



# Wessex

A Poem by C. John Holcombe

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Colin John Holcombe

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# WESSEX

## One

*Would you retain me in our few letters,  
Reduce me, laughing, to some purblind dream?  
The paths in the sunlight are not the same.  
Ours was a falling into headlong waters,  
A bewitchment further than the earth again.*

*Why reiterate how every chit of stone  
Brimmed with a music that now is silent?  
In the torrents of spring we yearn for attainment —  
For the yielding, the belonging, the outward turned in:  
How fast that epiphany is put away.*

*Say what you want to, exactly: I shall not care.  
Enough were the words once to clothe the heart.  
But now I am part of all the inanimate  
Small and the suffering. Tell me: does the circling year  
Return now the scene where our own bird sang?*

*Pretend to yourself - why don't you? — I shan't be long,  
What with the sun up, the air soft, and the leaves warm.  
There is no one to hear you. It will do no harm  
To hold me awhile as though summers bring  
Tangible wonderment only once.*

*Why the incessant indulging of old regrets,  
Playing the martyr? We have done our stint.  
The fields have reseeded; the little that went  
On from us soaring to a famed romance  
Is burned out and sintered, the first child spilled.*

No, that's not true. There is an inner weld  
Where still I may find you and feel the stone  
Warm with your touch, and the doorway creaking. Lean  
Out of absence a moment and I will build  
Stairways to rapture from a patchwork song

That flumes in the telling as an underground spring  
Irrigates later when the great storms are gone —  
Inwardly always, and my hooded skin  
Is smooth and persuasive as the lawyer's tongue.  
Smile, disbelief: yes, they are best.



A cottage with a garden, among folk who crossed  
Briefly to speak to us in the rain-dressed streets. Not  
Laggard nor kindly so much as that  
Old way of customs, observances — at least  
So we then hoped, and so it was.

You do not know how your absences leave me. Is  
This then the upshot, a thermomtered heart?  
To be wheeled up and down in this tremulous state?  
Round me, delinquent and splendid,  
the past years progress,  
Dilatory on their antique spindle.

*Dear man, you are changed. Your very hands tremble.  
Come, let me hold you as you once held me  
In the footpaths and tangles of past kissing places — I  
Laughed as you lifted and on my own back thimble  
Set me to reach out for all I dare.*

Where is it written that the years must grieve us? Are  
There not runes in the wind-sifted trees?  
Must I cast fortunes from my lot of tears?  
No, do not preach to me: I cannot bear  
Even a breath of that upland place.

I am nothing but sunlight on the wet-cut grass —  
Succulent for the instant, then a heavy listing  
To darkness, to discharge, not even lasting  
To reflections, excuses, the saying because  
    Of this matter, that — just the light wind idling.

A leaching to nothing, to the indolent sailing  
Out in all weathers as the whistling jays  
Burst from the hedgerows, and the cumulous trees  
Soar and dissolve, and with the seasons are curling  
    And colouring and ever diminishing daily.

*What's the strange quandary that you wander so slowly  
About these grey quarters in these solemn towns,  
Long-sashed and elderly, where the ponderous stones  
Are eye-holed with sockets and smugly lie  
    Prebendary to the plain, always the dull*

*Flat of the brickwork, cobbles, cheap lavatory stall.  
The small, the ungenerous, the never-kind.  
Beneath, when I'm silent, comes the bricked-in sound  
From corridors and basements, as though the pull  
    Of earth on its kinsfolk returned again.*

What am I doing in this lace-doily scene  
With a waitress beguiling in your pride of moving?  
Why am I seated like an old man perceiving  
How the past unravels, that the tea leaves spin  
For him as for others, that I appear

But aged and spent, with the odd coin to spare  
For someone to humour this white-haired creature,  
Smiling and shambling while the inward rapture  
Rises, and shakes him, a recusant fire  
That laughs as I go, and am vacant under

A tumult of cumulous, which is water vapour —  
That and no more — without length of purpose.  
Days pass, the rain. Will nothing possess  
The past as it was, and will no one keep her  
Alive in the lift that the soft wind has?

