

A Book Of Places

colin john holcombe



ocaso press 2008

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by Colin John Holcombe

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Last Revised: November 2017

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

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Poems

England

Cookham	1
Going West	3
Country Weddings	4
The Botanical Gardens at Kew	6
The West Riding Towns	7
Funeral at St. Peter Port: 1797	8
Waking	9
Commercial Hotels	10
Local Histories	12
All Stations	14
Madge	15
Babs and Me	17
The Nightingale	19
Dear Books	20
Candy	22
Office Workers	23
The Great Dinosaurs	26
The Kentish Weald	25
Out Walking	26
Lowdnes	29
Middlesex	35
Exegesis in Maida Vale	38
Dartmoor	39
Norman Lands	40
Warwick Castle	41
Voices	42
Temple Church	43

Middle East

On the Isfahan Road	44
Dasht-e-Lut	45
Baraka Café	46

Afternoon in the Mountains	47
Islamic Kingdoms	48
Far East	
Rubber Tappers	49
Wang Chung-Ssu	50
Penang	52
A Tale of the Islands	57
Night Thoughts in the Tropics	60
Europe	
A Short History of the Northern Peoples	61
The East Lands	63
Winter Journey	64
South	68
Us at Last	70
The Normandy Landings	74
Lunch Party at Villeneuve sur Yonne	76
For the Most Catholic Kings of Spain	78
Andalusia	79
Cadiz	80
Magna Graecia	82
The Church of Miracles	83
Latin America	
The Mountain Wall	85
Society Wedding, Santiago	86
The Military Church	87
Military Hospital, Santiago	88
Autumn Already	89
To the New World	90
Industrial Zone	91
New Chile	92
Agua Con Gas	93
Dogs	94
Providencia	95

Visiting	96
Funeral at the Church of the Archangel	97

Planet Earth

Let's Start	98
Subsequently	99
In the Beginning	100
The Uncertain Earth	101
Meteorites	102
Welsh Graptolites	103
Mountain Building	104
The Black Country	105
Cornish Tin	106
The Cotswolds	107
Wealden Ironstones	108
Sea Urchins	109
The Isle of Wight	110
Birds	111
Mammoths	112
Snowdonia	113

Aries Rising

I've Lived	114
Otherwise	116
America	120

Julius Caesar

What I Remember	123
Epistle to Cossutia	124
To Cornelia: Greetings	125
From Cossutia: Thoughts	126
Farewell for the Present	127
Mark Antony to Catullus	128
Gaul Risings	129
Vercingetorix	130
To Cossutia: Memories	131

Death Throes of the Republic	132
Postscript	133

Childhood Journeys: The Nutcracker

What A Joy	134
Paint the Picture	135
Home For Us	136

Imaginary Journeys

Flanders	139
Tartar Lands	140
Deciduous Forests	141
Gobi Desert	142
Voyage of the Bounty	143
Tien Shan	144

POEMS OF ENGLAND

Cookham

As for the unfathomable, there are the clouds only
that on some days hang in indolent splendour, scattering
refulgence and sadness on the hills beneath.

Yet here and everywhere was England: ordered, rolled
into farms and parklands, shelving to the Thames
which, upstream silver dimpling into water-meadows
or threading into inlets, here on the village settled
an air of foreign occupation. It lined up boatyards
and small bridges, reflected riverside hotels;
for visitors it shimmered, backdropped picnic lawns,
jostled the odd pleasure craft, plunged, legend-pooled,
to runs of tench and perch.

All this is thematic,
and was. Stanley Spencer, painter and iconoclast,
traced each day with eye and brush the solemn glory
of his God. He painted in vast canvases
the Thames rolled back, from its cramping gravels the dead
awakened, tumbled out in dawn-pale multitudes
of children, postmen, vicar, schoolmistresses, the baker. . .
The vision, roundly drawn, composed as of the weather
with its mildness and forgetfulness, the public
accepted with large commissions. More followed. He married,
was successful. Working on altarpieces, however,
he pierced the body to its ribald cloak of flesh,
painted his own in every jubilant particular,
then a friend's. All still, he saw, the progeny
of God.

The public disagreed, bought nothing. By turns
he lost his wife, his friend, the cottage and commissions.
He painted on. Became obsessive: abroad a celebrity,
at home a bespectacled recluse. Eventually God left him.
In the iron-stained gravels one stripped December day
they buried him, a pauper with a civic pension.
Years pass. At the request of visitors the council
open a museum, which vies now with the Sunday funfair.
And distant from the village, far from his demise,
unruffled and unconcerned by it, the huge clouds rise.

Going West

One has had enough in the end of the grand
addresses, of Pont Street Dutch and the high rents,
the flaunting oneself before the stretched-out limos,
and marquees shimmering behind the week's events.

Enough of Greenwich, or of Hampstead even, where
the erudition is bred of a foreign earth
and the air is unhealthy with such fumigation,
though rain runs briskly through the rollered turf.

Hounslow I came to, where the twinkling gravels
of the Thames and its poplars and the light blue sky
were rinsed for the first time, where yeoman farmers
brought in their produce to suburbs that lie

Now gardened and contented in priveted
decency, each with a garage and buttressed wall,
where the small man held castle, and the living
could turn to stone slowly at the twilight's fall.

Country Weddings

A month of weddings. Fuchsia, organdies and haze
on wheat fields thick as milk or new-mown grass:

*Verily hath it come to pass
that the Lord God is come unto our days.*

*Homeward is anointing. Copses in the evening light
move as unshorn sheep upon the hills. Beetles chatter
over streams and scatter.*

The bat looms up the shuttle of its flight.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Botanical Gardens at Kew

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

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

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

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

The West Riding Towns

So when they spawned their ungodly children that ran
up, down the rough grey tumble of streets, did
they think that their Albert, theirs, past the skid-
marks to marriage, might just make it and get on?

And not have their own fussed-over lives — such
as flickered twice weekly at the Odeon;
but plain words in parlours at Council, not hangers-on
glimpsed lewd, glass in hand, at Christmas time?

Aye: something right topping, like cherry on cake
rotated to preacher or aunt, and not that much
after to be divided, not the soft touch
of the lassies laughing at their mill town fete,

but artists, musicians, writers — local men
with clink of good millstone in their gait,
who buffed up their vowels, made them tough and straight
not vague-capped like clouds on the roads ahead

that went over the moorlands, where if broom or ling
flamed in season, they were dull again
all very shortly: each in his common pen
to have whippets and fantails to lead him on.

So there's really no answer, and if any man
wanted an out it was his. But not their thing
ever when, grand like at Blackpool, each year would bring
their Gracie to sing with their own brass band.

Funeral at St. Peter Port: 1797

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

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

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

So clang the bell now, my good man;
pipe last orders and be done:
unfurl the sails and, as the sea may run,
give each his regulation rum!

Waking

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

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

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

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

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

Returns to the earth this thing of dust:

as in Thee, Lord, only we repose our trust.

Still, if that's what we end in, here we begin:
each of us turning and turning his small hopes in.

Commercial Hotels

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Local Histories

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

The last of this innings — who met to play
with family at funerals or in registries,
but also at cricket when, on Sundays from May,
they would field and feud down the summer leas —

the cousins Tennysonian under the trees
that were sunlit and warm, where the scenery cloud
bowled white bumpers that the umpire allowed
along with the catcalls, the ladies and cream-rimmed teas.

Grandfather, however, of a different
sort, dressed himself smartly and so went to town
in a big way with women, and had to rent
something in London, where the soot came down

on the grimmest of tenements. But it was different then,
when heirlooms were purchased and things had pride
attached like a label, and at Whitsuntide,
doffing his overalls, he would take his pen

and write to the family (as he could, you see —
a skill self-taught as how to speak
appropriate to occasion) in a world to be
kinder to father and uncle — who should have their week

back with the old folk. And did. But when he died
one Easter from cancer, the bright blood went chill
all very quickly with three mouths to fill.
and the scorecards of course were then put aside

for good, most likely. But it was not a story
I think unusual as the car-borne hearse
arrives here and stops. Memento mori
for my artisan cousin? Well, perhaps it was worse

for those who went on, for my father came
compendiously to make amends.
Only half-humorously he would name
lord mayors and bankers he had as friends.

But none of them cricketers, still less his son —
who was bookish, travelled, and avoided sport —
so that, weighing it up, he'd have no doubt thought:
amongst the lot of us no side had won.

All Stations

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

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

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

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

to the rough abundance of each other. For it was odd their being here with us

paid office workers, PAs with their neat exteriors, the odd works manager who, as the train gained daylight grew more angularly male. At Wembley Park the two

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

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

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

Madge

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

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

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

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

Babs and Me

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Nightingale

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dear Books

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

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

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

Candy

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

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

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

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

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

So yeah, why not? And — well, I have to, don't I?
That's what he said. So — if you want to.
Yeah, I'd like that. Do my bit and that.
But ask for Candy, no, not Rachel Peters.
That doesn't do for me, now does it, right?

Office Workers

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Great Dinosaurs

My friend: this is the land of bank-clerks, mostly.

The pugnacious, the dutiful, the brave?

The rank

upon rank

ride on plate or in cenotaph. They

airily to earth graves have gone

who fought at Plassy or Verdun.

We, in our own lines, orderly and grey,

take as stipends whatever they gave,

we, who follow quietly, laid as closely

in our cemeteries the same. My friend,

this is the land of consort, not content-

ment, here, where

small lives flare

vainglorious and seeded as summer's end

in parks, allotments, as knots

of thistles in council plots —

which clouds envelop, and the hills blend

in rain-smudged contours that are not consent —

not here, not now, in England, where empires end

in injured mummery, Malacca pride

of old gentlemen swashbuckling and spruce

in their pedigreed

waistcoat and tweed

of social engagements on rain-bowed hills

dotted around Esher, Godalming, Chorley.

Gone, all of them, just as surely

as the lichen extends and its fibre fills

the eyes of the angel that without excuse

shelters the fallen on some far hillside.

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

The Kentish Weald

Here then we left you, reluctantly, far
from your kinsfolk, your friendships, home.
One with the quiet of the soft Kent loam —
you who were bluff and so jocular.

