

# SMALLTALK



colin john holcombe

ocaso press 2009

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by Colin John Holcombe

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# POEMS

## 1. Agua con Gas

Sunday morning, and I'm sat at peace  
with coffee and an 'agua con gas'.  
The rising silver bubbles never cease  
to fuzz the clarity the surface has  
with a bristling, steady movement: tiny blink  
as each arrives and opens and is gone,  
as though the fervent inwardness would link  
with calm transparency I'm gazing on.

Sights recollected in tranquillity  
as Wordsworth almost said. I think of how  
the great technicians made us see  
by painting miracles of this world now.  
Velasquez most of all, whose hog-hair brush  
picked out ebullience of silk and lace,  
Sargeant and Boldini even, once the rush  
to finish sitting settled into grace.

All tiny objects, mundane, trivial things  
that are, and of themselves, not asking why,  
where consciousness a moment spreads its wings  
and asks for nothing but the wide blue sky.

## 2. Café Time

A café, jotting pad, an hour to kill:  
I watch the summer beauties drifting past  
in fashion statements that they largely fill  
though doubtless borrowed from an older cast.

From bulky schoolgirl to the well-dressed wife  
and sales assistants on their thick-soled shoes  
to legs still buoyantly adrift in life  
and perfumed legends that can pout and choose —  
they all are going somewhere, and will leave  
some image on the air, each shape intent  
on having mischief in their looks deceive  
us with an indolence that's only lent.

The most compelling then is lightest worn:  
a casual word or laugh, the shuttered glance.  
And all that is not said is through this born  
to bonfired vanities in which their dance  
patrols the territories imagined ours.

Soft and imperial, they flit about  
in rapturous plangency of all their powers  
as I, with guttering sunlight, darken out.

### 3. Another One

Another one has gone, our maid who cooks  
a bit and weekly does this modest flat,  
although we're easy money, by the looks  
of it, and I'm a gringo, come to that.

But all too obvious the reason why:  
the country's changing, as I tell my wife.  
No start in education, still they try  
as others do to get a better life:  
attempts not news or reprehensible.  
Across the world fresh millions ply their fates,  
with many more increasingly incapable  
of doing so in Europe or the States.

In fact our energetic, cheery lot  
have taken new employment roads urged on  
by illness, families, or drunken sot  
of husband come back with his savings gone.

I sit here in this café with the sun  
across the world now sinking on the life I lead,  
one difficult but answerable to none  
but those who worry how these small words read.

#### 4. As It Was

He comes each Sunday with his antique prints  
for you to ask about, and purchase, frame:  
the city as it was in sepia tints:  
decipherable though not the same.

Nor such a gracious age for all that men  
could saunter in their polished shoes and spats.  
Another photo shows the street again  
with workmen in their waistcoats, boots and hats.  
They're navies, laying tramlines. You can see  
the muscles glistening in the summer heat,  
also the gritted jaws and the despondency  
in gangs on quotas that they have to meet.

My neighbour, smiling, contradicts this view,  
and waves a thick-ringed hand across the lines.  
They did, I tell her; even now they do  
on country roads, in quarries, in the mines.

Criminals, she says, for no man living  
becomes mere animals as much as that.  
What can I tell her, that as unforgiving  
run all the thoroughfares to where we're sat?

## 5. Fragrant Air

From enervation trees withdraw their sap  
and leaves fray out to skeletons and fall  
to a limp collapse at each cold snap,  
as though the winter now stood more on call.

Our bodies smaller in the shirt or vest,  
we feel expectancy in morning's chill,  
a sense of daring when we stand undressed  
above the bedroom's silvered windowsill.

But not the Chileans: the slightest drop  
in temperature brings out the thickset teens  
in muffler, overcoat or knitted top,  
the boots to thigh-length over padded jeans,  
and not as demonstration, but release  
of autumn's subdued jazz notes fading out  
into a badly-written, rained-on piece  
with legs and bodices sent far about.

Yet all that's promised is a wavering frieze  
of aqueous mirages not here nor there,  
but in the haloed street-lamps and the trees  
become embodiments of far off air

## 6. Rain

What differences a change in weather makes:  
dark skies, the shut-in faces, muddy ground.  
The workmen pull out matted leaves with rakes  
from drains and gutters with a rasping sound  
that bites into our thoughts like scattered grit  
beneath a wheel that otherwise would spin  
upon a yielding softness, holding it  
as fit for purposes through thick and thin.

A grim determination, raw and cold,  
has gripped the capital: the streets are bare  
of dogs and beggars, and the shop-lights fold  
into their inner-circulated air  
that gives out nothing to the gloomy streets.  
The traffic lacks its famed exuberance  
and boasts no racing lights or ribald bleats:  
each change of lights an orderly advance.

