

A nighttime photograph of a city street. In the foreground, two large umbrellas are open: a purple one on the left and a bright yellow one on the right. The background shows a building with a large archway, through which a street scene is visible. The scene is illuminated by streetlights and the lights of a building in the distance, creating a warm, atmospheric glow. The overall composition is framed by a thin yellow border.

The Italian Affair

C. John Holcombe

Ocaso Press 2008

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THE ITALIAN AFFAIR

One

We start. This opening coda introduces
a fitful world of characters who, dance
or dawdle, still fall over, make excuses:
'her, the other fool, mere happenstance.'
Or so it seems in reminiscence: time
that was so prodigal, so cosseting,
takes no more care of us than midnight's chime
at old year's ending changes anything.
(Not an image, that, to shed much light,
but here we call for coats and bid goodnight.)

So to our story, which has started well.
There is no better way, as you'll agree,
than have whole days together's work compel
these two still touring on in Italy
for churches, galleries, good food and space
to stop and think about each other, let
the unmapped evening hold their pulse's race
to what might happen after dinner. Yet
that passed, then drinks, without sulk or glooms,
it was a smile and kiss to separate rooms.

You say that's sad. No doubt it is, but I
in looking backwards now am not so sure.
Events have their denouements, and if they lie
as dead as dodos then a short downpour
of hurt or hope makes good the wait. Be
a little patient, therefore: nothing's certain.

The world's a pantomime, a comedy
in making, doubtless. If you find the curtain
ups and downs distracting, so do I —
and will roundly say so, by and by.

If only Nicholas and Clare were fated:
for she was mischievous, and chic, and pretty,
and he, large-boned and handsome, inundated
with gifts his friends thought devastating. Witty
he was, good-natured, and was clever. What more
could be expected? Openness, I think:
she could not fathom keenness there or not.
And he, when put to it, from words would shrink.
Odd, wasn't it, so kept apart
as she by diffidence and he her heart?

Yet Nicholas was settled, half content,
and if a womaniser then discreet —
a man about who everywhere was lent
by papsies knowing papsies in his street.
It was a life combed out, of tidy ends,
of monthly supper dates with someone new,
of Sunday gossip with convivial friends.
And by and large, if asked, he'd take the view
however lives be dubbed (or proved) quixotic
they grow by daily dosage more hypnotic.

I've missed Nick's essence, which I doubt
has much to do with character or looks.
He was — how can I put it? — round about.
The wise, the cognoscenti, plump for books
where all's set down, is plain, and cannot shift
one reading to another. Only we
change, or claim to, have horizons lift
over the raw, hard ground of husbandry.
So difficult, of course, is navigation,
when it's 'all change here' at every station.

But how in Italy they loved their calls!
Each house or gallery brought something new.
The owners walking through their patterned halls
would point out lineages, trace who was who.
There breathed around them such a sense of place
in features that the generations linked
and filled out graciously each three-foot space.
A pity therefore (seems a poor instinct)
that after in *locande* they mislaid
the smiling overtures so promptly made.

Expected, as I've said. I haven't? Yes,
well, with Clare you see, so good at bluffing
(required for socializing, as for chess)
you'd think that Nicholas was up to nothing.
But no, he was an art historian, in part,
a very small part at the present, but
with 'Introductions to Rococo Art:
The Italian Legacy' his bid to cut
a path to independence, reputation
beyond the art-world's hackneyed recitation,

there could be something to him. We shall see,
and hope from haute couture that we've called Clare:
a bimbo of all bimbos, pedigree
straight out of Ola, Cosmo, anywhere
where well-placed highlight and soft focus throw a
trace of one-off on the identikit
of Mayfair's teeny-bopping party-goer.
If there is catch-all likeness she was it.
You don't agree? You should. They do exist,
asparas living off their charm and wits.

A final point I'd make before we move
on now, which is a call for moderation.
Many of you I know will not approve
of high-flown modishness or affectation.
You're right, of course, but wouldn't office, shop,
the place you work at, still return your voice
if need for all attendance there would stop?
Do not alternatives retread the choice?
Perhaps not everyone leads simple lives,
or, having made a hash of it, survives.

There are the high wire acrobats who hurl
all their slim, svelte beauty out, and fall
in a heap therefrom at some slight girl
who really didn't want their man at all.
Accept the someone who having got her
reins in the high step and the swirl of carriage,
or bid for higher odds and do the rotter?
Retire and end up with a worked-at marriage?
Each in their falling is much talked on —
a day or two at most, and then they're gone.