A shade in this green but autumnal scene
of surnames sprinkled over the Weald:
a speck unyellowed though seasons yield
only rough pastures where fields had been.

There is nothing to talk of. You got
odd jobs, were married, widowed, worked
on in timber, were foreman and shirked
only retirement and then forgot

the functions of skills laboriously learned,
gave them all up, took the bachelor part.
Jovial and wary, was ever a heart
consulted, so wanted, and unconcerned?

I did try, we all did, to call you friend,
you were phoned, invited, birthdays remembered,
You cut us all off, turned inward, and tended
that large green Skoda to the end.

I have placed cut dahlias although you cared
only for music — Mantovani, pops,
choral and church at your frequent stops
of a life down the slow lane that should have fared

further than this. For the last time I look
around me and lift the latch gate shut.
Immense and parochial, the past years glut
with sadness the roads you never took.

In affections unused our progenies die.
No thunder there is, or elevation:
by graves past naming or enumeration
stand the trees, the bracken, and a small patch of sky.

Out Walking

It comes when walking maybe in the spring
time — or I don't know — out driving, at the first
frail plumes of greenness in the barren fields:
the hope then beating outwards, the nights reversed.
Refringence of morning on the hills that yields
days beautiful, beyond imagining —
months to cut the heart.

The trees and the warm lanes that blind us, stumbling on,
seasons with their fragrance, the keen winds gone
dwindling to the heavens, as the long days start.

It's the same, then is it? in that begetting
of April after April in those vales of trees?
Clouds in their passage over furze and heath,
smell of the warmth, of shadow, the hum of bees
contenting the honeysuckle, the fume beneath:
all in delirium gathered and then forgetting —
how the waters pour —
impassioned and headlong in each tumbling brook
with never a turn backward, never a look
to us who are rootless and return no more

to the high fields of childhood that summer long
invited and thickly through the schoolyard netting,
where we romped and got grass in shirts and socks,
took them all off, ran careless, abetting
the girls in freckles and their summer frocks
till Persephone was taken and her song
echoed all the pain,
the lies, deceptions and the misbehaving.
Do you stand in the doorway the same and waving
in the warmth of sunlight and the simple rain?

In bright shapes and dark the hot earth goes
radiant and gossamer in its fragrant train
of fruit, crops and pastures, till one by one
the quiet hills grow farther, fainter, gain
an effulgence of Eden in the midday sun.
Goosestrife is yellow. Dandelion and rose-
bay willow splay

out to a spinnakering. By a single thread
hanging, of its making, the spider is fed
off as winds lift, and is winnowed away.

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

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

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

Lowdnes

One

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Oh well, we'll see him soon enough, no doubt. . ." *'You think me mad,*

now don't you?' *"Maddi, I don't know. I really don't. Except we have to go and change sometime. Let's talk more later."*

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

Two

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

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

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

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

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

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

Three

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

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

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

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

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

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

Four

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

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

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

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

Where could he manoeuvre? What was there to say? *'Look: you didn't ask me for my mind, and I'm not a picture freak. you call the shots for once and see what happens — I'm asking Gavin, if you want to, really want to. Otherwise, I have enjoyed our meeting and we can always stay as friends.'*

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

Five

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

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

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

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

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

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

and the gates whirred quietly shut behind,

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

Middlesex

Where the cell-like edge of London frays
into the rich, wet acreage of Middlesex —
from Wembley through to Harrow, with High Barnet,
ringed with terminuses north — in trolley-
buses, tube connection, silver flex
of Metropolitan or Bakerloo —
there, always, I remember, with the weather
plumed above our playing fields, our gardens,
shopping precincts, roundabouts, our streets,
the opalescent bubble of a boy's

imagination clouds with Iroquois —
with Pawnee creeping through the ox-eyed daisy,
adrift in meadowlands where crimsoned grasses
awoke at dawn and shook at sunset. Seemed
as consequential that our hours should stretch
as far as summer, and whole days together
we would dawdle till the deliquescence
of the evening found such happiness
had wooded in our gestures, hair, our clothes.
Between the shadows and the clustered

galleons of great trees the mustard-
coloured moon recalled the promises
we made the very place the world tipped down.
We heard the night wind settle through the branches
the interpenetration of the leaves
restless in their tide of being, further
than our parents calling, chimes from ice cream
van so quietly falling through the close:
this life, so full, was inexhaustible . . .
Why now from solstice fire does summer go

to cool opacity, and wetness throw
distinctness on the paths to home? Again
I shall not see the splendour of the great

expresses out of Euston, Waterloo;
the roar of LMS, of great North West:
for small boy waiting in the wind-pressed grasses,
book at 462's or double 0s.

The signal clicks; it shifts; the light goes red.
How long ago that was and is. It never
stops. The past goes short on hopes, and has

but street lights clustered in their sullen gas
to mark our footsteps as we troop down streets
from home to local pub to corner shop.

what spirit replicates the spirit guts:
it's bad those many days did not take root.
We pass with comrades large in talk — of wives
of office politics, of children's sport,
of days abundant that in those regulation
holidays to Africa, to Spain,
where on the calmest of the afternoons

we watch from balconies: the green sea swoons
in rush of topiaried weed and stone.

So fresh, so frolicsome. We stand again
in bright amazement at the bend
into that world of bubbles. Boats above
were bobbing lightly: this way, that. The wind
that lifted sea-spray from the surface drove
all those sunshine-heavy afternoons
till we, becalmed under the vast clouds, saw
their columbines do cartwheels round the blue.

These I don't remember now, nor you
nor even fishing trips when we two sat,
watching hours together water full
of surface as our ruffled hopes. Nothing
bit, or bobbed or moved, though marsh gas bubbles
rose in glistening algal conurbations.

The weed was deep and still. And what we saw
was nothing but a murky world of shapes,
of Rorschach premonitions, vaguely true.
Strange how individually we wait

with broolly, briefcase, glasses, paper-mate,
to board our yellow Network trains — the same
that take us through the spruced-up suburbs, past
the council dumps, allotments, coppices,
wastelands rolled, felled, filled in, made good:
a past that's well tamped down. It doesn't stir,
although I think at times, occasionally,
just after rain, in springtime, carriage windows
open to the warm scents of the south,
the cold year waking up and London with it,

what are these empty synagogues of spirit,
the riches mammon serves and shackles? Here
in business suit I lounge, and am prevailed
upon by something unforgiving.

Like bird-foot deltas, pigeon-droppings, sudden
pools of sunlight as the train revives
its old speed over cantilever bridges,
the same old offices with plotted plants,
it seeps through us, to far away, and leaves
an after-taste of how it was together.

If home is where heart is — and it seems whatever
I may do about it I return
days older, or days younger, indistinct —
so many things I did not want, for what's
the benefit in retrospect? — I see
a small boy dangling shirtsleeves in the shadows,
above old drains in gardens where the sticklebacks
reflect the turbid cross-glints of the current.
In gold and crimson is the day out late
and, though I didn't know it, late for me.

Exegesis in Maida Vale

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dartmoor

Talk, turn up the radio as you pass
uplands of heathery, half-stifled screams.
Sun blushes into the wayside grass;
pebbles flit quietly in the headlong streams.

In none of them, mysteries — not in traces
of sheep's wool on wire, in rabbit's bones.
Not even in winds, though their eddies turn faces
inward at encampments and in standing stones.

The heather roots thickly. The rivulet fills
eventually the pools now as black as jet.
Spattering the blue a hawk swoops and spills.
Incessantly, the birdsongs chip at granite.

Shadows of clouds graze the far hills whence
comes a patterning of white, pure white on the silence.

Norman Lands

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

with raven and with rutting boar.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Warwick Castle

Heavy the smell of river, the prevailing seasons
of drift and of rottenness, a running on.

Deeper is the sunlight than its translucence,
probing a Renaissance that was thinly borne.

Opening from their calyxes the swans preen
improbably on the water and dissolve.

The gunmetal colours are flurried, levelled; soon
there is nothing but stillness where moorhens delve.

All this was Offa's, Warwick's, the middle kingdom:
land of fat willow, slow streams, unaccountable crops.

Dowager, the river gathers its itinerants in,
no archers but clouds on the embattled steps.

A dream, just a dream, with no more semblance
to Italy than willows on the water's blaze.

Voices

To the rough-built tumulus I came,
to the house stooped on the hill;
Yet the town inhabiting my name,
simply listened to grow still.

*John comes home this week. He will not stay.
Like enough it will be cold today.*

As evening clothes itself I draw down shutters,
put the cat out, douse the lights.
Floorboard with floorboard communes, mutters,
breathlessly the whole house sleeps.
Moonlight and starlight dazzle, in the well
of midnight gossamers the subtle spell.

Lucid and most secret are the generations
shining in their small gilt frames.
To each of them I make my stations,
reproving bitterness, the blame.
Rant of passion, lamp-lit rage
of tallow on the soot-soft page.

Am I the last? I am, the very last.
Kith extended are not the same.
The days pass over to overcast,
The snarling bear at length grows tame.
Families reach solstice; these remain —
the voices, the solitude, the rain.

The Temple Church

To this same Temple Church my father took
me once, as his had taken him before,
no doubt to get the feel of it, and look
on martial gravitas defaced by war.

I gaze on templar's effigies preserved
in armour, tunic and their hand on sword,
and ask myself again what ends were served
with life as circumstances I'd afford.

Then come to me the things my father said,
and much in passing, with no thought at all
that I should count in time the fond hopes fled
as filial recklessness, to more recall:

I have no son, and nothing I can say
will make one pause here when I've passed away.

POEMS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

On the Isfahan Road

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

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

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

Dasht-e-Lut

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

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

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

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

Baraka Café

Caught at Rabat, the Baraka café, with
the vibrant clangour of a five-piece band
clashing about me — crescendo and
the rain of drumming from our coppersmith —
I light up, wait. Spot-lit, appears
the sweep of jawbone, the high-lift eyes,
of a dancer, another, long step and thighs:
and a shutter comes down of about five years

that is built on and settled. Doorman again:
You see? That is Sasha. She whisky go-go.
That one, she like you. You remember? No?
I do not, I say. It was different then.
However, excited, Fateeha sits down,
I think it's Fateeha. Yes. My Arab host
fluffs introductions. Laughs. Says, *ghost*
of a chance I've got if I don't quit town.

