



# A Book of Songs

colin john holcombe

Ocaso Press 2008

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by Colin John Holcombe

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# Youth

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

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

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

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

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

## Tangled in her Arms

From all day tangled in her arms  
I fought my passage there,  
and felt that heady perfume in the hour was  
dropping from the air.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My lovely, high, my distant one,  
let down your golden hair,  
so all I finally remember is  
the sunlight in the air.

# Without Consequence

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

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

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

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



## My Parents Both

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

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

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

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

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

## Coppelia Café

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

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

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

## The Brightly Woven Braid

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

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

The shadows on the arms that fill  
their supple creases through the skin:  
what is it those eyes fulfil,  
or see in darkneses within?

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Fabulous Night

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

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

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

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

# The Moon in Heaven

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

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

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

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

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

## It Was Not Well

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

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

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

*Whatever pursued us . . .*

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

*Whatever pursued us . . .*

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

*Whatever pursued us . . .*

As it was first, so  
I would have it again,  
for all you won't know  
how fickle are men.

*Whatever pursued us . . .*

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

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

## All Day Long

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

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

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



## Your Tune

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

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

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

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

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

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

# They Grew Up Too

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Little Girl

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

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

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

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

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

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

So dance imperiously. The race  
goes not to modesty at all,  
and if your daughters can hereafter  
stem no part of careless laughter  
not in fine-cut jewels or pearl,

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

## O My Love

### One

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

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

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

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

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

### Two

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

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

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

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

### Three

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

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

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

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

#### Four

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

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

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

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



## Five

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

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

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

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

# Let No Memories Conspire

Let no memories conspire,  
lay by that distant tune;  
for all its elixir and remembered fire,  
shut out the radiant moon!

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

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

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

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

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

## Seeing

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

## Going Home

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

The reckless declarations, summer balls,  
the urge of youth held in by corseting,  
the body's crimped recalcitrance in silks  
embroidering the cold breasts — all lie  
beyond entitlement on that small, pinched face.

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

# St Pauls

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

What there might have wavered on that tall and peopled shore  
you did not acknowledge, indeed you shut the door.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## I Watch Each Measured Step

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Family Counsel

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

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

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

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

# For You the Most Missed

## One

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

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

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

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

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

## Two

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

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

## Three

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

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

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

## Four

How is that true? The years lift away.  
Estranged from our kinsfolk at end of day  
we count up the cost and take for pay  
life itself as best we may.  
All in the future: mere straws in the wind.  
You stand in the acres of sepia hills  
half lost in the haystacks, in foliage, twinned  
with the first breath of summer as it warms and fills

The woods and high pastures. Soft, ragged explosion  
of cumulus the length of the rain-torn sky.  
Rough ways, footways, paths not chosen  
by farmer, grazier whose men stood by  
from counting the quota of live-stock measures:  
oblivious of all you raced far over  
the wheat-lands and hedgerows to reach the treasures  
of slow-worm and bird's nest and four-leaf clover.

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

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

## Five

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Six

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

where have you hidden my childhood away?

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

## Seven

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

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

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



a moment only, who hardly cared.

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

## Eight

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

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

But then you were happy. And never his whim  
to end it in silence or heartlessness:  
*If someone waste time that time wastes him.*  
No one drudged harder and into less.  
Sometimes I think as years closed in  
of him counting the prospects, for us providing

a home, a future as both wore thin,  
shunted off in some railway siding.

## Nine

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

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

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

## Ten

Lastly you moved to the county which,  
her marriage dissolved, your mother went.  
Was that mere chance, or did you switch  
to prospects over the discontent?  
Yes, Kent was quiet and prosperous,

retaining thereby its small-town way,  
yet still would my father's abacus  
count up the words he couldn't say.

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

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

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

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

## Pottering About

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

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

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

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

# Marya

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For you our thoughts were visions: for me they leant upon  
emptinesses at midday, on heat without substance.

The wind whirrs across the fields, and what it brings to us  
is only what we dreamt of, what you and I put in.

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

## Eight Small Notes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## As If Immemorially

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

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

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

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

## Afterwards

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

# A Victorian Interlude

Narrator:

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

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

Bill:

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

Kate:

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

Narrator:

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

Hubert:

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

tells me that our future is assured, this playtime venture, as I call it, is capital to start. Was very kind, I told her. And my thanks to Briggs. However, I did make bold enough to wonder whether London had not given what we both had wanted: she her society and I my theatre column. She says she has grown up. It's different. She is happy. In a rough-necked country, then, I asked her, raw, that won't be tamed? No answer. So speak to Saunders, would you? I imagine anywhere would suit us at the present.

Narrator:

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

Bill:

Big happenings in this place, Frank. Our friend has snuffed it. So long, highness. No great loss, but something strange I reckon. We had a bushfire here, a nasty little bleeder, that passed us in the end, but awful close. Fair put the wind up me, I'll tell you, but not his nibs: Oh no, he hitches horses when the fire was on us, the silly bugger. Of course they bolted. Afterwards we found him on the ground, looking strange. And dead all right. I'd say the missus took it pretty well. she cried a bit, picked him up and shook him, stared

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

Kate:

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

Narrator:

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

## This Small Sketch of You

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



# September

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

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

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

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

## The Teashop Meeting

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

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

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

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

If something then of charity was in  
that hour, laying ahead as though in heaven,  
nothing was in the watermarks of what  
they chose: the radiance, inverted, that was lost.

## Country Folk

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## How Middle-Aged We Are, Dear Lord

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Dead Weights

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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