Not that Clare was flitting anywhere for now
but round the bogus restaurant circuits — raising
glasses, eyebrows, and a good old row
because, trust her, she'd only stoop to praising
the sorts of half-baked cuisine she believed in.
For what? A weekly column — not much really,
but good for showbiz junketings and even
info sometimes — in a high street freebie.
So there you are, then: it is not denied
that Clare was flighty but at least she tried.

Yet what her thoughts were really, Heaven knows.
For no one is it easy, truly so,
to judge by circumstance, from clothes suppose
the real proprieties are *comme il faut*.
The root in all of us is hidden: there
are our trapdoors into direst facts.
In short we are dark continents, and Clare
in all good conscience now must hide her tracks.
Itinerary over, she stopped off in Rome,
while Nicholas thoughtfully and slowly motored home.

And there it ended. He was busy, wrote
occasionally, got no reply. She
was in Geneva, studying, afloat,
friends said, but weighing things more seriously.
“The which she has to”, they would add and look
at Nick with menaces, which he found odd.
No matter, he had much to do. His book
was ambling on as usual, badly shod.
The post arriving brought the usual ills —
the at-home Christmases and heating bills.

Two

The months move on. To April, which is spring
except that in these wind-warped northern lands
it's late the full-leaf days begin and bring
Macs and Morris dancers, maypole bands —
anything if amateur and out
of sorts and idiotic: things begotten
by village tediousness on village lout,
all point of it now lost and quite forgotten.
Unkind? There's elegance, there's outward show?
Well, stroll through Hackney, say, and then you'll know.

The Roman settlers did not prize these coasts:
'A sullen and revengeful people, given
to charioteering and to idle boasts' —
so said one Dio Cassius driven
wild by thinking of the Apennine
Hills he'd left, his homesteads, fields where air
so clear, intoxicating, so like wine,
would celebrate the poorest cottage fare.
How far from that this endless, day on day
of rain on wattle and on dull brown clay.

No doubt we are a different race — whence
comes our genius for muddling through —
genius of course as in the Roman sense
of rough-hewn features on a log or two;
in form quite ludicrous, and as crudely written
As, 'Pay, ye Gods, for everything you get!'
To a world far off and different, wholly smitten,
belongs what Nicholas cannot forget:
the bubbling laughter from a sunlit head,
the rash ingenuousness of what he'd said.

"More monographs, more galleries! You planned
this whole caboodle, didn't you? That book
means more to you than anything first hand.
No pedigree, no attribution: Nick won't look."

"Do more than look, I tell you, given room
to celebrate this newest boon companion:
great looks and stylishness and fun, with whom
of course he knows he must not try it on."

Well, not bad. But our confederate
back home has got herself a whole hour late,

So far. Suppose the feckless did not come?
The note had ended with a sprawled-out kiss
but nothing further or conciliatory — rum
he thought if recompense for hopes once his,
for days together on her spending sprees,
the best of company, as he had said,
and tried moreover very hard to please —
at which she'd smiled and half inclined her head.
A wonder, wasn't it, in that brilliant weather
that one or both of them were kept to tether?

He'd buffed it up a bit but hadn't lied:
a first-rate reputation that was earned.
Inside the Georgian frontage, dignified,
a committedness one slowly learnt.
And much to notice if she took the stairs —
the prints, enamelled nameplates polished flat,
stucco ceilings, wood panellings and chairs
set out at intervals where no one sat.
He wondered what she'd make of it, this trade
of gentleman in residence, unpaid.

The telephone then rang. "Yes. Good. Of course!"

He felt delighted, not to say light headed,
to hear the voices mounting, then took pause:
was one condensing into what he dreaded?

It was. The unacknowledged girlfriend-sister:
L in forthright fashion and no doubt bloused
in some concoction of pale beige or bistre
that not gulag inmate would have roused.

Uncanny, at the moment Clare arrived:
the day, good to begin with, now nose-dived.

No point in rubbishing Laurina who
was generous and a gentle creature.

A soft and puggish face, whose small eyes, blue,
seemed to follow you about and feature
in the what you hadn't planned to do.

One of the great gregarious who seem
to count a group without them one too few.

But if it's flattering for self-esteem
too much is tedious, and Nick's resistance
increased, of course, with her hangdog persistence.

It's true: she was no mannequin, not really,
but well established on the physical
with such embellishments she would have dearly
loved to have gone over as the femme fatale.
Now that was honest, wasn't it? and felt
throughout the solemn bottom and the thighs.
But still that fullness wasn't all it spelt.
One felt the warm good sense in her small lies,
astute performances which, like perfume,
fill out to kindness the coldest room.

But. No matter how the list was made
Laurina's chosen outfit was the sweater.
Just ring the cape and corduroy brigade,
Nick thought, to have 'The Guardian' to the letter.
That clothes might, by their character, disclose
or hint at through the cloth, or length of hem,
things inherent more than outward show
is not attributable to her or them.
Yes, Islington's least publicized event
is L out shopping in her large bell-tent.