They're never that mercenary, or so I thought
till sat with Fateeha — diminutive, moth-
like and practised, half-meter of cloth
and smouldering allurements for life-support —
when I'm struck for the first time how much is brought
of my own to this séance, to lives that call
for family, place and affection — indeed for all
that tonight seems so suddenly out of court.

Afternoon in the Mountains

Impregnable in blue and pale magnolia,
mountains are and will be through the afternoon:
within their contours all our thoughts
harden into what's at hand.

But hours elapse and purple gullies
emerge to intersperse the mountain flanks.
Go on — ignore the spectacle until
the evening hems in afternoon.

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

Islamic Kingdoms

The tribes are legends in themselves, of course:
the Ghorids, Qarakitay, Golden Horde.
Surrounding Christendoms 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 Friday prayers,
can even read their laqabs, each one laid
with florid kufic into further 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 thinned-out desert, mile on mile.

And yet I read about them still, and look
up mint and ruler on the coins I've got.
The child at Christmas thinks his 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.

POEMS OF THE FAR EAST

Rubber Tappers

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wang Chung-Ssu

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Historical Note

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

Penang

From the window opens out
the town in palm trees and the bay
beyond: a counterpane of pale-
grey clouds, and then a bristling, sun-fuzzed
abacus of seething gold.

Close to, and, seeming made of milt,
the roofs and wharves and towers waver,
colours yet to coagulate.

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

Now who comes walking here? And look!
she stops, she laughs, she runs to kiss. . .
so who is it her eyes enlist?
Oh him? He's a sometime visitor,
and she's a certain light love of town.
Brm, brm, brm. Well, who was that
reeling in the windy miles?
No one knows. American?
Maybe he's Australian?
Sure was welcoming that glance
alighting, dancing on and down
the wondering lines of local girls. . .
Golly, kiddo, act your age:
all the same these servicemen!

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pinafores and pretty-fingered,
silhouetted in the tall
spot-lit and over-canopied
hoardings of the picture house,
two little schoolgirls, lost in wonder,

gaze upon the cavalcade.
Cowboy hucksters, Chinese bandits,
cops and international crooks:
airmen sweep the blue Pacific,
the allies win the Burma war.
And see! There's someone's mum and dad
kissing how they shouldn't have.
Laughing now and taking hands
they turn toward the homeward track.

Flocks of girls from upper forms
meanwhile climb the foyer stairs,
thence returning, waving tickets,
taking the steps at two by two,
uniform, purse and pale blue shoes
whirl about the slender legs.
Even Acteon on Diana
didn't fasten such fond eyes
as, with a lapidary glitter, do
(chewing cashews, doting darkly)
all who here would walk with her,
talk with her, tack their tongue,
drifting, past a dental palette
incongruously thick with teeth.

Fay you are and fortunate,
lucky to that tricky bauble —
Oh Buddha is it? Well, that's good:
he'll arraign your arrogance,
lead you to more delicate
(but I do like the cool bids
now, yes, of your eyelids)
eloquent acceptance that
as my very soul is smitten
so your soothing words are bidden.
Do you not my heart believe?
Do you not my hands give leave
to link us for this night and find
your long breath folded into mine?

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

A Tale of the Islands

You can imagine how it was when Hegwa, near
uncle on my mother's side, last of the direct kings,
ruled the fourteen islands. Unmitigated mayhem,
frankly: drums, feasts and flotillas all day long.
The bashed-in skulls in hundreds wash up on the beaches.

Things had to change. Our smiling chum was booted out,
and carrying the spark of decency to a dark world came
the white-suited ubiquitous administrator — Nevison
by name. Not a bad man. Inoculations and what not
drove out smallpox, brigandage and incest. Good.

Except on this small atoll. Here apparently
the ancient rites went on. Which is where yours truly,
the kingdom's heir apparent, summa cum laude
of Edinburgh and Yale, after a good deal of nonsense
and got up in outlandish costume, received initiation.

Not to be barbaric — words His Britannic
Majesty (i.e. the Commonwealth Division,
all bolshies then) was kind enough to pen. Even
Nevison, then retired, I spoke to back in England, said
'I think you'd better go, old boy, you can't dodge London.'

And also there was M'tupawalma, my queen to be.
The first encounter fairly did me in. Huge topaz
eyes, a glitzy laugh, a delicate and I
should think unfingered body. Know , O king, the gods
have given generously. They had. Oh boy they had!

So here we were. Or rather I was. My entourage
had beetled off, leaving me to contemplate
the sea, the island, clouds, anything they said
that would announce to me my reign as king. I see,
I said. My dress was fiendishly uncomfortable,

not so say absurd. I felt immediately ridiculous,
sat on the beach, watching what of course was beautiful.
The sea in picture postcard colours crumpled into surf;
the lines of kelp splayed out and back; leathery,
the palms waved stiffly in their canopied hosannas.

The sand I found most comfortable to camp on, warm and dry,
and there I stretched out, thinking. Dawn lightened into morning.
over the silver-crinkled bay the clouds in small
flotillas began their muscular contortions. I watched
these portents out of nothing distend themselves to nothing.

All day long. No doubt I wasn't in my proper mind
exactly — hunger, or the water drunk — for what
I did was odd for me, so level-headed,
calculating even, odd indeed. A storm
blew up and in the rain I danced, naked and exulting.

Yes, I was unhinged. The rain was hissing on the water,
the palm trees flapping round me. Still, I knew
a strange exhilaration, that in me flowed the sap
of godhead: I felt the surge of sea, the islands rocking
on long pedestals, the echo of my name.

The rain stopped. A speck upon the sea, now brindled grey
and green, became a small canoe. I met the warriors
and took from them the royal mantle. Then embarked.
At my capital, M'tupawalma. *Welcome, King,*
she said. *Rule with me my islands, Queen,* I said.

There the cameras stopped. *OK, that's thank you everybody.*
And, Highness, you were great. Sure was, said M'tupawalma,
giving me an open kiss smack on the mouth
which I could feel for months. *You mean,* I said. *Promotion,*
honey. You ain't no actor. We had to go for real.

Ours is a model family. Prince Tswin now sits for Oxford.
I write a little, play some golf. Walma's into cooking,
culled from Hola, in which from time to time we feature.
And yet I could have sworn the islands spoke, to me
at least, if never Tswin: we have new hopes for him.

Night Thoughts in the Tropics

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

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

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

POEMS OF EUROPE

A Short History of the Northern Peoples

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The East Lands

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

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

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

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

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

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

Winter Journey

I must have dozed. Pictures of the cupolas in gold were built as though of water jelly — the same which we as children, I remember, at Rabenschloss built hobgoblins of, noses like our governess's till she, poor creature, led us off and read long stories to us from the Brothers Grimm. They still go round this sleeping head. Frightful journey. The carriage jolts. Sometimes we wait on what we think are sidings or branchlines while troop trains rumble past. It seems unreal: the shut-up stopping places, the mesh of shaded lights.

Diary entry: Jan 8th. 1917.

Late arriving: after four. Prague when it appeared took on the outlines of a winter city, the squares and palaces closeted in snow. What surprised me was the silence, complete in Karmelitska as I walked to my apartment. I thought of Christmases with Klaus and Anna, and only when the bell, dull and gloomy, of old St Nicholas boomed and reverberated were my thoughts returned beyond the wealth of learning — to wounds and stench and mud.

My dear von Macke,

Your letter awaiting my return has just been handed me. I am appalled. I can't believe it possible. Having seen myself in five days at the front, with what composure, courage, and even gallantry the least of troops resist, permit me to say that a more accomplished and more upright officer, well-thought-of and beloved, never served the Emperor. A mix-up of the names, is evident. So, look, my dear old fellow, put your mind at rest: I know the C.O. and will write at once.

Wilhelm does not acknowledge. A Major Gunscher writes:

MUCH REGRET INFORM YOU DESERTION CASE PROCEEDS
BEG TO RECOMMEND THIS CORRESPONDENCE CEASE
REGULATIONS BRACKETS WARTIME STILL IN FORCE
VISIT SERVES NO PURPOSE WIRE YOU WITH RESULT

I know this stratagem: met it all my life.

Say nothing, do nothing, refer you to the colonel.

Well this old buffer, Red Cross only that he may be,
is built of stronger stuff. I'll go, of course, but can't
there be some let-up in this endless roll of drums?

*You enter, all of you, at daybreak, the doubtful
lists of war. Such is your duty. . . is inescapable. . .*

How I do not know, but sometimes what I've said
flares up at night to wake me. *Gentlemen, you fight
pro patria, for Austria, and when the cannon roars,
Gentlemen, the regiment, the Imperial Fourth Uhlans,
expects of you a conduct illustrious as its past.*

Ride well, bear your heads high, your swords sheathed. Ride!

I know they did so, across the Bug and Soane —
returning, if at all, in twos or on their own.

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

I hated him for honesty and fearlessness
at what I had to say: *Conduct insufferable. . .*

intolerable... destructive of proper discipline. . .

Play doubting Thomas anywhere but not with serving men.

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

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

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

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

By the Code Part 4: Keeping to the letter,

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

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

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

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

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

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

Your Excellency,

With deep regret I write . . .

Note

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

South

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

cold through our fingers. This was no home for comrades dying, whom we killed, adept at hiding weakness. Miserable. Kept nothing of watch, but let our hunger roam.

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

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

first to the fort, the sentry place. Nothing. No one. Then to our homesteads as fearfulness grew. Here quiet, almost peacefulness, from which we knew in truth our hardships had now begun.

Us at Last

One

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

Two

Dawn aches, and in the distance groups of men
flounder at the rock face and the puffing smoke
carries from the crusher with a chortling sound.
Later come shouts and whistles. Searchlights poke
out their long blades, when
for a second in the fen,
a backlit figure stumbles and goes zigzag

into the softly-felted moccasin
of darkness, now to sag
as shot and shots go in.
Afterwards nothing but the thick-piled snow
sealing us forever in an underground
asphyxiation of the northern lights
in conical shadowy rites
high over watchtowers, wire and rifle sights:
unbroken as the wadded white wall round,
unuttered as the orders that a world ago
looked on innocence and laughter but now confound
us with docketts and quotas. We improvise
once more, redo the figures. The arc-lights flare
into an alliteration of halogen
flare and infrangible darkness, when again
there falls but heavy snow, and figures there
are silent under wind-shut eyes.