Who can be sure that the years don't deceive us?  
Who can shake tears from the prescient air?  
I can, and I do, and around me are  
The emboldened and ever more certain as  
The sunlight turns golden through this Hardy land.

Here you are standing, were standing: where does it end?  
At times I still see you and I hurry on  
Fast to the car park, the café, small country inn,  
But no, it's not you, someone different, and  
I do not know if you are far or near.

I've toured our two counties but find nothing there  
But banks and small businesses, a fast food chain.  
How can it be they do not rise again  
The sturdy, the undeserving, the resentful poor  
Opposed to the bailiff, and the enclosure acts?

Throughout these long Downlands, though it may vex  
Me, still I come back to in these rain-scooped acres,  
To trees half in mist as though they might lead us  
On with that journey when with shovels and picks  
They cut their way to the frontier castles.

A strange business then. Where the heathland jostles,  
And the birch is sfumato in the evening light,  
There was haze, thick presence, no end of it,  
Impenetrable dead furze, and stiff stands of thistles.  
Bristling to the sea's edge, wind-shaven, sheer,



They are bivouacked out in the wintertime  
And sometimes I can find them when the grass is thin.  
'Late of this parish', the lettering plain,  
Their last port of call on the long drift home  
    From tramping the roads to the hiring fair.

Made up at last to a twelfth-month year,  
An adjunct to the weather that made the skin  
Potatoed and leathery, their whole lives run  
From alehouse to spinney for a fourpenny hire,  
    For somewhere and someone to take them in.

So I still see them leaving coppice or barn,  
Waiting, child-burdened, on unmetalled roads,  
Wandering indifferent as the unkempt weeds —  
Sturdy, ever present, and bereft again  
    Of the law, its protection, abiding care.

I make no mistake: this was a surly poor.  
Would strip you promptly as take your pulse,  
And leave not a tale but the wayside grass  
Flattened, blood-speckled — nothing there  
    But the spoil of the fox, and the wind's dissensions.



## TWO

My kith and my kinfolk, a full century away  
From the clerks on stools in a gas-flared light  
Flat-spreading to ledgers where, propped up late,  
They toil on in Clerkenwell under a sky,  
Gothic and muddy, with a heavy breath,

Pregnant with soot, with wetness, with  
Smells of frying and of lunch in boxes,  
The air spitted, then fraying with the sound of taxis:  
Sticky, unending, like the rough-cut cloth  
On which they are printed, all of a piece.

High on the skyline, tilting place to place,  
Bundles of the elements and piebald at evening  
With a vast inner longing, and the horse plumes waving  
As they came in their wagons and took by force  
Chattels of the landlord and minor gentry.

There is a family of mine in the midwest country  
That held fiefed possessions before the Normans came.  
A good name among many in that broken time,  
A blur at this distance, hardly an entry,  
But a start, an event, an erstwhile home.

For a century or so, till that Doomsday time  
Ushered in records, and their rendezvous  
Became the thickness of night in the flinty shires —  
Segregating into the us and them,  
    Small, a contagion, and running on

To woods and high pastures. Not a vigorous clan,  
Not breeding that much, a tight-fisted lot —  
Unminded, distrustful, bristling, yet  
Seamless as weather or the wind to the vane  
    Advancing, scattering and in retreat.

Sometimes in summer at the fall of night,  
When doorways are open and the warmth spills out  
There brims such a crinoline,  
  such complexioned thought  
That yours was the feminine, that this or naught  
    Was the yielding to tumult beyond all want.

There are thigh bones, their sockets, the nodular flint —  
Indomitable, incalculable but always large.  
That builds up the wall and the bedroom ledge  
Roughcast but solid, though the dream is spent:  
    The breath we remember and the going under.

And then there is nothing but the evening's tinder,  
A tree that burns red, the brushed hedgerows cut  
With a circular, flaring, incandescent light  
That makes the heart darkness, the memory blonder  
    Under teachers, with schoolbooks, a forgotten aegis.