Since few of us do much for holy writ
I won't say more but let the good decide.
Only it's known, I think, for couples split
with vehemence previously to not divide
but keep, amoeba-like, a fluid hold
on "odd ways that the dear thing does his sums."
Why not? It's hard to go back into the cold,
go back to salads, yoga, and to chums.
Even on summer evenings, God knows,
it's cold the bank whereon the wild thyme blows.

Too late for that or anything when Clare
has run up, stopped, stepped back and flung
a bangled, long, bronzed arm to Nick. Their
friendship back upon an upper rung,
he noted, as bending, "Bella, Signorina,"
he said beside a disapproving L.
She looked as friendly as his old two-seater
reclaimed, with hood down, from some rainy spell.
"How nice, etc. . . So then, what's arranged?"
"Hopeless isn't it? He hasn't changed."

No doubt he saw the danger, but what to do?

There was no help for it, he had to go.

Boxing clever now might see him through

or failing that, he thought, just lying low.

But no. They snared him with an attribution,

both. "Nicky, dearest, say you'll do it."

"Would make a difference, major contribution. . ."

His face was like his pudding, dull grey suet,

his thoughts quite biblical, of Ruth and corn —

that's two ways tipped, in trouble and in pawn.

"You know they would, and Bonham's; they're not bad . . .

and, don't you see, like this it won't appear

she's selling. . . at the party. . . don't be mad. . .

You'll love the building, really. . . Fitz's a dear.

That's afterwards, and we can call the city. . .

Why not Laurina? Nick can take you. Oh,

out of town again, well, that's a pity. . .

So what about it, Nicky, shall we go?"

He looked at her, perplexed and conscience-tossed —

so mischievous, so pretty — and was lost.

Three

They drove past terraces where each, with garden,
had grown to palisades of glittering light.

They watched the outlines of the buildings harden,
the brickwork massing into marcasite.

They stopped at Sloane Street where, immense
and restless over them, the tent of leaves
rose far above in green-spread innocence
and lamp-lit promises that none believes.

Then off, past rows of windows, dark, wide-eyed,
where Clare stayed strangely silent all the ride

But thought of Italy, another June.

the streets so quiet, calyxed, quattrocento:
white pavilions, windowed, where the moon
flashed huge and intermittent. More than meant to,
much, much more, despite the party and this
strange creature he was caught with — “half in love”
so were they really? — she must reminisce.

At last Nick's thrown the roof back and, above,
the trees had put their leaves up, and the night
hung out its banners of the dark and bright.

They got to Kensington or close on that:
a red-bricked leasehold in its own small plot —
a charming pied-à-terre with diplomat
credentials Maskall's called it: guests might not.
But still, it's pretty, the garden fronted
with friends and families now new-acquainted.
A scene quite from an aquatint, if blunted
somewhat by the alarm-bells, large, red-painted.
The car once parked, our two go through and in.
A large ex-guardsman gives a toothy grin.

The hostess spots and greets them, introduces
the such of nearby couples they don't know.
It is the old-style custom which induces
necessarily some chat to flow.
For make your atmosphere and that's the link,
no matter who they are, or phobe or phil.
Strange creations, parties, which will sink
centre-inwards at a whiff of chill:
the piled-up soufflé of a sudden gapes
and what was nascent fellowship escapes.

But here it's forward and right friendly, as
befits a party or the guests won't stay.
A curious hubbub, set to modern jazz
of people adding to a well-bred fray
of shoving, dancing, leaving, turning round
bowed down with drinks, friends, plates and nibbles.
Much talk of holidays, and a profound
distrust of ministers, their weaves and dribbles.
Some collared cronies, wives, one girl the waiter,
which made her partner rather hate her.

And here was Nicholas, though not with Clare.
The talked-of painting was an imitation.
He had no doubts about it, didn't care
for Mrs. Fitz's feelings, approbation,
guests, etc. Loud and adamant he was
the Fragonard of '64, the Villa
D' Este as they're known was not. . . because
as he so patiently explained. . . until a
wound up, exasperated, nettled hostess
found some other guests she ought to notice.

A gross stupidity by Nicholas!

The group around dispersed and he was left
idly as the ancient mariner to cross
the animated, dancing whirl and weft,
which seemed a nothing now that Clare had fled.
Where to? He didn't know. Not home — the car
was there, the wrap. He should have left, instead
of doing things that made it more bizarre.
He wandered around feeling somehow slighted:
isolated, cold-shouldered, uninvited.