And then it rains again, ragged, thin  
and nondescript as rooms in tenements  
show cold opprobrium the poor are in,  
and doubtless will be to their going hence.

## 7. Autumn Outfits

A late, unsettling autumn's in the air,  
and pavements dazzle with a chilly fire  
that frames the Chileans off to work, who wear  
the wraps and thickest of their warm attire.  
It all this while has been as good as dead:  
the winter's warm and bodily impress  
consigned to hangers and to drawers instead,  
mere phantoms draped on nothing: emptiness.

No doubt they still saw outlines through their minds'  
clear incantation of each flounce and look,  
but learned that latency which absence finds  
is winter's habitat in winter's book.

And when you think about it, we all fare on  
attired in habits and contrivances  
not ours, and though the day for them is gone,  
past all the season's proper licenses,  
must still push regardless through our make-  
belief that what's to come must still be best,  
as though our very actions built the stake,  
and hope's down-payment furnished all the rest.

## 8. Blind

Blind, and out all weathers: can't be stopped.  
He plays a cheap wood pipe, and waits, and when  
the box is shaken and no coin is dropped  
will play the soft and faltering tune again.  
And so for hours on end: it doesn't change.  
He hears the footsteps and the traffic's roar  
as something elsewhere, and it's nothing strange  
to hold this one thing he is aiming for,  
which is but contact, contribution. We,  
in short, all matter, and are linking through  
to what remains, a settled constancy  
of being part of, always, this small view.

The world goes past him and he cannot see  
what looks are offered, taking things on trust.  
He didn't want this life or even choose to be  
the thickset figure piping as he must.

But are we different in our larger scope  
of adding something to the general din:  
of laughing, talking, praying — giving hope  
that someone hear us, and will let us in?

## 9. Cántico

Bowra, Paz, MacLeish and Madriago  
add the scholar-poet's words of praise:  
'which stands as refutation and embargo  
upon the horrors of the present days.'

After forty years I don't know what to think,  
except to add the verse looks dreadfully thin,  
reprise of Valéry, a mental blink  
to use the metaphor we're rhyming in.

'The greatest living Spanish poet', Jorge  
Luis Borges writes, 'beyond dispute.'  
Perhaps he really thought so, and this porky  
is not hyperbole the words refute.  
In fact, as is so often with translation,  
the editor is passable, the big names bad:  
in none of them a wider revelation  
of what the mere words earned or ever had.

Is there not a country built on fact  
where poets need not climb the greasy pole,  
perform their vaudeville or their vatic act,  
but see life lengthened out, and bright, and whole?

## 10. Window Cleaner

I watch a window-cleaner at her task.  
Day in, day out, professionally the same  
she does the fronts in turn and doesn't ask  
to be excused the awkward café name.

You think she could do better? Maybe not:  
for all I know it may be best to go  
on unobtrusively with what we've got  
than try for something that we just can't know  
in all its branches or complexities:  
some realm of science always building on —  
medicine perhaps, which, as it is,  
means charts we studied once have largely gone.

And are computerized, where sections glow  
with floating animations on the screen,  
and you can turn the image round to show  
how closely inter-penetrant have been  
on parts we took for granted through the skin.  
All worked mechanically to link and fit  
the vibrant envelope we're living in  
with menials to cleanse us, bit by bit.

## 11. Chilean Politics

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

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

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

## 12. Clothes

On the whole, men's outfits simply clothe, give respectability, some guide to trade, profession, class, or where they live — but hinted at, identikit, down-played.

And if their better halves make much more fuss of jewellery and corset, new-done hair, they do not dress so much as prop and truss a fraught intention that was always there.

In short, we do not look on through, but take as one the hemline and the bodice cup, the swagger of the hips as those hips make a point of swaggering and fronting up.

But more than that: the body's deep unease resolves itself in radiant sunny weather: it's sublimated, fused, and no one sees how truth and subterfuge must live together.

So come the manias that the fashions send in millions window-shopping, trying on outfit after outfit as though the dress would lend entrancing shape to where their prospects shone.

### 13. Dog Days

It is the dog-days' heat we notice most  
among the miasmas of the bodies sweat,  
as though this sweltering stickiness must host  
our comfort somewhere, in the sense we get  
of being of and out of this closed space  
with trees and awnings and the welcome shade —  
this long, long falling headlong out of grace  
towards extinction, though it's much delayed.