Only at evening when the shutters in pages  
Close on the day and the wide sky glitters  
With a thousand sharp points, and the leaves in tatters  
Are waving, long-gloved, and the far wood smudges  
    With the returning, red-brown, of the autumn tide,

Does the fox sniff the fields for the sharp days ahead?  
The badger has its scratchings, the letheret twitches  
At the first chill of winter, and by it hatches  
Windings of straw, in warm burrows conveyed  
    To the new world at springtime, where soft green grass

Is fattened, thick-planted, where the wet stones hiss  
In the sunlight, and even the rain-doused air  
Breaks open with a lucence, and the mud-caked fur  
Is cast off in patches, and the mottled sky  
    Patterns with storm-clouds and will never stop

From lifting in consort, as passion's own sap  
Into April quiddities, to flagrant jest.  
Who is the gambler and who the host?  
Whatever the stratagem, the lattermost step  
    Has hot tears only that are out of focus.

Still I go back to those unturned acres,  
To the whaleback swallow over the late spring wheat,  
Tousled with day's end but breathing out  
A warmth, a contentment, something to hold us  
    In a contour of keeping to a quiet land.

Here we began and it is here we end;  
The temporary steadies to an allotted place.  
The passion dissembles, dissolves, and a gentleness  
At last stands proxy for the common bond  
    Born out of fervour that is put away.

The grave holds the bones, and the grasping yew  
Fragments what was and there is none to tell  
How the lichen knits thickly in the churchyard wall  
And the past days are real as they ramify  
    Into us vaguely, for some remark



Perhaps that comes never, not in the winter's hard stare,  
In sermons of light on the stripped pine table,  
In the knotting of the cold and the outside trouble:  
A splinter in the glass, or a dip in the floor:  
    This, the very last, in the rough-hewn stone.

Yet even on the obdurate they leave their stain.  
The air in its ascensions is accursed with grief.  
Imperceptibly, delicate and only if  
You hold both my hands am I truly one  
    As we now turn backward, for good or ill.

But then I am idling, and I know too well  
How emboldened by the Downlands they journey on  
In every embodiment but loved by one  
Fervently, passionately, as though their fall  
    Were encircled by coppice and by valley fold —

In the whole world about, in fields rough or tilled,  
In the streams that come down to have of earth  
A tincture of wetness, of greenness, as of shade beneath  
The blueness unstitching from the thick birch wold —  
    This time, this place, and ever again.

If this is old England with no sepia worked in,  
Without ploughman and workmen of the heavy shires,  
The waistcoats, the caps and the pinafores  
Tell me as much as the history can  
Of a penny for baccy and tuppence beer.

They had nothing, were nothing but tongs in the fire  
To glow briefly to life and be dull again,  
Stretched to a fashion, a tough-knotted strain  
Clasped to themselves and their simple fare:  
Under their heaven no embroidery.

Such then their customs, like cuckoos, now flown away,  
The cottage to stones, or an old man's strolls.  
Through the high-tufted meadows the tillage smells  
Of flowers unentered, where the humming bee  
Must brood on no ripeness in the soft dry husks.

Shuttered as an eyelid as the laughter asks  
Who will consent or be man enough  
To be turned in the wind and only if  
She wills it and wantons and the bright air dusks  
Her cheekbone with shadows, and the climbing breath



What a man takes out he must put in:  
As ever, the seasons insist on that.  
But what will he do when the seed-corn is not  
Provision, but only by his little ones eaten:  
    The first of their needs but to stay alive?

I can take you to fields where the bailiff and reeve  
Ruled and are silent under wind-sown grass.  
Can point out the corners where the tumbled mass  
Of bodies are cursing as the plague years drove  
    Out their infecting multitude

To heathlands, to hilltops, to stagnant woods  
There much to starve while their pastoral lord  
Lolled in his dwelling, and still God's word  
Hung in his gesture, and over all heads  
    Popes nodded a blessing but looked askance.

What does it matter? These are greasy pence  
In the largesse of a country that soon extends  
Their influence to valour and the Holy Lands —  
By marriage, by connivance, by a governance  
    That such as man is, then so he was.