One may, indeed one does, go unescorted,
but just how single is the one to stay?
Even to have flirted, danced, disported
oneself with half the plainer girls won't pay
come midnight in the garden, at the droop,
when people cluster, moth-like in the cool
to say of us, "No, not so cock-a-hoop
now is he? Still, it's her, the little fool. . ."
So in these circumstances Clare's slim being
went not unnoticed in the overseeing.

Yet what brought Edward to alight on Clare?
Or Clare in Edward to divine a mate?
Well, from her nesting place upon the stair
she watched fool Nicholas, and in some state
tripped down too quickly and caught heels in dress.
Their two eyes met. He smiled, untangled her.
Her breath, the hand on shoulder, the distress
and smile that made their troubled thoughts concur.
A social climber would have rolled in clover:
the girl's expensiveness was signed all over.

Which wasn't Eddie's act at any price.
The county manners would have balked at that.
He was quite simply what the girls call nice,
the few, that is, who know just what it's at.
All too vague, agreed, but you would know
as soon as meeting him what vogue words meant.
There were strong features: blunt, a buffalo
with flair and maybe trace of insolence:
animal, but with a polished grace;
perspicacious, and an open face.

First Edward spoke, and stopped. Then so did Clare.
They looked around, but there was no one there.
You understand: on meeting their first care
was how to cultivate a casual air,
though few observing would be taken in.
Each watched the other, shifting odd degrees
so that the nonchalance wore somewhat thin,
as is the trouble with parentheses.
Poor souls! Gone overboard or wrecked on isles
far from any stratagem or wiles.

She liked his tousled awkwardness and touch
of unfeigned shyness in the way he stood.
Also the dominating toughness, much
reminding in its resonance of wood.
Of course she felt these more than thought —
except the voice. It registered that each
strong and vibrant ending of it caught
her quivering with matters out of reach.
Something there was that stalked behind the sound
and in her mind she turned this round and round.

And Edward was enamoured most because
of how the supple anglepoise beneath
the wealth of chiffon thinned to limbs. She was
so trim from toenails to the little teeth.
A long smooth jaw-line and a nose that dropped
into the rich, dark madder of the lips,
two ponded crescents . . . Then the heart-beat stopped,
and all before was plunged into eclipse.
Yet is there harm that people, when they meet,
should itemize, lovingly, the balance sheet?

For her quite vexing since he wasn't tall:
the hair was light, though, soft, she saw
that on the hands it hardly showed at all.
Then on of course she knew he'd like her more
with not that hemline and that eye line blue.
Which was a pity, but, by dint of stare,
the sustained, electrocuting "I like you"
she recklessly blew up the pupils there,
when from her under-lids a hitherto
unnoticed luminary rose to view.

Four

It's time we put the properties away
and went home for the night. An hour to dawn,
that's all that's left our characters and they
in twos or otherwise have now withdrawn.
What bliss when dying inwardly one meets
the quiet welcome of an ordered room,
undressed, to slip between the crisp white sheets:
who cares at this point who is what with whom?
Therefore, to tell much more is not my purpose:
life's lamentable but not a circus.

I say this most advisedly because
you'll want to know, I hope, what happened. Well,
actually not much. All's as it was,
it seems, as far, indeed, as I can tell.
The characters kept active and July
rose glorious but then that sunburned month
ended muggy, overcast, the sky
a grey and superannuated sponge.
One week was promising, until, again,
our friend the herring-pond breezed in with rain.

Nicholas, the idle waster that he was,
got down at length to his last chapter.
The weather worried him the least because
he felt it rather circumscribed his captor.
He met her, once a week odd, otherwise
the girl was pretty damn mysterious —
not that he wanted to monopolize
her, naturally, and that was fatuous
or worse, but still the weekly dose of laughter
left him doubly importunate the day after.

Thank God the season now was hotting up.
From home or hols last travellers are back,
a touch reproachful and in truth hard up.
The nights were drawing in: in silvered black
was most of Kensington from six to seven,
when girls push bicycles, and smiles are met
by old companions with another leaven
of men, entanglements and change of set.
In this as constant as the moon is fickle,
which leaves us, often, in a pretty pickle.

August had gone, incendiary. September's out.
The rain-dressed mornings have a sharper bite.
The season of mists, misgivings and of doubt
has cleared for Nicholas wide miles to write.
For which he's none too grateful, though the studies
resound with fullness that his heart once had,
but now more quietly. Yes, no passion muddies:
against all sentiment he's iron-clad,
intending, rightfully, to disappoint
the damn-fool notions art may reappoint.