Three

The whole frame judders, and the rotors thwack
and thwack above us as each three-man crew
is ferried out. We pull on over, when
it's the thick, warm sunshine we are lifting through.
High to the light, back
round to the attack
upon the smoke-thick trees. We come in close,
the turrets rattling hard though out of range
at heaps set out with clothes
smouldering, and a strange
acid smoke that billows up. We roar
on over. The scene diminishes and one
by one we see the bombers hung up there,
spiked into the bare
blue sky with their hard, wing-stretched stare
absorbed in calculations till the odds run
quietly in our favour and the bombs pour
out in long threads: hundreds of them, ton
upon ton on what or whatever. The ground

steadies but there comes a tree-trawling
apocalypse of crimson, a deep red to black
opening of the canopy, but at the back
of minds, and so not part of us, and falling
signally far off, without a sound.

Four

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

Five

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

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

The Normandy Landings

(A Requiem for the American Dead)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gone out and gone over, the warm-hearted, the profiteers,
the principled and the feckless who make up troops of men.
How safe they sleep, while we must turn and mark again
the dates on calendars through slow receding years.

A Lunch Party at Villeneuve sur Yonne

(On a painting by Eduard Vuillard)

For one whole day — what glory in it — happiness!
Those his friends who walked there, in the noontide coolness
of the garden, where talk was gathered and the cloth spread,
what had they come to? Conversation as the wind,
infectious, filling out the trees, and of a sudden
stilled. He saw what he had painted. That each in talking
to his neighbours turned as though upon a inner
spindle, knit in sympathy with other things.

High summer then in northern France, so rich, so fresh.
Leaf-tips sparkled in the bushes; the path was dry.
What had he done? The Seine, left-centre, sloughed
a skin of pale viridian. The sun was swallowed
up in oyster-shells of grey. Strange, nocturnal,
in the undergrowth, the afternoon was waiting,
not like an animal, but pungent, bruising . . .
The irises, far left, bared fangs of purple bloom . . .

So much had happened, muddled in the twenty years
between the picking up and laying down of brushes.
So much was changed. Particularly for Misia.
Dear darling Misia: how dumpy she had grown. Didn't play,
she said, not now. But Pierre was in the south somewhere,
still painting. If recollections are what we hollow out
and crown with our accomplishments, what then were his?
Nothing he could think of, except some canvases.

*If you were famous, what would you do? Why — go on
of course, what else? And if that meant you journeyed
the further from what your object was in art — still then?
Oh, I don't know, yes . . . perhaps.* What should he say?
That skill was wasted in the hands which never held
the least of what he'd wanted? That painting was
his proxy in an adoration which shouldn't now
be his? No, he was not sorry really, as things fell out.

There are no happy lives, not overall, and gains
are as the trees — arrayed in gladness, triple-crowned
in green, but at their centre dusted, taking on
the dark. What the canvasses now showed, as he could see,
was not Gethsemane, not fame, not valediction,
but how the hours put out their innocent, shy hands,
that, hungry for them, we too reach out, as days
upon days flash out and fold into each small event.

For the Most Catholic Kings of Spain

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

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

You will hear, if you listen, as the armies march
them calling for trumpets, for the clarion shout:
Navarre! Castile! That faithful church
is still around them. Look: what is about

them, built of marble, remains but never done.

Far from this sanctuary in their single files
the roads reach elsewhere, and the Inca sun
hardens on fountains, and on red roof tiles,

on poor the most of all. The vast plains lie
exposed to purpose as a local shrine:
lives scattered upwards into a clear blue sky
that fills in the evening with blood and wine.

Andalusia

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cadiz

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Magna Graecia

Always wheat by the rivers, olives on hills
though tumulus, palace and village pass.

In a soil quite patchy, a farmer tills
much in bone-dust and in sharded glass
where even today the plough may ring
on rough-hewn ewer from burial plot,
when there will spill glistening
unthreaded lapis or peridot.

Shadows of the great world gone over breathe
dustily through this town and leave

in the walls, parked vehicles, the nodular streets,
on the graffiti sunning on yellowed stone,
moods larger than absence, that delete
the epiphanies pregnant in the bone.

All through their long years the fathers walked
cypress in robes as opposite
trees flamed through afternoons and stalked
silent at evening and darkly clothed. It
seems but yesterday the Medici blessed
the town with its small fountain and assessed

it so much for tribute, continuance
of their building, reef-like, through men's lives.
To this wall, this roof, this seminary, the sense
of living surrenders and yet survives —
as it must do, continually to be settled in
soft-vowelled syllables of scent and grain.
Apprehensions of the spirit were never thin
in small Greek towns of the Ofanto plain.
And though lives be blended there remain
the figs, the olives, the contributory gain

of wines kept in hiding, ladled out
at festivals, weddings, at harvest ends.
And if rough walls surround there is about
them conspiring a silence which extends
deeper than well-shaft or legacy-yield,
to the stout rock itself where the rough blocks sit
open and empty. In hilltop and field,
patient as summer, the cicadas knit
their hard sounds in stone for the Bourbon kings,
offertories out of lifeless things.

The Church of Miracles

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

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

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

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

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

Yes — that is all it was — although the light became
so large and forward in her that the outward bliss
turned piteousness,
her heartbreak poignant and too lucid —
such yearning for us, gentleness, such pain.

I was astonished. More to lose it:
for though it radiated
through my mind it also faded.

The marble, quiet candles and the cross remained.

I have no more to add. Though tempted, naturally,
to read some portent in it, nothing came.

Around me the same
cold place: the dusty centuries, the banks of flowers.

A strange location for a colloquy,
I thought. Still do. I thought of powers
on earth, in Heaven, of Heaven's grace.

The guide was blunter to me: *'Odd place,
but liked by visitors.'* Yes, I said, *would be.*

POEMS OF LATIN AMERICA

The Mountain Wall

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

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

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

that looms as barrier to one in this
protracted interval of saying grace
with joy and passion in a bridal kiss
for all the sadness in the colonel's face.

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

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

Society Wedding, Santiago

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Military Church

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

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

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

agitators, unionists: in strict accord
men acted as ordered, as time conferred
duty to the fatherland: not by sword,
but bullet or beating they kept their word.

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

Into these I married, by familiar name
know many who'd say 'never again' :
no doubt sincerely, but the same
'unthinkable' could yet come down to 'when'.

Reviled, discounted, the unyielding shines
in schools and long, bemedalled lines:
pray God unneeded as the past consigns
itself to laid down bitter wines.

Military Hospital, Santiago

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

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

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

As doubtless also in my own case —
though not as costly, nor with outside trees
so lined up or offensive as the fees,
with smiles still wary on each practised face.

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

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

Autumn Already

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

Except that we grow older, I suppose, and stake
out our enjoyments carefully to ignore
how distant and hopelessly the waves still break
as life's achievements on that fabled shore.

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

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

To the New World

This is a strange country, and you must be careful not to confuse how the sun flares out on the far mountains, or exults on the rivers with the high brilliance of trees that are here shaken to uproar, to shout their hoarse irruptions of shadow into the Ur-lands of evening unleafing continually to distance, with ever being homely and one with the sad, pinched smell of dust.

Hosannas and saint's days are not as they seem, and for all the fashioning of lace for tourists, or elaborate bridles, the bustling festivals, or the evening concerts in parks, each place has its own Plaza de Armas, where perambulating children under the palm trees know the names of the warriors, the conquistadors quiet on their plinths that are set in granite.

Walk round at evening. When light drains away you will stand on the earth and know how hard it is, and feel stamped on the soul the recusant nights when the Cross would go forward, with all to lose.

Outer Industrial Zone of Santiago

The light glints and goes out across the poplar-
and factory-dotted plain where a range
of mountains trolleys to close the view eastward
and insist this was wanted, and here we are.
The train picks up speed and rattles across
a metallised carriageway with lighted signs
that flash on south at intersections and make
a virtue of being contemporary and at the wheel.

Around us, the walls of a concrete obtuseness
take us from the station and in the gaps occasionally
show a flatland of garden plots and steep-roofed buildings
sintering under the sun, their corrugations
folding, like those of factories and odd metal works,
into views from the fortresses of apartment blocks
that rise out of a landscape as at Nagasaki
where only the very largest of blocks survived.

These are the iron cordons, the demagogue's
illegal enterprises he could steal, while all
about are hopes new made and faces shine
through tiers of offices in high-rise glass.

New Chile

Stooping under the trees, the melancholy parades
of high buildings, the glitter town, distinctly
perpendicular in these lost evenings of white
flares on windows, we find the neon lights winking
on a bodywork waxed and betokening beneath
the rain a raw health throbbing with the heavy
overhead cam engines and their intricately fluttering
and clattering of valves in steel-lined ventricles.

Angels by the Mapocho, imported hopes
tinted by the glass and luxurious leather.
All that was uprooted in the Junta years
is shed as is paper of the left-wing tracts.
The future roars outward and slowly the metal
bends into modernity or into spray-shop paint.
The trees continue but from their leaves is absent,
except in the colours, any incendiary future.

That is all past, and the chauffeured bodies
are wrapped in the good life of department stores.
The stones keep their distance and the towers of concrete
rise more imperially into the rain-dark sky.

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.

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 days 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 hours
must pass for them in soporific tediousness:
past litters they remember through their powers
of recollection fading into less and less.

Providencia

I took some photos of our neighbourhood
one Sunday afternoon to show 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.

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 latterly 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 their beauty shone,
and know too well whatever words I say
will not a moment enter what is gone.

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 a hard-tiled floor
as plain as looks that promise spinsterhood.

So there we are. The husband grasps my hand
and dumbly stares at words he's heard us tell
him countless times but cannot 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.

PLANET EARTH

Let's Start

My friends, let's start. I'd like to talk throughout these pages on the ways one simple (I would say emergent) concept has regained the wholeness in our view of planet earth.