But then there is the thought of Thomas Browne  
amazed we last a single day. How soon  
from their high equinoxes lives run down  
to that loud ticking in the depths of noon.  
And trees will cast their seasonal burdens down  
and be as lifeless sentinels, then clothed again,  
and from a field, a house or thriving town  
will take on markings of the lives of men.

How brief mortality, like passing heat  
that plays with us, and passes, then is gone,  
to leave us tables and the busy street,  
the traffic roaring past us, heedless, on.

## 14. Dogs

Exhausted, muzzles on the paving stones,  
the dogs lie stretched out in the heat: an eye  
opens, an ear twitches, but still the muzzy bones  
take in but warmth and looming passers by.  
A mother wheels her pram up. They must shift  
reluctantly an inch or two, and poke  
their dry snouts out from under chairs and drift  
thence off to where they were before they woke.

How do we know what makes the canine sight  
receding upwards from perspiring feet,  
the forms that sway above and block out light  
in lofty silhouettes where these forms meet?

The streets for dogs have dark and pungent smells  
and rank enchantment where the welcome spread  
of evening's coolness in their shadows wells  
in memories that fill each bony head  
with fibred sinews while these present days  
must pass for them in soporific tediousness:  
past litters they remember through a haze  
their eyes' benevolence will not confess.

## 15. Friends

As with friends we haven't met for years  
we all turn older suddenly, with hair  
ablaze with worry's sad and brave arrears,  
that asks importantly just how we fare.

We think of Proust's narrator near his end,  
beguiled by some young, pretty, flouncing thing  
who whispers: 'Can't I be your little friend?'  
and laughs to hear the tittle-tattle that might bring.  
And more of Yeats' dying animal, its wealth  
of love, both sad and pungent, to impart  
to all who'd read him, while the battered self  
retreat to rag and bone shop of the heart.

Bizarre, preposterous and obscene,  
so dies the body as the sense bloom  
beyond imaginings, and what has been  
becomes as perfume of a shut-up room  
that in a moment is compressed to grief.  
So youth, that blooms on further out of reach:  
riotous and disposable in the brief  
bewitchment of this autumn's empty speech.

## 16. Florist Boys

They walk on past so solemnly with sprays  
of lilies, laurels, and the odd white rose.  
Reminding all of us to pause and play  
respects to families when all hope goes.

At every moment, one of us is dying,  
and doctors think we all are, bit by bit,  
but this is different, and there's no denying  
that here's a flaunted, public end of it.  
And not just that, but maybe we who are  
is not that fully known until our ends:  
that daily converse doesn't take us far  
on what we really count for with our friends.

A sobering recollection, knowing my own lot  
with whom I'm hardly present: a partial ghost  
who, mute, still broods on nothings and has got  
a taste for then imagining the most.  
I think of those obituaries I had to write,  
not wholly honest, but with good points first,  
and hope with mine in looking back they might  
say life to him was bravely unrehearsed.

## 17. Geoffrey Hill

The craftsmanship is clear: the rhythms fall  
it seems haphazardly but leave their gaps  
in such a melody that words and all  
lacunae adumbrate a large 'perhaps'.

Nonetheless I wish I liked the pieces more:  
the range of learning and the razor skill  
with which the thoughts provoke and shift before  
we grasp the essence in this overkill  
of sculpted commentary on non-events.  
How far the probing scholar's thought goes back  
to pluck the arcane from the obvious sense,  
put deconstruction's guard dogs on attack.

I'm comfortable with deep allusions, find  
it quite unworrying that words deceive,  
that we can never know what's on our mind  
until of common sense we take our leave,  
but must it be so dark and recondite,  
these well-mulched sowings in a wintry mind:  
no glad awakening with the sun's delight  
or passing happiness a word may find?

## 18. Heat

Water splashed out under flower stalls  
gives misted respites from the summer heats,  
though there are shadows where the sunlight falls  
outside the blooms in blue and white retreats.

In fact the temperatures are not that bad:  
it's far, far hotter on the pampas plains,  
and of course the Atacama's never clad  
with trails of cumulous and passing rains.  
Besides, it doesn't last. Four months and then  
the sun throws lengthening shadows from the trees  
and high developments, which then again  
will fill with headiness that no one sees.

But that's the rub of it, these afternoons  
when heat and dark become uncoupled, pour  
an unbearable radiance into shaded rooms  
that wait with windows open and the door  
transcribing onetime colours into heat.  
We cannot look at them or watch the cars  
push tremulously shimmering through the street  
now tiger-bold in blaze and shadow bars.

## 19. How Far We Have Come

How far we've come you'd say to see the grim  
old photo albums of the time before.  
Each household had its patron, he whose whim  
was made by custom into written law.  
Just what he earned he wouldn't say, or how  
he'd spent the bulk of it, more his preserve,  
except the little bit that did for now:  
so his to order it and hers to serve.  
A demarcation that the church upheld,  
observed in courtesies, a hundred rules.  
Man was the stronger partner, would not be gelled  
by lies the socialists dispensed for fools.