You knew, of course you knew that, and you know
the scholar's recompense for time and trouble
is not a monument with inner glow,
no whole-reflecting, iridescent bubble,
but dates, attributions, a phrase or two
that may just haunt us as we close the book.
There were some blemishes — a youthful view
and moralizings we can overlook —
but, on the whole, sound, at which Nick was pleased,
as well he might be, till his future sneezed,

As all too often happened. In our scene
the offbeat peccadilloes of our Nick
are not now spoken of, or much. He's been
for ages now the toothless lunatic.
But not so Edward, who is very busy
collating, annotating, airing views
enough to make his well-combed hair go frizzy.
No, not quite 'The Times' but 'Banking News'.
But then, whatever you might think of drones,
it's quite impeccably they manage tones.

Particularly when needed, as we'll see.

We come to party time (it's L's) once more,
but this time different, rather literary
and so to Nicholas a complete bore.

He hates the wretched business, suits who fill
the heads of hangers-on with mindless chatter.

No doubt they do, but since it takes some skill
to pass the empty off as pith and matter,
even to be diverting or different, let's not say
'The bill's in error' when we cannot pay.

And Clare? She's not, no, altogether right,
or that much easy with her Ed's replies,
which seemed more distant if not out of sight.
You'd think that with her wits she'd recognize
his feints and stratagems: but still the trends
are not that clearer when the thing's unwinding.
She knew for counsel she could count on friends
out shopping, lunching, spots of baby-minding.
They'd rally round, sent scouts — yes, soon would tell
if Edward was intending sail or sell.

Perhaps they can and will: I do not know.
For L the month was fabulous, she felt
at last the wheel of fortune, rickety and slow,
that all too often, if it stopped, misdealt,
had hit the jackpot squarely. The benefits?
At work appointment to a higher post
that pleased her mother ('yes, quite thrilled to bits').
plus recognition that her playing host
brought in from everywhere, for even Clare
could feel the strength of her arranging flair.

Unneeded duty-drinkies can be ghastly
and this one truly was the end. Our L,
the perpetrator of the launch, had vastly
over ordered. The ranks of Hironnelle
stood wanly on the tables piled with eats.
A few told stories that but spread the gloom.
We try to sparkle but the air defeats.
One notices how shabby is the room.
and worst, in this uncomfortable demise
in conversation, Nick must analyze

some hopeless sally into attribution
that quite misunderstood the term 'effete'.
No doubt it matters, but the retribution
from Nick was much too witty and complete.
Now, please, it does not pay to vilify
the hopes of other names or publishers
at friendly get-togethers: let faults lie
beyond the repertoire of rubbishers.
But still, maliciously, to fan the flame
of ignorance our Ed must add his name.

"Now Edward, you stay out of this. We've had enough of suchlike nonsense, specially yours."

Clare stopped, and whitened, had still more to add but heard the silence tightening, saw its claws entrap its author, who forgot his place.

"You're not including Nick, I take it, then?

What's this I'm in, you think, some three-horse race?

Why continually do you let these men play loose with their acquaintance? Just because it's hopeless for them, as it always was. . .?"

You think that cleared the air, that Clare saw Nick so much the happier for having tiffed?

You think? The girl was wildly choleric and even Nick looked dead-pan miffed.

"Why's everything you do just so cack-handed when all that's needed is to play along?

But that's too easy and you might be stranded with friends in waiting and be never wrong.

I warn you, Nicholas: just one more do like this disaster settles it with you."

Five

So fanfare out, you think, for Ed and Clare
before, quite obviously, they shifted horses,
with all the season's fallout in the air,
the passions following the autumn's courses?

Well, good idea, but no, actually: our pair
are still together, happily, and are
if anything more booked, and everywhere
stand host at parties, dinners, nightclub, bar.
You'd think it might be some half-brokered deal
that makes them more concerned to spin their wheel?

You may be right. Indeed the marionettes
go swiftly through their movements, but what has stopped
is heart-spring in the action. Hedged their bets,
or grown more sensible when hopes have flopped?

Your author does not know. He feels inside
there may be better days to come but, since
the last thing prized is honesty, they've dyed
their courtship in a new-belonging rinse.

But not our Nick: to him the girl's soft voices
float up with assignations and Rolls Royces.

Or so he dreams. On some days, when it's wet,
the box has nothing on, the friend's away,
the high spot of the evening being launderette
plus shopping and to clean the flat — OK,
on those days it is good to sit, hours deep
in words which fatten into substance, each
as inaccessible as no doubt sleep
resolves to entities our thoughts can't reach.
The jottings slowly as the coffee cools
impose their own fantastic, high-dive rules.

Immediately the room was dark and small.
Nick got up, put pen down, walked about.
This life of writer would not do at all.
He paused, pushed up the sash and half leaned out.
The mews behind were emptying, not a soul
made good the echo of his thoughts backstage.
He summoned up that famous self-control
to finish paragraph if not the page,
but stopped at summers gone, the little done,
how short the life of the historian.