None of my namesakes had a hand in this,  
Had care for the roll-calls or the noise abroad.  
Theirs was the springtime and the bird-filled wood,  
The summer of idling through the wind's distress,  
In the air a delighting, where nothing is

Imagined or permanent but must regress  
To things as are entered, and everywhere  
They are silent and inward. Yet they never tire  
Of calling up witness that I give them voice:  
Speak for them urgently when they are dumb.

This is my bloodstock, this that welters or staggers,  
The vastly dispossessed who are lumbering on.  
Vague blots on the records, soon lost again:  
Mendicants, hucksters, mere surly beggars,  
A cross in each lawsuit, who never build.

They have entered no patent: there is nothing to tell  
In looks or containment of that opening voice,  
Nothing of radiance in the once-dark eyes  
Rounding or deepening, consumed and still  
Returning to our heartland beyond all doubts.

## Three

And so in this hard time, among the tangled shoots,  
Returning like my father from his silent walks,  
Straitened and sharpened as the winter pokes  
Up into happening and in unclothed thoughts,  
    Huddled together, and of their time.

You all I wanted: no larger claim  
From someone unleashed and made wild with grief,  
Unsettled, ungregarious, not content with life.  
Always it was you, one life, one home  
    Endlessly nurtured if all else fail.

*Why must you track me, over footbridge and stile,  
As slowly the evenings reach out in March  
And the couples form up and from church to church  
The weddings announce in their happy peal  
    The generations continuing and passing on?*

Vast and withdrawn, they are silent again —  
The forest and the Downland, not now sending  
To an old man bewildered, trembling and handing  
On from a patrimony hardly his own  
    Even a shadow of that erstwhile fire.

*How can you say that? My successors are  
At large in my purpose, and even their clothes  
Extend in my walking. The story book leaves  
Surely a wonderment. What is the fear —  
That you will not find me, not here or far?*

As a man traduced and disfigured by joy,  
Dwindled to misogyny who knows not why  
But must cancel your syllables and on his cue  
Behave as a stranger and, as you draw near  
Turn as though smiling and never bravely.

You do not know how your absences leave me,  
You do not know how the years condemn.  
How weighted with cares I continue, am  
Stumbling on the far side of what should approve me  
But didn't and went laughing, sauntering on.

*I am dust on the roadside  
and in the first breath of dawn,  
The frost that holds fast to the pinnacled gorse,  
The faint line of green in long-tramelled grass.  
I am this and am nothing but the notice sewn  
In a thousand small touches of tempered pain.*

Who would not feel for the terror I'm in,  
When every dead creature and each small thing  
Is around me attending, and insistent and long  
They call to me, speak to me, that the solid stone  
Dissolves in the patois like emptied smoke?

On some days, some weathers I'm heedless and take  
The paths through the forest, which is restless or still.  
The stands have their rituals, which is admirable.  
The sycamore, beech and the heavy oak  
Are nodding their heads and turning and caring

For me not at all. Was my gift of hearing  
By you then encouraged, or my double sight?  
My learning is slow and is naming by rote  
Pubstops and roadstops, and the churchyard staring  
Hard at me passing with my course near run.

What is the evening but a conflagration  
Of a radiance unanswered or that had no place?  
From shunt-yards and depots the lifetime's lease  
Is whittled to a platform, and the stopping train  
Branches to sidelines we never took.

The doors close, the guard waves, the carriages stack  
Loosely concertina'd as the small lives wend  
Outward and threading through the terraced land  
Of gardens and allotments, the small duty stock  
Of lives ever forming, continuing free

To vast shimmied hopes, as over flatlands the low  
Hills are as clouds and the springtimes are rising  
Past what they grasped at, the small fists closing  
Not on contentment, or not that they knew,  
But vaguer and thinner after all.

And settling, impregnations like a ragged smell,  
A game in the yard that must shut them in.  
Graffiti on the brickwork, plans stoic and plain,  
Mouldering to nothing as the long years roll  
To the year's occasion or maybe not.

