous three
to add their small part to the family's link
with other lineages: that's how it's done.
You've seen the family portraits, maps
of the estate as once it was, the lands
we owned, administered that now perhaps
are not unwisely farmed by other hands.
That's the truth of us, the Davenports
with tales of grandeur and their Agincourts.*

*You have no money, Anthony, or name
or wealth of ancestry nor claim
on what, alas, with us will always count:
some kinship with this homely, dew-kissed ground
with elves for neighbours and where stories mount
of ghosts returned from tryst or battle mound.
This is our country, all of it, and one
we served our king for countless times. A name
is nothing marvellous unless it hold
itself inviolate and not the same
as other modest, kindly folk, a mould
that's no doubt passé and ridiculous
but still means family, at least to us.*

*How can a man then win his lady's hand
I asked half-earnestly, when naught of land
great halls, retainers, chivalry are his?
Unless, I added, he can make his way
to find the worst of places that there is
and use his energy to make it pay.*

I spoke then vaguely of the Sahel sands
a place of raging emptiness where crops
were millet, sorghum, and alfalfa grass.
For days the wind picks up and never stops
while wondering wide-eyed nomads pause and pass.
A place of emptiness, of dust and haze
of sweltering evenings and of hotter days.

*Don't, she'd told me. Listen, Anthony
what you're proposing hurts both you and me.
We're friend, the best of friends, and, more than that,
are close on kissing cousins, of one heart.
You know the most of me, and where I'm at,
you know I think of you, and wake and start
that one day suddenly we'll be no more:
we'll both be married, separately, with lives
that run on differently to different ends.
I want a friend, an honest friend, who strives
to be my guide whatever fortune sends.
Anthony, remember when you're gone,
how much it brings another's prospects on.*

30 A UN mission paid the passage out
to wastes of dune and thorn bush where the drought
was more depressing than I'd thought. They knock
the stuffing out of you, the sickness, heat,
the wind-scoured landscape lifted out of rock.
They went as mirages on silent feet,
the people, cattle, and the herds of goat,
the women foraging, bowed down, the flies
thick hazards of them in their warping swarms
to fasten on them and their children's eyes,
a cataract of blackness after storms
removed each village, road and straggling field:
a land of pestilence that never healed.

My work? Bureaucracy: those tiny cogs,
of fields reports, assessments, careful logs.
But what was that to them? The waste went on,
their wives grew leaner and the cattle died.
We foreigners consulted, smiled, were gone,
but practically to help them barely tried.
I did: that second leave I spent my cash
and hired a drilling rig and Arab crew.
Marvellous, said colleagues: *who's to pay?*
The UN will, I said, *for seed-corn too.*
The which they did at last. I got my way
and gradually, in small ways, sprouts of green
broke through the level, sun-baked, dusty scene.

For three years afterwards, on flat or hill
across these desert wastes we'd drill
a spoor of holes, for small communities
to draw some sustenance from dusty soil,
not quite a living, true, but such to please
the funding governments: their cash, my toil.
And what a toil it was: my skin grew black,
my hair more sunbleached, and my looks more strange.
But still I stuck it out, the money mailed
back home to England since the locals change.
I wanted proceeds safe if all else failed.
A tidy sum, and sums, and with them went
a note to Emily as heaven bent.

Each day I thought of her, each night I dreamt
quixotically of warmth and hair well kempt
within that dark and smoothly tapered hat.
I saw the neat-cut figure, what I missed:
the imperious and easy way she sat,
the unloosed, dreamy way she kissed.
I missed continually that body's press, and heard
instead inside that stifling driller's shack
the howling wilderness of driven sand
that dinned at walls till changing tack
it brought the hissing breath more close to hand.
Beneath the pillow, though, not inches deep,
her letters comforting, I went to sleep.

How well she kept in touch with all the news
from combine harvesters to dancing shoes.
I had the run of her and all her thought,
and in the very paper smelt her scent.
I saw her outings, picnics, what she bought;
it seemed that hard-to-fathom distance lent
a charm and detail to that small estate.
She had the time to tell me how it went,
the farms, the fields, the yields spent working for.
Far from vague, it was a picture sent
with much more detail than I'd had before.
Indeed the whole complexity was such
it seemed a thing I'd never thought of much.

*We need a bailiff, once she wrote, or so
I think but father is the one to know.*

Dearest Anthony when will you come?

I'll come immediately was my first thought
but then of course came money, that real sum
she handled for me, mounting up, that bought
an independence for us, livelihood
without excessive debts and loans. I knew
the country life, indeed my college course
was much on economics: that quaint view
of mellow cottages draws age-old force
from grants and privileges: the lawyer signs
across the documents of grand designs.

All changed again. *My dearest Anthony,*
she wrote, *this letter's awfully hard for me.*
I married someone whom you will not know,
two weeks ago. We came back yesterday.
My time with you, it seems an age ago
but close and dear to me in every way.
It's true. You must believe I never meant
in any way to hurt or lead you on.
We knew such happiness I hadn't heart
to spoil the hopes of it when you were gone.
You have the money now to make a start
again with someone pretty, someone fun,
who loves you very much as I have done.