More, if I elaborate a moment — our love, our wonder, adoration — what do I refer to? Yes, to biospheric processes. You smile. But take an atlas:

there you have them — all the planets, earth the third one out. And not the fastest moving, most spectacular, you'd think to any alien now visiting, would you? Just

a small spot turning round an oblate orbit extending far in space. If sun's a football, earth's a pinhead thirty yards away, with Pluto at the end, oblique in orbit,

and twinkling out a thousand yards in space that stretches on this scale four thousand miles to alpha Centaur, known our nearest star. Mere dust and nothingness is all we are.

Subsequently

Yes, we say, of course. And quit our musings,
to go into the falling sunshine, to the warm,
full, breathing world, the thick-with-birdsong,
asking if such progenies could still be true?

But what did Pascal say? And Leibniz — space
immeasurable, illimitable, and bending
round as Einstein thought, and never thinning:
in no wise, in no place, and to no thing.

Gentlemen — let me take you down
into the very basement of those minds,
to the souls crying out in torment from
a world evacuated of its spheres:

For why, O God, has Thou forsaken us
among the entrails of a dusty earth?
From Noah unto Jeremiah Thy glory
flamed from mountain top to mountain top.

That was a way of putting it, with angels
choiring to the empyrean — and gods,
as Shelley saw them, household guests. You
believe that, do you? No? Well, let us think.

In the Beginning

Since somewhere in the vastness was our beginning,
in the coalescing and melting as they crashed down —
ice-comets and planetesimals — to make
the core, the mantle and the homely crust,

we have attachments in us to those vast implosions —
to the first time, the far time, to a time entrammelled
in our make-up, our dreaming, to worlds no doubt
prefigured before us in those distant places.

So, if now of the Hadean there is nothing
recorded — not in rocks, in the heights or in the depths
and only by foraging on the moon's wan surface,
collecting up splinters, can we trace it through —

we must remember now to put aside
the colossi of theories that do not reach
to the plainness of matter, its obdurate nature,
its inertness to us, though not indifference.

For threaded in us, and through us, however briefly,
there's meaning, and a making of our various lives.
Out of the stars we have come, and our immortal longings
brim in the evening if we will see it so.

This Uncertain Earth

All things are in motion and this dull spot
wobbling about slowly in its draughty slot
on the uncertain ecliptic, can never stop
here or for anyone. And is therefore not

an exemplar for children — however taught
that force is no mystery, that Newton fought
nothing of conscience to have each orb
speak of his God in the 'is' and 'ought'.

Fatuous, of course. What practical use
is a calculus or more that won't produce
a certainty beyond what was Gödel's proof?
Arithmetic even is not certain truth.

Which leaves us, I suppose, as all things must,
floundering with concepts like hope or trust,
with souls that God moulded out of febrile dust.
Well, so they once said, but it comes to us

as a heartbeat uncertain, from an earth whose sense
is to head for the centre, and never go hence.
Distant as pin-picks, the sky's Maundy pence
have no cause or reason for eloquence.

Meteorites

For the most part they come from God knows where,
with nothing in the nature of an explanation.
They fall, and are found, as though casually flung
from the high front of Heaven — out of which they've fought

a long flight like Lucifer down to earth.
From the heat which basted they have their bat-like skin —
cindery or webbed as that may be — but what
their insides record is the strange world they're from.

Which puzzled the ancients. To us they speak
of collisions in orbits, and in this important
in giving us insight of the deep core within,
of earth as it was, in its first existence.

And for this we brood on the museum cases,
study the descriptions, the polished sections,
watch the light travel the grid-locked lamellae
of nickel and iron, the offensive placings,
and know they are strangers, and always inert
to any long sojourn in the heart's affections:
always inflexible was the hard world they knew,
and hard that down-pull still draws our feet.

Welsh Graptolites

So down a fathom and then a fathom and after
the cold waters closed over how could they know
how precipitous the drop was, or on what
glutinous surfaces their fronds would lie?

Huge and seeming as an accumulation
or darkening as of autumn in the miles above —
an immense flagellation of small things
like keys of sycamores that floated down.

Who can grasp the mountainousness of it,
the flaccid accrediting of layer on layer,
the countless millennia of that long time tightening
by foldings and pressings into spotted slate?

So if you think that you can put away
something unchanged for its millions of years
in the miles beneath the abysmal waters,
with occasionally a current to spread fine silt,

then you have no conception of those great deeps
and cannot take up what that time will give:
like a blink of the eyelid are the soft impressions
of the lifelines suspended but still pouring in.

Mountain Building

For a long time, to the thoughtful, it brought some grief:
earth piled on earth, with the squashy seas
uplifted to the mountains, to their very tops:
if life was everlasting, this world was not.

Also to be counted were earthquakes, fires, floods
that men from wickedness should be seared and washed.
And ever, all about them, lay the Devil's things:
the ammonite horns and his thunderbolts.

Under a righteous and indignant God
we all of us lived then. It was His hand
that dowered with miracles or had the rock
break out in fountains or in evening blood.

Fanciful? Parables? Hardly: earth
was different but certain, above all enduring.
However one travelled, the land rolled on,
or the sea did, for ever, beyond all maps.

Fossils and sediments were portents when bones
could be tumbled as pebbles by the mountain bourne.
For in the end we were dust, entirely, but
that also was His, and invoked our trust.

The Black Country

After all these eons there's an exhalation
from the partings, as in hot lands at evening
when the heat expands into rooms and doorways,
half filling the streets until it fines away.

But nothing like this: a brocaded plumpness,
large in concretions — a rich spattering about
of a raindrop exactness, in the spreading leaves:
somnolent as scarabs as they split apart.

So this was their ambiance: long reaches of rotting
tree stumps, oil patches, the stagnant bits stretching
for unending hundreds of humid, heat-stilled miles
large with amphibians and half-climbing fish.

But above all resplendent in the dragonflies —
enormous: wingspans up to a yard across —
which rose through the air, thin-bronzed and clicking,
their membranes a circuitry of silica chips.

Which they were in some ways, taking up sunlight
to warm their fluids for a tempestuous flight:
yet most of it carbon, filmy and glittering,
till it broke and flared down into bedded soot.

Cornish Tin

The main thing is their smiling self-conceit
mixed with mute indifference. Pegmatites
extend whole miles like some vast Cheshire cat
with extravagant, glittering and ill-shaped teeth.

Which are quartz and plagioclase and mica,
mostly, and filling the all but crevices,
the last being those which gave passage through
for mineralising fluids the miners followed.

So, the last residuum of the Hercynian granites
speckled all the hills with their lodes and swellings,
with the gangue and ore, the specious minerals
that lit up their hopes, and still led them on

through adit and roof-fall, past threat of flooding,
emptying the chambers, the rich lodes thinning,
to vast new dominions: Ontario forests,
Ashante goldfields and the sweltering bull-dust flats.

To eventually the sky that was always above them,
a blue where the head-frames must rust away:
round them wind whistles as they lie with children,
gap-toothed, in cemeteries, without a name.

The Cotswolds

Blue vales, ribbons of coloured hills — folly-crowned, contenting in themselves, but casting in their long, fluteduestas the ripples from the continents plicating into Alpine Europe.

Yet that a long time after. Here the water-meadows, sturdy haze of thorn and alder, the great oaks, tall elms, a rural England quintessentially unflurried with its clocks

and calendars is underlain by rocks sedimenting out of drying seas: clear waters, corals, sunlight and warmth from a climate seasonal and close at hand.

And even if the water deepened, as it did, or shoaled on horsts and swells, accumulated sun-baked thicknesses of fetid mud, yet here was provenance, continual flooding

from a tropical landmass with no polar ice caps or tortuous desert scenes. No mountain building even, but only the quietly spoken of the decently particular and stay-at-home.

Wealden Ironstones

Small woods, half-timbered properties, long drives
to ponds, illuminated, where dimpled lawns
run up to sundial and to silver birch —
a rural Elysium that rolls its turf

on onetime furnaces. A good deal helped —
a land in trade, labour to buy, wood
to burn, and the small ironstones nodular
and plentiful as cowpats on the ground.

And so it went on till all shifted north:
from part-time industries with local men —
graziers, herdsmen, labourers — men content
to go on working where their forebears went.

In time that changed, and had to. In the great
rimmed cauldrons of the Pennine north, rough men,
who drudged and brooded, took the cropping out
of coal and ironstone as God's own work.

But here though never. No. Not mines or quarries,
just hammer ponds breathing with the passing clouds:
phosphorescence silvered with the summer days
that darken toward winter and the wealth to come.

Sea Urchins

Providential, when each Sunday walk, brisk
along the esplanade or shingly beach,
brought in such numbers of these creatures, cast
in flint or calcite from the gleaming Chalk.

Echinoderms, the lot of them, but also
bit by bit more heart-shaped — changing, in a
word, evolving, that was it, as Darwin said —
and all quite beautiful when taken out.

On the upper surface and the grooves leading
immodestly to mouth and anal sphincter
one could see the plates knitting and diminishing
like little girls' pudenda, scrubbed and neat.

Which charms they show today, if claimed from vaults,
retrieved in their hundreds from the prurience
of moralists who measured up by the size
of breast or genitals the descent from God.

And odd, particularly, that these small creatures
decked out in thin white sutured shells, became
a frisson for old reverent gentlemen, with flocks
of women following who were never kissed.

The Isle of Wight

Of course, in winter, down comes the rain, just
as pitiless as elsewhere, bleak and thin,
up-ending the streets with their dwindling people, beyond
the conservatory-rooms with all mod cons.

But still there was always something I thought tropical
about the surroundings, the country, the comfortable bodies,
the skin creamed and pampered beneath warm blouses,
skirts and lingerie from BHS.

It's this which comes to mind in the shells washed down
from Miocene or Oligocene accumulations:
gastropods mostly, intricate twistings
that ended in an opening flared-out and chaste.

Both somehow together, as Boucher depicted
who collected such things, I remember, liking
how their dormitory and muted exteriors hid
the most voluptuous of windings when you looked.

So that behind them, as behind all the bungalow lives,
meeting the bills and the morning paper, is a
holiday loucheness or moral vagrancy
whorled and folded in each nacreous shift.