Shade, imperceptibly, falls everywhere:
the office girls come later, do not walk
with quite that light step or that laden air:
the harebell, flower shed, is left a stalk.
No more they swirl round in their flounce of dresses
but come in boots, in jeans and pantyhose.
By five the evening, pearl-like, opalesces
and what was summer empties, fades and goes.
No, his time was over and a gibbous moon
now haunts the small, square casement of his room.

No doubt more telling reasons could be found
by Nick for staying booked and out of town.
But then one evening, late, our Ed called round
and walking none too steady would sit down.
"Clare is always on about you, wonders
why or what it is you hold against her."
Astonished, to avoid more downright blunders,
Nick's suggestion was a spot of dinner.
"Fact is we've broken up, and so, as such,
I really don't see Clare, you know, that much."

The turn of Nicholas to feel unstable.

"You know her well enough to just blow in . . .

your number's always unobtainable . . .

Of course you have this book, and how's that going?

I thought it would be, though I can't profess

to understand these matters really, unlike you

who have real talent there, or so Clare says.

I'm sorry for the last time. . . Will that do?"

The floor was given him, was his by rights,

and worse than ever his recurrent frights.

We give up freedom for the smallest feature —

a quirk of laugh, impishness, I don't know,

but each of you, dear reader, has a creature

now looking at him, yes, exactly so.

And even as you read you feel the gut

seize and tighten in the undertow.

No, not that she's not ordinary but

among a thousand others you would know.

Hear but her name or place half-spoken

and you're as abjectly as then heartbroken.

From having hunted, caught her, had our heart
sent thereby singing to its higher station,
there come the leakages; the doubtings start,
the long let down to winter's obduration.

Wretchedly we ask, 'Why did we?' Say
to friends, "Forget it. No, the whole thing's dead."
The cringing telephone can ring all day
while we turn ten ways restless in our beds.
But still the warm days hang, and we don't know
how or whether to go back or no.

We see, occasionally, in the distance,
her drifting, separate and not part of us.
hers a creditable new-world existence
while ours is patently ridiculous.

We read, dine out, find hobbies, chase some other,
are much at parties, friends, and if she's there
we smile, talk manfully, and can't discover
in the least way why she made us stare —
that is, until we feel her, open-eyed,
reset, and suddenly, all locks inside.

Nick retracked. L's birthday. There was scope.
a few brave souls might field a sensible excuse
but most were conscripts and would have to cope —
indeed be thankful though the thing produce
no more than indigestion at the races.

But seeing it was L and he was host,
at least for combatants he'd see to places.

Lay out the watchtowers, castles, ring the coast,
and go out fighting — yes, that's best by miles,
than play some footling pantomime of smiles.

How simple are intentions. Round the table
we have now Dickie, Sally, Nick and Clare,
then Miles, L, Ed, and from the Pont Street stable
the faithful James and Emma, always there.

Aperitifs are ordered and food, or most,
except that Ed is compeer at the quiz,
a prerogative that Nicholas as host
feels, though he does not say so, should be his.

But all's settled, or so it seems, and paying court
each in the other is absorbed in thought.

The talk flows generally. However, guests whose placings Nick had carefully arranged were now reactivated as by new requests, and Clare, quite pointedly, had upped and changed. Till later, what with candlelight and laughter — plus the celebrity of this resort, more than the names booking, or bill after — the talk swelled volubly, as well it ought, except that, to the extent that she was able, Laurina would keep looking down the table.

Still, it was her party, and she played the weak suits and the strong together. "James You know Spain. . . tell Emma how you got mislaid. . Big time. . . a west End run, or so he claims. . . The whole thing over there is pretty queer. . . So frankly, talk about a bit distrahit. . . From Dick's, she'd just bombed in from Hertfordshire. Now folks — we go to Eddie's place, OK?" And Eddie's inglenook, as I've disclosed, is not a café off the North End Road.

Six

Nick's chance. Relaxed and laughing, they had entered upon the in scene of latest happenings.

Here L sought Nicholas, but he was centred upon the whirligig of sleek young things who jived, cavorted, swung and stepped — indeed so drunk or mesmerized was Nick that when it should be Clare he danced with she was freed only to dance with Ed or James again.

Too late, refused, as though to come a cropper, he went up promptly to a nearby bopper.

Perhaps you do not know the form. Not done.

To come together means you stay a crowd.

That's what they thought, and I do. Everyone can list behaviours that are not allowed.

Of course they'd watched her rock him on his heels, but no, the brazen Jezebel said 'yes' — at least as far as that small shrug reveals.