Substance to imagining: if an unframed thought  
Is sun on the counterpane abruptly gone,  
When all through the curtains the long campaign  
Is of the clouds in white plumage, eddying, yet  
An absence, a passing from loss to loss,

Can there be keepsakes, that nonetheless  
Emerge from our thinking as we drive on past  
Some morning in thought, and closely pressed  
By a matter of factness that cuts across  
    The veins and freckles in an older hand?

Some turning, some echo, some lapse in the wind:  
Nothing exceptional, an ordinariness —  
A cottage, a churchtower, an arch framed by trees,  
A belonging to others that distances lend —  
    Returning once more to our childhood days.

Which are past, hardly present, though that present lies  
Hazily around us that the house was ours.  
Rain is on the window and the dropping years  
Bring clamour and laughter, and still there goes  
    Always the high sound drearily on.

You do not know the afflictions I'm in.  
You do not know what that absence sends.  
It is silent. It is listening. Even my hands  
Are flayed with your touch, and the small parts sewn  
    On my skin are a leprosy and a loss.

*Who could have but contempt at this,  
As I stand to my maker and the small clothes itch  
On my skin, on my conscience, as occasions catch  
In the hemline and flounce of whatever I dress  
In furthering my going into womanhood?*

*First I was storm-bird on the weltering tide  
Sent headland to headland by granite fists.  
And now I am warning of the far grey west's  
Lift into daylight and passing, the last clouds sped  
Over a torrent of turbid rain.*

*What's encompassed? Now tell me: the sea flows on  
Deeper and more violent than the surface swell.  
Under the water the lobster pots twirl  
In a current that buffets and will buffet again  
Making the inmates their very bars.*

I want to be walking on more yielding shores,  
On headlands in weathers when the whistling air  
Evacuates the body and my fingers gnaw  
At the rich sense of being, to dissolve and as  
A name to continue, a darkening voice.

I thought the refusing would further contain us,  
I thought in enchantment you would hold me where  
Retrenchments would make me even more  
Reverent and truthful, content with less:  
    But no, there is only hiss of the tapes.

I have walked up bewildered through steepening slopes  
That pass into hawthorn, then nettles, to stunted oak,  
The path growing broader into gleaming chalk  
Until there is nothing, just grasses, and the windy tops  
    Of the high beeches tossing: alone, cloud-cropped.

What stays, what passes? Through the deep-mired yard  
The cattle are plodding, the gate lies adrift  
To the weather, the sunlight, the ever-soft  
Rain of the springtime, however viewed —  
    Still I am chastened and only chose

To be nothing in this, not the nights or the days,  
But only the pistil in the small hopes springing  
Like poppies from the seed-drill, opening and flowering  
In gardens, allotments, the terraced rows  
    Where the lives are still parcelled by the simple laws.

I know them, I like them, they have battered cars,  
Are kindly, hard-working: they come to the door  
Smiling, hands wet, as though to adhere  
To a "take us as you find us", as the daylight steers  
Round and again the cluttered room.

All have their habits, their workmates, the same  
Sequence of moves on the checkerboard  
Of outings and shopping and drinks at the pub.  
A start and return, following a dream  
Heartlessly etched on the daylight's skin

## FOUR

I want on such occasions to be walking again  
With the wind in my hair and sauntering free  
Of thoughts, of long hopes that whistle away —  
That whistle to nothing, to the frequent, inane  
Repetitions, repetitions of names I know.

Sometimes, as abruptly, I put the matter away  
And feel in that moment content and safe,  
And then, I don't know, some misplaced grief  
Turns everything backward: I only see  
The autumn lands dwindling, and stripped and small.

You do not know how this endless recital  
Of grieving will stricken and bring me down.  
You do not know how forward would burn  
Your looks, your soft laughter and dancing till  
The darkness turn dawn, and the last volunteer

Turns and turns helpless till the body tire  
In the bones and the fretwork: *did you think my breath*  
*But beckoned you back to a brutal hearth*  
*To be emptied of passion, discarded and sore,*  
*Fragrantly entered into no accord?*

*Why should you censure what is simple need,  
To be yoked in tempest to some other being  
But then not knit tight, but outward and straying,  
Open and playful: have we not stayed  
A testimony to all the summers lost?*

Like the finest denier, the early mist  
Curdled around us as wet with dew,  
Aching, unconfined, and stretched out we lay,  
Entangled with the seasons, by those seasons pressed  
Into the pregnant and yielding turf.