In this small corner of the Spanish crown,  
however, far and lacking obvious wealth,  
it was the women laid the first floor down  
declared, 'I keep my name and am myself.'  
And so it grew, and does so now, an ever  
swelling animated talk: it's all  
by women, of them, for them, which, together,  
now keeps their men-folk distant, meek, on call.

## 20. La Traviata

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

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

## 21. Labour Day

A warm, contenting, shadowed afternoon that rounds off International Labour Day here in Providencia, where too soon we'll end our idle chit-chat, go our way as friends who had to fill an hour or two before the restaurant or the cinema: a day on which there's nothing left to do except some duty visit out by bus or car.

There were the televised and bright parades of Socialists to mark the battles past: Allende's death, the rise of guilds and trades but even those were peaceful, failing fast.

The country's like this afternoon, between the fire of summer and the winter frost: equitable, not one nor other, seen progressing slowly over what was lost. And that will no doubt take its many forms and can't today be guessed at or delayed, but brooding on those landscapes, blood and storms, it's hard to think of what its martyrs paid.

## 22. MBAs

Sensibly they like to start from scratch,  
knock down the brick-built buildings, and erect  
their airy, glass-wreathed palaces that match  
the inward glitterings the walls reflect.

A world that I knew well, where lady luck  
patrols in power-suits and eased-in clutch —  
impregnable until the downturn struck  
but still not teetering, or not that much.

What do they make, these smiles in business suits  
but groups that congregate, are in the know?  
Like client brochures or the fashion shoot  
it's done professionally, and done for show.

In outline it's a sort of first estate  
above mere trade or business thought:  
to pay bills grudgingly and settle late,  
but know, correctly, that their name is sought  
precisely for its well-occasioned cost.  
Their very cachet holds them in the air:  
unwavering confidence they never lost,  
nor ever need to in the hopes they share.

## 23. Winter

Winter's now established with an absent air,  
to make the autumn's riotous desolation in  
the streets a bruising thing, a conscious stare  
at lighted shop-fronts dull, withdrawn and thin.

It's walking through the fallen drifts of leaves  
the thousands of them, thrown as coloured hands  
down on the sidewalks that the mind receives  
its intimations of far other lands.

Eternal summers which the Greeks, that most  
contentious, sceptical of people, saw  
as needed by their gods, though rootless ghost  
was what the great majority had for  
their own inheritance, as like as not.

Yet walking through these coloured drifts,  
these heaped-up counterpanes the streets have got  
as though too readily, the spirit lifts  
to what we doubtless never lost, although  
it form an obvious, repeated theme  
in things we never till then felt: the flow  
of lives beyond us in each winter's screen.

## 24. New Starts

They hang about in streets, these raw new starts  
that promise journeys out to jean-clad truth,  
to things that are themselves, whose knowledge crafts  
a bluff embodiment of regal youth.

How easily we'd go with them, and taking  
but bare necessities, and not that much  
in clothes, but more in resolution, making  
sure we stayed untainted, out of touch.  
Our lives would bloom in vast ascension, spun  
of youth's high longings, such as soar about  
in lofty, brilliant-feathered days of sun  
upon the shimmering highways, speeding out.

Of course we'd have to learn new skills,  
be much more humble, wary, know our place,  
and find which esoteric creed instils  
our being different then, in every case.  
But still, as dawn itself on new-made roads,  
to be our wholesome selves, just who we were,  
lest things habitual turn heavy loads  
we pledged a lifetime past we'd not incur.

## 25. Obituaries

I shouldn't have read the thing, obituaries  
the 'Economist' has gathered in a book.  
Half the names are pallid memories  
that coyly beg us for a second look.

How elegant the lives are here, which flowed  
effortlessly on to that high ground:  
so prodigal of gifts they never owed  
to birth or circumstances, but were found  
in what they made the lottery of life  
become, and not capricious in their case.  
We take a ticket to the job or wife  
where they moved purposely, from place to place.

Myself, I wonder how I got here, see  
my course a sort of pinball, where I fell,  
and still fall, headlong, curiously  
into a self-inflicted urge to tell  
that all our conversations shrink to one  
on one with still more distant company,  
each pestering to have the phrases run  
to what they maybe meant to them or me.

## 26. Office Blocks

Bland, unthreatening, more blanking out  
if anything, with panels, wafer-thin,  
of breathing sky and clouds and all about  
that's registered, absorbed and taken in.