Birds

To do bird is to do time, of course, and these
collecting on rooftops or suburban parks
are not so much yielding to the wide air round
as fending off purposes in that first start.

The which they have come from, their whole life one
of aspiring like Icarus to escape the earth,
leaving both gravity and their entrapping shape
in the long phylogenies out of which they're built.

All of it pointless. Their trajectories point
to a tough skin, thick scales and developing beak
and then there were feathers, and their sharp round eyes
grew unblinking as drones that must stalk their prey.
Even their flight — if you watch — is not of grace
but a run, a plunge, a fierce explosion

as the joints knit, the heart pumps, and the long wings spread,
pterodactyl-like on extended air,
outwards, away from them, till they leave that past
as an odd spot of shadow that lifts away.
They rise, diminishing into the sunlit sky:
reptilian, light-bodied, and headed back.

Mammoths: Thame Valley

Swollen as they are and part of earth-time, the tusks,
femurs and molars — huddled together in fissures,
in long loams, in gravels well-pummelled — canticles
of enamel moving with the rivers that brought them,

grinding south and south, with the ice-blocks floating:
the auroras of winter canopied in their small brains,
the husks no doubt also of summer in their soft hides,
only we cannot see them, all that hugeness gone

greedily but without stain into the heavy tills —
the Gipping, the Chiltern, the Lowestoft drift:
tough, glutinous blanketings that the great bones
work in and founder, and are never released from.

Now imponderably they are of this time and this place,
uncomfortable or diminishing as that may be:
to the foundations of docks or industrial buildings,
they are apportioned sequentially and lie as found.

As such these pantechicons of the flood,
ruminating and then melting into the tundra,
may almost be part of our own tenured lives,
integral with the weather in this late warm spell.

Snowdonia

On mountains, shelving, and on standing lakes,
a stunning whiteness and then a bitter frost
in a land of moraines, drumlins, eskers that lay
beneath all the summer, and in cold about —

which still would come back, blundering on
into glaciers, whiteouts, shrouded mammoths, bear,
till distally and signally the melts trailed out
to conifers, to poplars and then temperate grasses.

And a gradual heritage for hunters-gatherers
in a landscape smoothed out, or with pocket hollows —
round which they farmed, fished, till they half-filled them in,
what with the climate supporting and the ample soil.

But not in the end: there were always the torpors
when cirques returned, half, to their former state.
The cold made patterns and the hoar frost deepened;
the mountains tinkled crisply in the bare-rock steeps.

But more of that even in their inner natures,
their fastness of being, to the very bones
came the eloquent and empty white of winter
till the summertime trampled them to loams.

ARIES RISING

I've Lived

I've lived with millionaires, the starving poor,
discoursed with holy men, and had my thoughts
thrown up on science's hard threshing floor.
I've worked with ministers of various sorts,
in foreign embassies have played some role —
as many have, of course, but may allow
for life seen steadily and seen as whole.
It speaks of common purposes that plough
what else is lonely in the hearts of men
albeit pointlessness of lives condemn
us make the same commuting trip again.
But yet there's something other, far from them,
which here and unmethodically has come
to this unsettled but not zero sum.

Long years would pass, and I would know the high
Iranian plateau with its cragged ravines
that fissured outward to a capstone sky,
the desert lands with their unchanging scenes
of sour-faced destitution, sun-split rocks,
the watercourses twisting flaccidly
to nests of pebbles and their scattered stocks
of sheep or goats, that vast vacuity
we can't encompass, not in one. A land
that once was paradise, a traveller said,
its paths with fruiting boughs so thickly spanned
scarce daylight filtered down from overhead.
So is the world, both mutable and rare
that needs our husbandry and human care.

It was world retreating into swathe
on swathe of emptiness, with scarcely thorn
or settlement or rough-ploughed field to save
the scene from desolation, ask we mourn
for what rode through, the great apocalypse,
which stripped the ground of every good it had.
For here were variegated fields and strips
of green along the riverbanks in woven plaid
of elm and poplar giving some such shade
to families that took their evening strolls.
Now all has gone, and children, half-afraid,
have parents send them on more pressing goals.
How much of untold misery would cease
were men to cultivate the arts of peace.

Otherwise

Our memories view it otherwise: the few
hot days that swelter by some blue-tiled pool,
with far-off sports day when a prize or two
was treasured endlessly, although the school
has gone, and with it teachers, classmates, all
those echoing, bright childhood voices,
the boys they represented — fat or tall —
who made the usual sorts of choices,
safe careers at some-such rates of pay,
those grim-faced certainties our parents said
were each obligatory, that we'd obey
with manners drummed into each wooden head.
All, all are gone, and playground grey
records no fervours from an earlier day.

The local deities of street and field,
of woods we ranged on through, where truant hours
made something numinous, and so still yield.
What is it that we saw in wayside flowers
produced so variously from shade and soil?
How was it grasses seeded carelessly
but in their kernels held what men by toil
continuously would cultivate, and see
spread out to slave-based, vast plantations where
the laughing summer-lands of wealth were born
of vast injustices but common air
drained off to sunlit private sheaves of corn?
History to me was still a distant joy
though time worked closely with the growing boy.

Besides my purblind journeys country-wise
grew unaccountable and unconstrained
by courses anyone might still advise.
I went, a solitary, and so remained
withdrawn from that vast busy world, the drum
beat of a getting on. I heard the leaves
re clothe the trees, the breathless morning come
as moths that flutter round the lighted eaves.
And every evening when the sun went down
and shadows filled the plain suburban street,
a sense immensely sad spread through the town
of something unfulfilled, which by retreat
made misty outlines and a distant hill
to flame in splendour, as it does so still.

It was a brand-new school, in every way
superlative, and meant to be. Here each
short-trousered acolyte would learn to play
a role defined by blazer, tie and speech.
Elitist definitely: it would not do
to congregate in gangs by bus or rail:
street games and loitering were much taboo,
and news-wrapped fish and chips beyond the pale.
The uniform enrolled you in that middle state
and even now I'm rarely impolite,
but lay my knife correctly on the plate,
and keep my raw opinions out of sight.
All this was conscionable, and even now
are standards none I think will disavow.

But I, the heir of all my father's trips,
from country house to churches, dates and styles,
knew also factories, wastelands, builders' tips,
though on to Harrow loved the leafy miles.
But, dispossessed, I was a stranger made
by intimations there was something more.
I turned on inward, thinking, undismayed
by marks so secretive, that semaphore
of ghostly entities in God's design.
I learned to love the smell of new-planed pine,
the rows of glassware, sinks, where taps would shine,
proud-necked and solitary in line on line:
research, then, certainly, where I could choose
a quiet identity I would not lose.

At last that proved an unrewarding quest.
Each day brought miracles, and would reveal
what strange dimensions kept me from the rest
who sat in schoolroom, learned, but did not feel
the rain gash window glass, the powdery stench
of blackboard chalk, the thick black bile of ink
however corralled in its inkwell clench
of shimmering porcelain, where you would think
it would be settled, obedient and never pain
the small boy's fingers with that Prussic blue
that comes in time to be a deeper stain
and goes on colouring the larger things he'll do,
that wide 'because' with which he's never daubed
but in the same is silently absorbed.

The names are lost, and yet I see again
their sauntering down the endless corridors
when I was on to who knows what or when,
past various closed but still inviting doors
that led to this or that, become assured
in time, if dutiful, if things worked out,
what boards and institutions could afford.
And they the while were shopping up and down,
the parcels burdening the splendid legs
the length of frayed and tawdry London town
with most combustible of powder kegs:
brilliant, imperial, their beckoning gaze
evocative of strangely other ways.

America

I think of that far voyager, that faint
recalcitrant and no doubt feckless man,
impelled by Calvinism, where no saint
need come between him, nor the artisan
and priest depict for him the face of God.
He was his own-built self, and all the ways
he took to were by heartfelt conscience shod,
where king and commoner to his keen gaze
were not so equal as constrained by laws.
These man had made although referred above
to things eternal, when, from new world shores,
that far Elysium, and not with love,
his eyes looked backward to the Europe left
where justice withered and all pity slept.

Where Catholics murdered Protestants with such
solemnities of torch-lit savagery
that Hell's own fearful torments couldn't touch
the roistering throughout the Holy See.
The Protestants outdid them even: ripped,
flayed, raped, and stretched them out in pain,
for hell's own devilry was so outstripped
that Lucifer himself could not complain.
As for hags of witches, they were burnt in tens
of thousands, as were Muslims, Jews and Moors.
For so was Christendom that sought to cleanse
itself of foreignness or tainting cause.
The millions more that faiths could not affect
were left to wholesale hunger and neglect.

Yet from that effervescent cauldron's rim
escaped the brutalized and rabid scum —
deported, emigrated, sent on whim
to penal settlements or kingdom come,
where deep resentment and ingested rage
at courts and institutions only brewed
a dangerous fervour to fulfil the age
of brutal chivalry their leaders viewed
as plainly given them. So was the hill
that rose before them in the setting sun,
ablaze with challenges they must fulfil
as patiently as saints who also won
a citadel that under God's good grace
could be a born-again, forgiving place.

A world where tired humanity could start again
and live in simple plots where grape and yam
were given on asking, and where honest men
could say: I came, I worked and so I am.
Rich acres beckoned them, moreover, gave
good profits from the meanest strip of land.
a buoyant livelihood where men could save
what they had gathered with their own good hand.
Sometimes the Indians helped them, sometimes not,
or sparkling frosts came early in the fall
or blizzards blanketed what springs begot:
a hard land always, but beautiful, and all
was promising, a new deliverance come
with evenings deepening into maize and plum.

Theirs was no scholarship in musty books
or tongue's felicities to get them through.
The wind's complaint, they heard, the croak of rooks,
and creaking harnesses they woke up to.
No more was needed and each vain excess
of sensibility could come at cost.
The old world castes they spurned, and saw noblesse
oblige could ruin men, real men, who lost
the day's entitlement when thinking strayed
beyond the needful. In that book of life
they set down blessings as they would a trade:
their land, their health and children, house and wife.
For earth is hardship and the vale of sin
a place that we poor men must wander in.