I stopped, reread the letter, read it twice,
at length remembering that sage advice
my father gave me long ago. I saw
the look come back into the careful eyes
that glanced at me and down and would say more
except for years of wisdom in that wise
old settled counsel. Not for you.
The Davenports are long established family
who spite the customs of the present age
and keep their privileges, their urge to be
above what law or government can stage.
Good Lord, they still receive, pay calls,
they ride to hounds and hold their summer balls.

Theirs is the family, remember, fought
at Ypres, Bleinhem and at Agincourt.
There's no admixture in that stainless blood
of common manners, common hopes. I tell
you Emily is not for you. The flood
of feeling's admirable, and that is well;
you're much together, best of friends. The girl
is destined elsewhere, though. She knows, and would
no doubt tell you if you asked. Have sense:
each hour you spend with her is one you could
be spending with more hope of recompense.
Take friendship as it is, a blessed thing
that needs no parent's say nor wedding ring.

I sold the business, took the next flight out
in dazed bewilderment, all turn-about.
I felt the overriding darkness pressing
in, a giddiness, an ache in what
my thought was slowly working on or guessing
as in some long detective novel's murky plot.
I saw her candid laughter and that look
confiding, secretive and always kind
that took each thought of mine and warmed its hand
as though to put suspicions out of mind
as heartless, undeserving, over-planned.
I read my novel twice, but nothing there
reclaimed me from that hurtful, chilling air.

40. Arrived, I hired a car and headed west.
The opening countryside in front progressed
to prospects colouring at every mile
to town and stopping places known before.
I saw the kissing bridle paths, each gate, each stile
as haunts of memory that held in store
the opening happenings the future gave.
All that was closed to me. I travelled on
across the chippings-fixed and stanchioned rails
to place-names friendly to me, yet was gone
that land of linnet haunting summer vales:
I knew that, met my father, heard: *Yes, pay
respects, if I were you, but do not stay.*

It seemed a life away from that event,
I turned the chapel knocker, in I went.
The door went hush and back and quietly shut.
The years returned. I saw a brooding place
withdrawn to silence, decorated, but
an air of sanctity. The altar lace,
brass candlesticks, a wreath of blooms. For her?
I did not know, but walked on past
the font, the clerestory, the choir stalls
to stand there looking at the wreath at last.
No name, no cut there in the chapel walls,
no dryad weeping with its unseen tears
but close to me her name and unknown years.

A passing interval, no more. I thought
of wealth, of beauty, all it brought
in this harsh world of hope and enterprise,
the smiles, appearance, the double face
we show continually, her candid eyes
that ruled the sovereignty of sylvan grace,
and knew that blessing lost to me was ever
lost, unalterably, for all time lost.
And not as brightness fallen from the air
but a whole world folded up at wrenching cost
of moods, of bitterness and hard despair.
And this is how I was, had ever been:
a bit-part actor in a rural scene.

Again the generations that I saw
but now more distant in the marble floor:
the diamond lozenges, the shields, the polished brass,
the vanished regiments, the titles gone.
Reserve, obedience, the mark of class
that misses generations but goes on
in church, academies and old professions:
a caste fantastical, outmoded pride,
the thousand families, I'd heard it said,
they married into, were by blood allied,
the names which England links by land and bed,
with hope of better times, for stalwart men
to do her work and purposes again.

And so I was myself as they had seen
me: honest, loving, who had no doubt been
in all things honourable but not a name
to link the family through what had passed:
no fighting men who gave their blood, no fame
to add its lustre to that stainless caste.
Not bad, they would have said. An honest man,
without a fortune, though, no certain lift
above the commonplace of sturdy poor.
Land and family is not a gift
but need for vigilance, to close the door.
All these I knew, and Emily as well:
she knew the truth of that, though wouldn't tell.

So there it was, a dream, a walk-on scene,
an empty pageantry where hope had been
betrayed or settled. I took the long way back
that wound through trees about the old estate.
I thought to call but didn't, knew my lack
of courtesy advisable, the gate
now shut on Emily. The Davenports
were Davenports both now and then. I wrote
and waited anxiously the counted hours
the usual courteous but formal note
but got *your happiness is joined with ours*,
the last that I'd expected, one brisk hand
extending from that fabled, closed-off land.

I thought to settle down, that hers and mine
retain in hills around a wayside shrine,
but that was morbid, and the riding crop
impatiently would flick the thought away.
I thought of that and how the days would drop
their serious contours with her words at play:
quite effortlessly, thoughtlessly she'd laugh
and urge her mount to race me: on we'd go
across the meadowland, along the Kennet where
the stream would pool and falter, pause and flow
more thoughtfully with her now mocking stare.
And then she'd dash away and I would see
a spirit unconstrained and glad with me.

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

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

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

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