Indeed, it's all been plotted up — each part  
by thousand miles of cable: nothing lost  
or double-counted: can't be. Here they start:  
the anonymity and added cost,  
an architectural ur-accountancy  
of girder, concrete panel, flooring space —  
the last particularly, since all's to be  
apportioned to the average selling pace.

In fact they're not that regular: each pane  
reflects an oblong, partial shade of sky  
and shimmers differently as evenings wane  
to bluish iridescence and the colours die,  
to go out in a strange forgiveness.  
A Leggo-land of money hardly there,  
tall piles of numbers that must slowly press  
the life both out and into city air.

## 27. Old Gentlemen

I shall join them soon enough, my slacks  
neat-pressed and pacing with a white-topped cane:  
a trace of dandy as the sunlight tracks  
me through life's slower and more kindly lane.

A panama that barely keeps my head  
such are the many names I have to greet  
and go off on a measured, sprightly tread  
down boulevard and leafed suburban street  
in coat or jacket still not thrown away,  
though quite unsuitable for daily use:  
a jaunty cut about it, brushed each day  
for some old, pampered tomcat on the loose.

And one you'll say has paid his entrance fee  
to that strange carnival we call a life:  
has paid in full indeed, as you can see  
bereft of offspring or a doting wife.  
As though in being spry and self-contained  
and not a moment failing in that practised part:  
was recompense, no less, for what has passed  
in this preserved and self-indulgent heart.

## 28. Victor Hugo

I should do better for him: underneath  
the piled-up bombast he was sane enough.  
At least his dreams were true, and would bequeath  
our academics much intriguing stuff.

So: that madman known as Victor Hugo,  
their greatest poet still, as Gide well knew,  
with name that only seems to rhyme with 'jugo'  
except that's Spanish more, and will not do.

And so I try. I really try, and jot  
down various openings for well-known lines,  
but how they go on, page on page, and not  
like this: the alexandrine also rhymes.

Suppose I parsed him well enough: I'd hear  
the muffled thunder of those phrases build  
to lofty citadels of childhood fear  
with God now speaking as the poet willed?  
Besides: where do you stop? Or start? It flows  
as with a Janus, double-headed look  
at truth and towering falsehood. On it blows  
through all eternity in book on book.

## 29. Passing

Always, though I knew them slightly, they  
were off to vague, preposterous districts — vast,  
beyond what post-codes or new maps portray,  
and all but ambulances drive on past.

But having seen my wife off, coming back  
at six this morning, in a train packed tight  
with watchmen, nurses, labourers, each man jack  
of them paid pittances, kept out of sight,  
I look at each unhealthy, sweating face,  
the lipstick much too thick, the jawbone blue,  
and am ashamed to find this swarthy race  
shows all the management we're paid to do.

And in an accident with someone hurt,  
where helping made some trouble with the boss,  
they'd go at once, and stain with blood and dirt  
the clothes for decencies they couldn't cross.  
Myself I wouldn't speak for, but my class  
I know too well would dally, be the last  
to hold a hand out, but display the farce  
of cell phones ringing and their stepping past.

### 30. Propertius

I sit here writing in this open street  
with passing crowds and traffic far away,  
to hear again the chatter and the sandaled feet  
and what the man I'm reading now would say.

The Chilean is not the easiest speech  
to woo in or be beautiful,  
and even on the TV is more screech  
than syllables soft-packed in cotton-wool.  
Perhaps the Latin round you was as bad,  
and marked by ugly patois, flattened vowel:  
you saw the essence in it, what it had  
behind a street-wise, raucous howl.

I do not know. We grow and live our seasons  
in loose abundance of our clumsy speech.  
Perhaps the heart has always added reasons  
beyond what aptly pumiced phrase can teach.  
Why write at all, unless each passing word  
is promissory, and points to something more  
that all our lives we strained for, never heard  
beneath the tenderness it's standing for?

## 31. Razor

We finish, wash the razor, flick it dry  
and hardly notice it, though day by day  
it grows less useable and we must buy  
another soon and toss the old away —  
without a thought, although another age  
would be enraptured by its slick precision,  
its neat-pressed plastic and the twinkling rage  
with which it goes about its felling mission.

No sword of samurai had quite this blade  
or was so modest with its inch-long steel  
that's hardly fastened but more pressed and laid  
to be the scimitar we do not feel.

A thousand marvels make our lives, but each  
when dulled by our unthinking use adopts  
an air of false docility, as though to preach  
unwonted homilies where no one stops  
to think about these small-time engineers,  
for all some space-time visitor may see  
in land-fill, sifting through the dangerous years,  
its small, quite perfect, glittering filigree.