She then grew lively; he did; and so I guess L was not mollified, still less delighted, to be so straight away, by both, goodnighted.

They drove to Hammersmith, that undefined
entanglement of flats and unmade lairs,
the which to get to you must grope behind
the dear girl giggling on the unlit stairs.
Rooms where they sit, cook, sleep, slam doors,
or sporting boob-tubes, see-throughs, minis get
the looked-for whistles as they troop down floors.
Seen out they're full-fledged goddesses, but met
padding in towels, curlers, dripping hair,
the famed creation is a rum affair.

But later, in the mirror, stripped, arrayed
before the massed regalia of their trade —
the heaps of lipsticks, pink to autumn jade,
mascaras to turn the midnight dark a shade
more permanent, and powders, cleansing milk —
the light transfigures. Yet, and through the slot
of undone button, bra or see-through silk,
how tremulous the hopes, and like as not
as little snail's horns that the tips put out
in fearful impudence each darkened pout.

However, there was nothing hesitant
in this small creature as she stripped for bed.
Not that Nick was languid or gallant
but left the overtures to her instead.
The girl was understanding, showed no haste;
stretched out and helped him, threw out sighs:
Like wings of butterflies about his waist
her legs were beating, closed, she closed her eyes.
The hot breaths faltered, and a little flame
of passion touched and blessed them both the same.

If twelve when they awoke, it was much later
when they were crunching at a bit of bread.
They went to 'Wheels', to 'Warehouse', 'Golden Stater',
So could she now please have her future read?
She did, and seemed much satisfied, though saying naught,
When over coffee, now at 'Blushes', she declared
Nick gave her, also, things to think about.
Of course she didn't care if people stared.
Yes, inevitable how it would end:
"Tonight I can't. I have to see my friend."

How has the warmth and light and lanolin
embodied by the afternoon now sank
so without trace into terraces, in
to whitewashed carapaces, plain and blank?
And, day-long shopping down Old Chelsea reach,
how is it boppers in their little clothes
have linked, flamingo-like, their movements — each
it seems the candid light and air betrothes —
vanished immediately the earth turns round,
as Lot's wife rendered into pillared ground.

The scenery stays put for one last scene;
the lights dim gradually as Nick is lost.
Drifting down Upper Sloane Street he is seen
mumbling to himself about the cost,
which is phenomenal indeed. He'll seem
a self-regarding show-off who has sunk
to an all-time low in self-esteem:
a poseur, charlatan, an outright skunk.
At this moment he'd have given anything
that Heaven promise to make good the fling.

But what is done is done. His eyes took
in but vacantly the famous shops
now à la mode and in the autumn look
of clothes and furniture — how well these props
would stand in bank accounts of happiness
if he possessed one still. Perhaps in such
a vein of new-found candour he'll confess
that's he's impossible and out of touch,
that what one does at twenty, back from sorties,
is yet more fatal to the over-forties.

He was now, what? Thirty, a little over,
and Clare was twenty-three or so, say four.
How suitable that was, would be, drove a
deep sharp pain into his mind. And more,
for Clare's display was open, almost blown.
He felt the inner showiness like lace
here on could only hurt her: she would own
no further increments of dewy grace.
The bubbling laughter, charm, the chic dress sense
go on, but not this time's beneficence.

So should he phone her? Hardly. She would bang the phone down on him. Who could blame her? So what then? He poured a drink, another, rang, cautiously, Laurina, who didn't know or want to. "Count me out in future, would you? I'm absolutely up to here with tricks like that, and what a tacky thing to do, puerile, adolescent. . . Nicholas, it's not the way to win a girl's respect, now, is it, really? Or what friends expect."

He listened, pleaded, waited. At last she'd fix she said, and did, a sort of make-up lunch. The two met guardedly. They did not mix but stayed restrained and awkward. At the crunch Clare talked to L, and L to Nick, and he said nothing really. "You think she'd pay for proper attribution, Clare? I mean if it's really good, the provenance, may be that Nick will not be outright naff at now collecting things we need to have?"

Handsome, wasn't it? A risk to take,
moreover. Yes, I'd not be guarantor,
but still some pow-wow had been held to make
the open secret safe, I think — bore
as that must be to everyone: to you
of course, and most of all to me. And Clare
a little startled and afraid now knew
that Nicholas had time for her, and care.
She looked at him, he her; their glances met,
and after them the future flung its net.

Seven

"No, not that old thing, Nick: you'll go by air now won't you? Be professional, and, please, it's not some holiday you're on — so Clare, make sure you've listed possibilities in full — hotels, fares, so your poor aunt can see we've haven't ratcheted the cost up of things you won't accomplish, can't. . ."

And strangely, after being so much bossed about, our Nick has found that Clare's new dresses will stand in admirably for no addresses.