Lengthily extended and in the sprawlings thereof  
Of the body, decorum, the unclothed heart:  
Brought all together this meeting at  
One woodside, one summer, when the scampering laugh  
Of the wind was the witness and would not tell.

Much then about me I did not will,  
Much that I hoped would securely last,  
But you have undone me who, deliberately, first  
Were my ignis fatuus, my dropping well  
Into silence, introspection, to simple being.

*Such was my offer: no kindness, no knowing  
Eventually how even the session might end,  
Only the insistent, the envenomed, and  
Not incantation but a steady fraying  
Of myself expended and opened out.*

*You do not know how the first hint of that  
Nightfall of fingers in the steady air  
Has woven for itself what was always near  
A translucence in the yielding, the golden knit  
In the limbs, of the being, the final rapture.*

*And so then the haunting of that single nature,  
A wraith like myself, whose unmuddied breath  
Is alive on the hillside, through the gorse-strewn heath,  
Troubled and unshaping, a dishevelled mixture  
Of laughing and calling and nowhere found.*

*Further than ever is that final land  
Which sometimes is inward but as it were  
Continues on outward and as the air  
Is vagrant and miserly and in the end  
Is nothing and no one and I forget.*





*Sell up and be done with these emptied quarters,  
In other ways now I shall take your arm.  
Our lives weren't in consort, but only by blame  
Were woven together in such heady matters,  
Though you turn the past over, much and again.*

*Is this the whole purpose, to cancel, atone  
For a whole world forgotten, for friendships, a home  
That now is mere nothing, a country, a name  
Returning with evenings and seasons, and these remain  
But shadow and dusk and nothing at all*

*Reproach that tags as a distant bell,  
Emptying the sunshine and of what we're saying?  
The colours of absence inhabit my being.  
I am last who was first, and the changes fill  
With the call of springtime the barren copse.*

*Past these I inhabit the rounded slopes:  
The ragwort, the speedwell, the thick welts of thistles.  
With these I am bending as the warm winds jostle  
The scabious and knapweed.  
In the wind's gust and lapse  
The harebell will hold to its wiry stem.*

*Let me return as the Maytimes bloom  
In the sharp thorns of hedgerows, in chestnut spires,  
In tempests of cherry and the chaplain rose,  
Through air splashed with petals, as the evening brim  
With candour and innocence, as I was.*

*To be conifer dark in the late summer days  
Or sunlight, coarse-spangled, under foliated trees,  
In the coloured regattas of clouds through the skies,  
In crispness, and stillness, in settling peace,  
When did I say I'd be sweet stay-at-home?*

*Who would desire me if I could do no harm,  
Be tansy and milkweed and the leopard's bane?  
I am regal, need loving and tillage again  
May wander, return, yet time after time,  
Am fruitful and generous after this.*

*I am with you in the woodlands  
and the flowering gorse.  
Abroad in the storm-clouds and their lowering grey,  
Fierce, never lasting — why must we know  
Only by permanence the fervour as  
Otherwise we witness it, you and I?*

*Would you humble me further? I have melted away.  
No more can my antics delight or disarm you.  
Nor can I hug you as the evenings must hurt you:  
I am gone, am dissolved; what you construe  
As my shadow is a furthering on from you.*

What is then conjured as the springtimes throw  
Off mantles of wetness, when the white slopes shine  
With a canopied brilliance, each Downland stone  
Is glinting and singing, and will hurt the eye  
Holding its richness too near the heart?

*Wolfbane and bugloss and the bewitched dark state  
Of the legs going forward in the long night's weight,  
Passion and exhaustion on each storm-drenched sheet:  
This is my turning from such intolerable height —  
A falling and heavily across the floor.*

*If you would contain me, entrammel my ear  
As you turn about in my summer mansions,  
Retain in your palms the subtle declensions  
Of jointing, of limb-build, each threaded hair —  
Though the touch of me now can be only wounds.*