## 32. Islamic Kingdoms

The tribes are legends in themselves, of course:  
the Ghorids, Quarakitay, Golden Horde.  
All wards of Christendom have felt their force  
or made entreaty to their overlord.

I know their lands, their rulers, tolls they paid,  
the Caliphs called up in their prayers,  
can even read their laqabs, each one laid  
with florid kufic into daily cares.

That said, what now remains but dust and air,  
a ruined mosque, a dirhem, faience tile?  
Of silk-robed conquerors there's nothing there  
but steppe and emptied desert, mile on mile.

And yet I read about them still, and look  
up mint and ruler on the coins I've got,  
like child at Christmas think the latest book  
completes the jigsaw, lot by lot.  
It doesn't, can't of course: the quest goes on  
and by its very nature is the place  
I'll never get to, ever, being gone  
into a world that left this shining trace.

### 33. Royal Holidays

Our fault entirely. Yes, we should have known:  
the salesgirl laughing when she'd half begun,  
the polished voice that bubbled down the phone,  
*Please come at once. It's true: You husband's won.*  
Reluctantly, still doubting it, we went  
and met the others (others!) large prize bent.  
Good suits, stiff drinks: the hotel foyer lent  
some misplaced glamour to this non-event.

You have to take to them, admire the loyal  
sales employee battling through the vacant look  
of those who only want their prize, as 'Royal  
Holidays' displayed their picture book.  
It was too obviously a scam. We knew  
immediately but somehow didn't leave.  
A nice guy, needing work. What would you do  
but make the best of it: smile, deceive?

So there we are. We stuck it out and got  
our prize, quite worthless, as the rest.  
Greed, stupidity, the human lot  
of kind complicity where each is blest.

## 34. Attack

The same old crowd of workaholics, cast-off wives,  
who now are teachers, lab-technician, nurse.  
It's clear, whatever complicates our lives,  
for most here chatting it's a good deal worse.

I trot the old tales out: they nod their heads  
and add a chance example to my wares,  
then quickly pass from lives as newly-weds  
to things now separate, a his and theirs.  
They ask about our children. None, I say,  
and turn the talk to theirs, who've all done well.  
I smile, encouraging my conscience pay  
its entry money to some private hell  
and think that's patronizing or bizarre  
although they pick it up by silent phone.  
*You just get used to it, they say. We are  
by preference happier on our own.*

Amen to that. Besides, I do not care  
and think of nothing till the sharp attack  
of look from cripple with a teddy bear  
we get on taking now the same bus back.

## 35. Same Old Stories

With coffees come the stories. His I know  
beyond the outside hazard of a chance  
he'll not know mine. But still it's round we go  
like weary partners at some village dance.

I wonder why we meet, and go on meeting,  
complain of taxes, bosses past, and wives —  
who get on famously, and go on beating  
us in varied interests all their lives.

And that's the secret of it: not to stop  
at any place or person, bustling through  
itineraries of meetings, parties, talk to drop,  
when all that energy wins others too.  
As though our pasts were endless library books  
and our society were out on loan:  
always to keep chattering, attracting looks  
with no accomplishments to call our own  
until in Births and Deaths an inch or two  
of standard newsprint in the local rag  
brings all our peccadilloes out on view  
to others in this game of touch and tag.

## 36. Careers

A smart address, and concierge rings through  
before we take the lift up, find the door.

A large room opens to a stunning view.

My wife's old boss: *You haven't been before?*

he asks, half smiling, and we take our place

among the other guests: none navy men

it seems from each complacent, settled face

that likes long lunches and will start at ten.

Later, when we talk and I've begun

to grasp he doesn't like his guests, I ask:

*But, admiral, if you don't make number one?*

but find he stops me, face a subtle mask

of mischievous good humour. *Hope I don't.*

*I'm being frank with you. As does my wife.*

*I'd be much happier with some job afloat.*

*A river pilot maybe: carefree life.*

Perhaps I half believed him, saw a ghost  
of Chinese diplomats retired from fame  
to farm and fishing. No. He has a post  
in Customs now: promoted just the same.

## 37. Shoes

How differently our foot-ware treads the streets,  
in playfulness or flat sobriety.

Through winter's consciousness or summer heats  
it's all laid down for us, just how we'll be.

Some women, true, prefer stout, outdoor things,  
and men make choices under other heads;  
it's only women go for straps and wings,  
and keep the unworn dozens under beds.

Perhaps it's fantasy their owners love,  
the body answering to what they feel,  
a leather thong supporting thighs above  
and tapering muscles fitted with a heel.