JULIUS CAESAR

What I Remember

What I remember of that boyhood shore,
with the high waves breaking, was more and more
lifted together in the heavy swell,
was exultation: fear as well.

I fastened on that, was composed and neat,
always respectful — in the street

I did not go running, make any noise:
that's what they noticed, the other boys.

As Julii we were middling — not rich, not poor,
but ancient and patrician — father wore
Tyrian to his toga when out of doors
attendant on Senate and the settled chores
that came with our ruling the vast lands east.

I saw myself there as elected priest,
Pontifex, even, and every cause
lift in the rapture of their applause.

Yet apart from that — nothing. I was betrothed
to one called Cossutia. At fifteen roved
curious through bodies to the curled-up toes
under the shyness and the small, damp clothes.

100 - 92 B.C. Caesar's Boyhood

Caius Julius Caesar was born in 100 B.C. He was given a sound education, introduced to women in approved brothels, and prepared for a role in public administration.

Epistle to Cossutia

Dutiful and presentable, if no
great beauty — yes, Cossutia, so
you were. True, but not a wife
for me, my prospects, type of life.
You see my almost life-companion:
all the time I had naught to stand on.
What was settlement when Father died
if we, the Julii, were not allied
to power, to Cinna? You know the crown
we bear of Venus — kingship down
to the present, treacherous, hard-fought days,
what we hunger for in praise.
So understand: we played together
with hearts and hands that hot June weather,
and I was happy, but saw your eyes:
the hazard in them, hurt, the lies.
Cossutia for me it only meant
not marriage but a muled consent.
Whatever you may hope for, or yet may be,
I ask you, Cossutia: remember me.

84 B.C. Caesar marries Cornelia

A year after his father died, as Proprætor of Asia in 85 BC, Caius broke with Cossutia and made a political marriage with Cornelia, daughter of the Populares leader Cinna. Though training for the priesthood, Caesar was looking for greater advancement — until Sulla's return was announced and Cinna was murdered by rebellious troops.

To Cornelia: Greetings

Hunted by troops, dogs, I'd stayed
too long by farms and granaries: paid
by capture. Advance the denarii
to him who bears this letter. I
am middling, yes mending, and if confined
am not uncomfortable. I do not mind
if you are waiting. But have it paid,
in full and promptly: this is their trade.
As for me, hope is fugitive
as smoke upon the capitol. If
lists continue, all our cost
is made up in the rivals lost.
Aunt Julia understands. Be bold
enough to talk to her. Of the old
party of the Populares there is one,
your husband, whom they'd still call son.
Cornelia, wife, be circumspect
but not discouraged. A ship's not wrecked
by force of tempest but by running slack:
with blood behind us there is no way back.

81 B.C. Sulla's Proscriptions

Caesar fled the proscriptions, but was hunted down and captured, only securing release by bribing his captors. His aunt Julia had lost all influence, but friends, including the Vestal Virgins, made representation to Sulla, who found him a position on the staff of Marcus Minucius Thermos, Proprætor of Asia.

From Cossutia: Thoughts

To husband though you're not: thoughts and sad
greetings. The hours as we had
frugal of happiness hang in the air:
fugitive, they follow me everywhere.
It is over. But I know you, Caius — of
soft words, consoling, they are not of love,
but pipings far off, Theocritan sighs
to have me content you: delicate lies.
Do not mistake me. I'm smiling at
all those flummeries you have learnt off pat.
You wanted me yielding, as soft as sponge,
did you, compliant, above all young?
Well, as to that I am not offended. All
I do ask is you sometimes call.
I hope that you prosper, and even gone
will think of you further and travelling on.
Remember me, Caius. I shall count your stays
in our hearts here as fortunate, all the days.
Spurn me or keep me, the country you go
to is warmly occasioned by what I know.

78 B.C. Cossutia Remembers

Little is known of Cossutia after her rejection, and her comments here are speculation only. But patrician women were not Victorian misses. They received a sound education, and exercised much independence in and out of marriage — a fact lamented by Rome's moralists who saw paterfamilias authority undermined by women's increasing love of wealth, pleasure and intrigue.

Farewell for the Present

Farewell for the present, Pompeius called
Magnus and wisely. In many walled
cities of Asia the people wait
impatient with riches for your estate.
Fair winds, swift voyage, but do not gloat
too much on appointment. They turn their coat,
Tribunes and Senate. I would not count
for favours to come to great amount.
But your friends I hope you will bear in mind,
our counsel to you, and each month find
intelligence to make a helpful sum
to act on, or not, when the time is come.
The Senate will exhort you make an end of wars,
for which they have reasons, as you have yours.
Also you'll note that the tax farming offers
are not now for Crassus but the general coffers.
The which we agree with, and have no positions,
on the check-board, of course, of your conditions.
No, nothing at all. Your Crassus mopes
but works away manfully, smiles and hopes.

65 B.C. Letter from Crassus

Caesar now became the protégé of the enormously wealthy Crassus, whose money made him Censor, Curule Aedile and then Pontifex Maximus — for none of which Caesar had the necessary attributes of age and distinguished service. Pompey meanwhile, having cleared the Mediterranean of pirates, was nominated for overall command in the Mithridatic Wars, an appointment Caesar and Crassus supported, seeing opportunities for themselves when Rome's first citizen was abroad.

Epistle: Mark Antony to Catullus

Have done, Catullus, it is the same
rank tomfoolery. She will not hear, blames
you, friends, for her mean ration
of praise and courtiers in the fashion
of traipsing about in these affections. Please
descant in private on vanities.
She knows, and we know, only that the step grows
heavier, the breasts flabbier, the years show.
Stop then, and walk, will you? With arms bare
from their stolas, the hips winkling and where
there is dancing before, like a taper bent,
the body will flare up, curled and spent.
Step forward or no? You are a fool,
my dear fellow, then — worse than that — stool-
pigeon, lickspittle, with turned-in feet
to be for her grist such paltry meat.
Above all, I beg you, put down those papers, I
will not hear, nor wish to. Try
as I might and resolve to, I shall not tire
of a Clodia abundant in her desire.

55 B.C. Dum Vivimus Vivamus

Clodia, the notorious sister of the equally notorious Publius Clodius, was famous for her looks and flagrant infidelities. Her liaison with Catullus brought poet and politician into close association. Catullus disapproved of Caesar's activities and lampooned him in scurrilous verses. Caesar invited the poet to dinner. Clodia had many lovers, and for a while took up with Caesar's lieutenant, the roistering Mark Antony.

Gaul Risings

The rain, and its endlessness on leaves
mouldering, on bracken. Our passage weaves
through quagmire and shadow — twin parent-hoods
of scouting and stopping in these shrouded woods.
Difficult and dangerous the foraging, earns
nothing for cooking and little burns
but lengthily smoulders, cackles, spits
a small thread of venom that puffs and flits
blue and widening through clearings that,
opening out northwards, go on to flat-
lands and marshlands that daylight finds
haggard as men in their several minds
on waking, to wonder, to brood on, with
nothing to look at, for which to live.
Chain mail grows rusty, the broken nights
are vivid with presences, half-veiled frights.
Still I must hold them: a trundling conundrum
towards their Fortuna which may not come.
The land set apart they shall call their own,
building a patrimony, stone by stone.

53 B.C. Gaul Risings

Caesar generally wintered in north Italy, where he could keep in touch with Roman politics. But the commanders he left behind in Gaul had a hard time keeping order. The Belgic tribes had submitted, but were not content under Roman administration. Frequently they resisted the tax demands, suffered reprisals, and then rose in further revolt.

Vercingetorix

Remember Avaricum: so many dead,
the thousands on thousands you armed and led
through countryside ravaged? Wide miles around
you were backwards hunted: dispatched, drowned.
It is not wise, ever, to make your war
on the soldierly Romans, who bring you law,
settlement, containment — counted men
to the extent you meet us at length again
in a country rich, without frontiers, where
prospects at evening are free as air:
a hint of fragrance after heavy labour
that we may sometimes sense and slowly savour.
Otherwise, what? Dark woods, still damp
morning and evening. And a green-turf camp,
where the smoke curls, the pigs mill, and every man
is a hirsute monster, a loathsome Pan
without pipings or music? No Bacchanal swirl,
no laughter, fervour, but a blear-eyed girl
who looks from the summer shimmer of blood
to the spreading acres of winter mud.

52 B.C. Avaricum

Caesar took Vercingetorix's camp at Avaricum (Bourges) after a long siege in a country stripped bare by scorched earth policies of the Gauls. By Caesar's reckoning, only some 800 of the 40,000 defenders escaped with their lives, many being pursued through the surrounding swamp.

Cossutia

So little, Cossutia, I have known
of sun-warmed evenings when the stone
is full of the quiet-mouldering smells
that gather like midges at country wells;
when long day's done for, rested, when
the snow-hung fields bloom green again,
maize ripens, grapes deepen, and all around
is the air now humming, a joyful sound.
So we should have lived, or not at all.
Why did you let your small hands fall?
Not hold me once, demand a cause?
You silent turned and went indoors.
Why, my dearest, my own Cossutia,
was it likely I'd refuse you?
What was wanting in those warm brown eyes
that I'd continue with such lies?
Believe me Cossutia, I am a man
accustomed to sorrow, to hardship, can
remember its triumphs, its failures, cost
on tables I gamed at, the friendships lost.

50 B.C. In Memoriam Cossutia

There is no evidence that Caesar ever hankered after a quieter life, or that he regretted his marriage to Cornelia. She was the first of three wives — the others being Pompeia and Calpurnia. To all three he was much attached, although engaged continually in scandalous affairs. Nonetheless, there may have been times when this most active and hard-headed of men reflected on his life and its alternatives — particularly in 50 B.C. when he faced prosecution for exceeding orders in Gaul. His decision was to cross the Rubicon and launch the Civil War.

Death Throes of the Republic

Thapsus was frightful. Pompey's sons
rushed at us, roaring, and with dogged runs
tore at our standards, detachments, supplies:
a vast pool of horror when to our eyes
rose heavings of bodies and bodies downed,
heads lopped off, arms, and the slimy ground
churned with wet flesh, as stomachs with sound
high-pitched and stilling, that well-nigh drowned
our sturdiest soldiers. The blood as rain
fell now as furies hacked on in pain.
The human only anathema
to these now fighting with all hope far.
Then to the worst: Corduba's plain
bleached from the winter and the wind's stain:
battalions assembled like stiff stands of wheat
were broken, discoloured and in retreat.
I ordered them counted. There were thousands dead.
Thousands upon thousands of high names bled
of lifeblood in carnage of all Rome bore:
I beg of the gods that there be no more!