Itineraries were put away once terra firma had been reached in Rome. First they turned the driver from the *Inghilterra* round, an old friend: "*Sì, signora. Sì, dovè?*"

They didn't think it mattered; the two were speeding up the lanes of autostrada, through the lights in batteries, the side roads leading nowhere that the *conducente* knew.

But all in the soft sunshine looked so beautiful, as much it's apt when the heart is full.

But first there were some mundane matters to attend to. What in practice would they do when once this whirlwind part was through? The central questions that concerned our two were not so separate in private thought: the homes and friends and holidays they'd share, and all the night's togetherness that brought. Elated, they returned, but at the hotel there said merely "*due stanze, per favore*", which brings us to the first part of our story.

They were tired, both, and after supper went up to sleeplessness and came down late, but still with eagerness like children bent upon arrival at their holidays to straight way to the beach return, chase up and down past other children to the soft white trace of surf resettling in a breathy round its far-off glitter and indulgent space. But from the breakfast table here our two could take in leisurely the hotel view.

It was an Italy repainted, light
and warping palpably through panes of heat.
They looked to sidewalks, shops, the chrome and white
tiers of modern offices from which the street
below them rose towards old masonries
of villas, porticoes and churches where,
cheek by jowl by wall, and thick with trees,
the hill there ornamented with a stair-
way thick with cypresses in dusty green
they saw the Villa d' Este Gardens scene.

So wouldn't now this borne of foreign shores
here close and welcoming, be their first call?

No: they phoned for names to open doors
on diaries, letters, sketches, wherewithal
if any work was possible on what
is always needed: dates and evidence.

A Fragonard perhaps. If Nick thought not,
he needed nonetheless some provenance.

So promising around them all that day
like flowers unwrapped the waiting gardens lay.

In phone calls went the first day, second. In
the day then following's afternoon, late, when
the sky lightens, and penumbral clouds begin
to lift off in their parasols again
and come down parachutes of ragged stuffs,
at one with the ambiance of a city rented
out to *pelligrini* and to history buffs,
at last when even traffic seems contented,
at the top in marble of the first few stairs
a smiling girl was waiting, and she wears

all that does wonders for her figure which,
as I have said, was chastely provident —
an injured innocence that would bewitch
a council of the holy fathers sat at Lent.

It was the clasp of her, the cloth that swept
so fondly outward from the bodice, turning
as the little feet beneath them kept
their sandals on the steps they're almost spurning.
By God, the girl was beautiful, Nick thought.
And as she was, of course, and as he ought.

He took her hand, and as they walked up through
the glittering cypresses, where rinse
the waters daily on what lovers do
who've vowed considerably all manner since
in time that was and is illusory,
she mentioned their first meeting, when he'd said
how good for them it was, this Italy,
which she'd interpreted as paired instead.
He stopped and softly kissed her, then once more:
more passionate, more fondly than before.

That was her figure there: she knew all that,
but what of Nicholas? Her beating heart
had wrung performance but the caveat
still spoke of prudence in the leading part.
She would have signed for both, but could not do
the more without his management or guide.
In that eternity the tears broke through,
and Nicholas, shamed Nicholas, at last replied —
as doubtless you would do, when close were staring
eyes so beautiful and so despairing.

It was a forthright, handsome peroration,
sensible and long, long overdue.

And what he said, too, on this fraught occasion
was certainly in part, in part, quite true.

What more is possible? At times we feel
upon this film-set of a life a hover
between what is and doubtless should be real.
(Enough to give the thoughtful awful bother
when all too frequently past words will mock
them endlessly with models out of stock.)

But now she listened and if he didn't hit the
intended centrally the situations
retrieved before must help prepare them. Pretty
girls are used to having declarations
thrust upon them somewhat ill-defined.
Nick's was this and that and maybe true,
but in its content of the better kind —
with some omissions, though. In Clare's own view,
in wanting something of a full proposal,
she's not eternally at his disposal.

Here we leave them. Dusk in these famed hills,
through squares and temples, deepens very fast.
Water in the long chutes darkens, chills
them even as they look at it. At last,
they walk on back together to their small
hotel, dress up for dinner and eat in.
As long before, in candlelight, they fall
to thinking happiness could now begin.
It can and does, and what you need to know
I'll sketch in lightly here before we go.

The painting's not our friend's, nor imitation,
but something in the manner of, which, as
repeated in each villa assignation,
seems more fitting than the razzmatazz
of fortune in a big-name masterpiece.
And in their own togetherness there goes
the plume of fortune in its own caprice,
playful and enchanting, so — who knows? —
they may come closer to the heart's consent
beguiled by music of such ravishment.