The fantasy is ours. How can they tell  
who live by outcomes neither good nor ill  
but steadied, conventional, though that as well  
must clothe the quotidian, general will?  
And so we see them set out on the shelves,  
the women's matching outfits, while the men's  
are set aside, important: very selves  
drawn up by effort through each shoelace lens.

### 38. Wheat and Tares

So here I sit, a gringo: easy touch  
for passing vagabonds and scamps of course.  
To them I am a friend, though not so much  
to make them pass up me as earnings source.

At times I've had enough, though still I give  
the odd few coppers that I have to spare.  
*This is the world in which we all must live,  
for which, despite its faults we have to care,*  
I say to friends who disapprove, think life's  
a casual lottery where some lose out,  
can see no conscience prompting, less a wife's  
continued worry that the kids make out.

But there we are. I give. They take.  
I smile, they smile, and so the world goes round,  
and if we're cheapened by it, the mistake  
lies not in giving but that age-old ground  
of trumped-up differences in us and them,  
that our disasters are as hard as theirs,  
and manners, always manners, that condemn  
each class to toil among the wheat and tares.

## 39. Experience

And so they talk the last of summer through  
in shade from café awnings or the trees;  
reminiscing, quietly coming to  
from stops and byways down long memories:  
how life was good to them when they were young,  
before they married, that is, kids grew up,  
the same old melody we all have sung  
of glacé offering in the small-stemmed cup.

Scandals, heartaches, losses: they survived,  
a little diminished but of strengthened mind,  
or so they told themselves, and there arrived  
the raft of troubles age is apt to find:  
the hardening arteries, arrhythmic heart,  
increasing deafness, both the sugars high.  
Stoically, they play their walk-on part:  
with pills and exercises as go on by  
the pantomimes they'll drop in time. The eyes  
can hide the disappointments and their depths,  
but know life is as it is, which never lies  
about that much-smudged entry age accepts.

## 40. The Neighbourhood

I took some photos of our neighbourhood  
one Sunday afternoon here for a friend,  
and found the 'thirties residences stood  
as though their kept-up insouciance would lend  
an air of graciousness to towering palm,  
to red-flecked maples and occasional larch,  
though orphaned, isolated, kept from harm  
by high wire fences and by gated arch.

In various styles they have their balconies  
and trellises fresh-painted white or green,  
both matched as well-dressed dignitaries  
or women sweeping from some ballroom scene.

Except that's long been over, with the flock  
of nannies, full-time gardener, maids and cook.  
From settler to Allende years the clock  
ticked steadily to close the ill-starred book.  
Now most have gone: adapted, modelled, made  
the corporate offices or new HQ,  
with only concierges, white-haired, and paid  
the grace and favour sums their forebears knew.

## 41. How It Goes

No one notices or even hears  
the echoing everywhere of passing feet,  
those emptying sadnesses as autumn nears  
the windows, wooden hoardings, bricked in street.

Like them we're planned for, measured, built  
on this broad amphitheatre called the earth.  
Like them we have the morning gladness spilt  
a bit more grudgingly each day from birth.

I think not even wanted are the faint sensations  
of sweated palm from workman's plane or last.  
We practise lives of wry, off-pat evasions  
and on the other side walk smartly past.  
The hum of looms fills out the clothes we wear;  
a bitterness is stitched in Chinese shoes.  
Soft hands in fashioning are always there,  
their toil is part of them we cannot lose,  
though much we'd want to, add 'it's paid  
for, life's unfair, that's simply how it goes.'  
Which of course is true, certainly, but made  
intolerable by things that keep it so.

## 42. Trees

Battered, indifferent, apart from us,  
the trees on traffic-pullulating streets  
have upper stories not conspicuous  
for being shaded, airy, green retreats.  
But still they grow on past us, living lives  
at best tangentially akin to ours,  
still rooting in a different soil that thrives  
as on a slow fuse through the buried hours  
of Carboniferous and humid heats  
that down millennia make the thickening green  
of vegetation folding into watery peats,  
to glower later with a soubrette sheen.

Yet once it was not so: the ancient world  
heard deity in spring and woodland dell,  
could feel the hope as every stem unfurled  
and Minos sighing as the first leaf fell.

All that is past, but walking back at night  
through groves of soft, unshuttered, prescient sound,  
we feel our bodies fill with slow delight,  
as though in kinship with the common ground.

### 43. Flamenco at La Fragua

That meld of tenderness and breathy fire,  
the shaped voluptuousness by which is bred  
those elemental forms we never tire  
of watching, as each lifts her flowered head.

All these are suppositions, gestures won  
of endless practice through the months and years,  
bequeathed to us in looks, but more begun  
in smiling inwardness that never hears.