46-45 B.C. Last Battles

Caesar fought hard campaigns against Pompey's supporters in north Africa (Thapsus) and Spain (Munda). At Thapsus in 46 B.C. he defeated Labienus and Metellus Scipio, returning to Rome in July to become Dictator for ten years and start his calendar reforms. The following year he defeated Gnaeus Pompeius the Younger and Labienus at Munda — the most savage and dangerous battle in his career — and returned once more to Rome, where he continued with his reforms and was made Dictator for Life.

Postscript

My patrimony: Caesar. The name I bear
is noble, accomplished and will outwear
all who come after, though each man dare
to build and still further in the high fields of air.
Asia spawns cities in their ceaseless sprawl
as Goths have their forests. And both, and all
were subject to legions. In the eagle's fall
like Jove I had mastery, a world in thrall.
If words out of togas may astound the days
even to the heart's most inward blaze,
they drift to amusement, to suspect praise,
as stoaes are empty in the midday haze.
He who would rule must encircle with long
filaments to hold the unsteady throng
of poor and ambitious. Not by right or wrong,
but ambition, that only, shall he tame the strong.
Writing's as dust, but the cities rise
marbled and bustling to astonished eyes:
Let them look onward, and ever prize
the purple enfolded in Roman skies.

Postscript

Caius Octavius arrived in Brindisi within weeks of his great uncle's death, and by great political cunning succeeded in forming a second triumvirate with Antony and Lepidus. The conspirators were defeated at Philippi in 42 B.C., and Rome slowly turned against Antony, the clash culminating in the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C. and the suicides of Antony and Cleopatra a year later. As Byzantium, the Roman Empire lasted another fourteen centuries, the title Caesar continuing till modern times in Tsar, Kaiser and Shah.

CHILDHOOD JOURNEYS: NUTCRACKER

What A Joy

Oh, what a joy this is: now, children, hold
on tightly through these drifts of smoke: we pass
the mining towns that glimmer through the cold,
but in the summertime are lost to grass.

Here the patriarch and bearded clerics
immerse themselves in gold-leafed holy books.
There is Baku of a thousand derricks
alive and bristling with its gangland crooks.

Here we pass the rushing rivers, thick
with boulders under Asia's blue-eyed vault.
Now dawdling on the Darya we pick
our way through buttercups to rustic halt.

Oysters, caviar, bejewelled eggs;
monasteries and churches, onion domes:
the land of boyars, khans and atabegs
requires that hovels serve as peasants' homes.

Grand St Petersburg subdues the Baltic:
domes and palaces on marbled streets.
Vladivostoc, in the all-too-Nordic
blue Pacific, has its whaling fleets.

Princess Orlova has a chill, poor
creature, stays at home: the doorman snores.
And driven out from village barn and store
the children sleep together out of doors.

That's all there is, this soil, this sky, the rain
that falls in the springtime, or as snow.
The wind's monotony and greyness stain
the steppes as far as ever steppelands go.

All that's past is but a puff of air
within the mysteries you'll never reach,
yet still are promises to hold you there.
Beware, my little ones, what grown-ups teach.

My name is Drosselmeyer, cabinetmaker,
craftsman extraordinary, court magician.
I am the purveyor of dreams and the fabricator
of all that you could wish for. Children listen

It's more lamentable than you can know,
this world. Nor is the toy the thing it seems.
The window thickens with its clotted snow
that's white as paper, and it folds in reams.

What would you write there? Tell me. I can see
into the souls of children. I have hidden sight.
Think into yourself and tell me. You can be
anyone you want for this enchanted night.

Anyone at all. You choose. The midnight hour
will soon be welcomed as the Christmas tree.
But in this dining room you'll note a flower
will mark each placing set for grown-up's tea.

You hear them chattering. What do they say?
Mere empty, casual things, as you will soon.
What do they know then? Nothing. Children, pay
attention, if you please, to fork and spoon.

Paint the Picture

Paint the picture as you can:
Stalin was a wicked man:
Controlled the papers, every lie:
said his policies were doing well.
One by one, the kulaks die:
they cannot furnish, cannot sell
what the party claims they should.

In field and hedgerow, in the shaded wood
the bones poke through, the stomachs bloat.
Now no one hoards and no one saves
a single cow or pig or goat.
Hardly strength to dig the graves,
but all are comrades, all are freight
in red October's party state.

Close your eyes, dear children, all you dream
of mother Russia, of the peopled land
of serfs and boyars and its fools can seem
a long way off unless you understand

that with your comrades you are marching on
beyond where sunlight floods the steppe.
It is your heritage when all is gone,
a brave new continent that's step in step.

The future thickens, hardens. Though you gaze
on hurt and disappointment, all delay
will be prohibited: the sun's last rays
must rise tomorrow on a better day.

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Home For Us

Enough of vision's changing light,
the lies diminish and condemn:
the promised land is out of sight:
the dark brown loam is tired of them.

One by one the lights come on
in streets of gaunt industrial cities:
beside some local Rubicon
the young decide their destinies.

The quiet of evening and the loss
of brightness as there drift across
the wastes of tundra and of taiga,
the ever-falling snow that haunts
the mink and bear and arctic tiger,
where the Volga eddies out and flaunts

itself in staging post and Cossack town
in undone miles of silver coils,
where seeping out, by slow degrees,
the thickening water softens soils
in fields, in gardens, through the trees:
till the hoar frost reaches skies
and the sturgeon, spawning, dies.

Birch and alder, then the fir-tree screens
the streams now tumbling into deep ravines.
High up, the Urals like an unclothed breast
displays bravado in each reddened slope,
and though the glittering morning come to rest
as dull galena in its mineral stope,
forever toiling up the winding path
beneath the head-frame where the tailings spill
as quiet as minnows in the crystal rivers:

a glint of gold and green and all is still.
A wad of sound, the wind: the aspen shivers,
and of a sudden through the lands of Rus
there's hope from exile and a home for us.

IMAGINARY JOURNEYS

Flanders

Such are the poppy realms of the astonished dead,
these permeable rich uplands of the wheat-clad Chalk.
Winds stir each steely, perforated seed-pod head
but only whiffs of barrages and mortars talk.

No fumes of long forgetfulness, no sensual charms,
Persephone reborn or Ceres' ripening care.
Nothing, an emptiness in which a sea of arms
excoriates the landscape and, waving, showers the air

with fierce expostulations: how it should have been
beneath a long and drowsy empire's spending spree:
good food, sound sleep, an outdoor life lived clean
alike in freckled comradeship and decency.

But when from their pressed sleep these millions wake — ah then,
what shall we say to these deceived, much purposed men?

Tartar Lands

Hard ground will make hard lives, and here this Viking stock
have bent their hurt to husbandry. With steel-girt arms
they laboured at stolidity until the rock
became enfiefed in cumulous and storm-cropped farms.

And summer already settled on these northern lands:
blue skies for days on end and then the sudden rain,
bluntly emblematic as their own brass bands,
trooped out each coloured Sunday, and revoked again.

In these tough Pennine Hills were all the empires fought
for gold and fabled lineage from their blood-line lord:
in journeys ever eastward to the great khan's court
go thoughts on wind-horsed steppe-lands of the Golden Horde.

From such stockades of rugged, ever-rained-on grit
were built their barns and cottages, all inward lit.

Deciduous Forests

The rivers glut with their delighted shoals of fish,
the wary fox and whiskered rodent fall to snare.
All around us welcoming and every wish
granted by encompassing and kindly air.

We trail on up high hills and tall bluffs cautiously
and blaze our progress, show in lines of milky quartz
detritus the meridians we need to see
to navigate our perilous and dogged course.

Across the rocks and scree-falls and attending clouds
that drench at times with sunlight, or with casual rain,
we go on, camp and find whatever darkness shrouds
these hinterlands with mystery will also stain

blue sky, the stalwart trees, and blossoming cumulous,
in a spring that's suddenly profuse and good to us.

Gobi Desert

Perpetual are the silences in these vast lands
of shimmering distances that merge with mountain wall.
In gold a snake uncoils across the heat-filmed sands,
and the tessellated lizard is not heard at all.

Ever the wind, incorruptible, and white caliche
in towering mesa stumps of variegated clays,
deliquescent and ferruginous, beyond the reach
of wind-plucked vulture or of any temperate days.

Beyond such mirages there rise the sun-draped peaks,
their clouds collecting with the quietness the moon has.
Shadowed caries over which the thunder speaks
of mutinous assignations, or as good as.

From heat that splutters into canticles of fire
to dust that will as softly and at length expire.

Voyage of the Bounty

He had his quadrant, maps, experience, this half-deranged and sour-tongued man we did not like. Lieutenant still, and therefore master here: however far we ranged, we would be oar-pursuant bent upon his will.

The waves brimmed clear about us. In the buoyant sway that lifted men and officers, the luckless ones, we watched the wavering depths that bore us day on day across the mackerel-variegated, deep sea runs.

Life kept us company. The flying fish in shoals fell iridescent round us, and a fin or two broke warily with danger. There were long patrols of sea-birds, solemn falls of chattering, that hid our view of reefs and cannibals and rumoured ill-content but soon to feature where our famous captain went.

Tien Shan

Like conifers in tented splendour, where no one wise
enough to parley with its dragon spirits goes:
such is the draped Tien Shan beneath its shrouded skies:
sheer pyramids of ice, where every danger shows.

Well known to travellers who took the northern silk
trade route as home to sorcerers and celestial snows:
placatory, they set out offerings of milk
beside the much-wreathed trees and cairns, for nothing blows

so fell with foul intentions as fierce winds that lift
the boulders clean off the higher slopes, to bowl them down
the long green valleys here, where sun and clouds must shift
between a fraught benevolence and icy frown.

But yet the same we venture on, and feel ignite
the verdant spring that bruises our bewildered sight.