I meet them afterwards: poised girls who go  
to offices and safe, parental homes,  
to domesticities that never know  
how far globe-trotting madam stamps and roams.  
And now that I remember them, come those  
whose heady passion of the limbs was worn  
by characters too warm and kind to close  
a deal on life, but stood apart, still-born  
in tittle-tattle, slander, being sad  
that all their fire of nature had not burned  
to splendour, only what a meek world had  
consigned to them, in wifely steps they learned.

#### 44. Visiting

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

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

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

## 45. What is Mathematics?

'What is Mathematics?' Not a work  
to trifle with but now my bedtime read.  
A book where twists and subterfuges lurk  
in neat expressions where these plain steps lead.

On everything there hangs the question why.  
Who tells correctly all the paths he'll take?  
But Euler and his formula for pi?  
And infinitesimals for heaven's sake!  
Yes, yes, I know: it's most abstruse,  
and if it held me once, that's long ago.  
But odd that things so lacking earthly use  
can open vistas where deep waters flow.

And, by analogy, this craft of verse,  
so cramped, so difficult, that even those  
who'd scatter tributes on its patched-up hearse  
must wonder sometimes what their passion shows.  
Yet something elemental, maybe, where each move  
is independent of us, must be so  
and all our individuality will prove  
some buoyant constant in the undertow?

## 46. What Plato Meant

Sudden clouds: a lull in summer's heat  
and lifting of the whole-day sun's impress,  
as though the once-bronzed figures in the street  
withdrew to pallor and to listlessness.

Perhaps to more: to thought and self-reflection,  
things to fractious Greeks worth fighting for,  
but restrained, proceeding by defection  
from some inherent and long-promised core.

Such looks are absolute, were given them  
with Independence and the Andean streams,  
with pasturage and liberty and hopes that stem,  
however hazily, from rural dreams.

Is this what Plato meant, whose ideal forms  
were indissoluble and made to last?  
Through life's vicissitudes and pounding storms  
there would be quietness as all things passed?  
How imperturbably breathes in the skin  
to drink up essences, have all things meet  
in supple contourings to which it's kin,  
and shades enveloping this quiet street.

## 47. Women in their Clothes

Long days of fervid, bronzed voluptuousness,  
of bodies offered in their bra-less tops,  
sheer legs undone from shirt or dress  
in variations from a hundred shops.

So comes this sordid empery of clothes  
where fashion holds its short and changing court  
and to the mind at large such treasures troves  
disclose how body truckles or it ought.  
And only mannequins that lack this sense  
of how the busts are high or hemlines down:  
a papier maché hapless innocence  
in well-formed beauty who has just hit town.  
And for the rest, on hangers, draped on chairs,  
the clothes link the promises of one more year:  
life's ever-changing, hopeless thoroughfares  
of what we count on but will always fear.

So afterwards in gusset, wire or tape  
the clothes project a naked, sheepish air,  
a soft beseeching from an emptied shape  
of things cut perfectly we cannot wear.

## 48. Funeral in the Church of the Archangel

A small church in a district now quite poor:  
the mourners in their working clothes, all stood  
about the woman's coffin on the hard-tiled floor,  
as plain as looks that promise spinsterhood.

So there we are: the end. The widower grasps my hand  
and dumbly stares at words he's heard us tell  
him countless times but can't yet understand.  
*Alzheimer's, says my wife, and just as well.*

Perhaps it is. I thought of masses where  
all Santiago flowered in its Sunday best,  
with anthems flung as incense in the air,  
more worldly triumph than this place of rest.  
But here it's different: each one knows  
the end he comes to: prayers and flowers —  
and not that many either, all our shows  
but tokens, pitiful to those great powers  
through which, if truly blessed, we find our place,  
the priest reminds us of in leading prayers:  
in hope of resurrection and eternal grace,  
the end to wandering and all our cares.

## 49. Quarterly Book-Fair

The venue is our local church. I go quite regularly to change my books and am returned to boyhood, England years ago of fetes and knitted things and potted jam.

The summer time is best: I work on down rows packed with books on trestle tables, one of many such determined souls, half town, half gown, but adamant now it's begun to have that title someone last time snatched beneath my spectacled and furious stare. You'd be surprised at all the venoms hatched by smiles, good mornings and the close-bobbed hair.

I know these honest, well-intentioned folk: the freckled schoolgirl in her summer frock, the meddlesome mother in the voice that spoke of teas and accents from good county stock. Not dark, not fragrant: manners, class: the hint of well-scrubbed body with the fluffed and nice. If once I think of putting in an English stint some time, this book-fair stops it in a trice.

## 50. La Carrousel

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

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

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