

# Kennet



Colin John Holcombe

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# Kennet

I came from that upmarket county town  
where money mixes with the college gown:  
a Georgian coaching stop whose summer air  
was not of hayricks or of far-off wheat  
but spruce amenities and three-star fare  
at AA hostelries with showers en suite.  
A place inhabitants had never need  
of fish-shops, cut-price malls or annual shows  
when condescension brought the worst to book,  
and even cheap-day trippers never chose  
the US franchise or the Ingle Nook,  
nor cream teas latterly, nor tourist stops  
around the vicarage and antique shops.

Across the trout-pooled interludes of stream  
patrolled by dragonfly and nosing bream  
there comes the memory of fragrant hours  
beside the Kennet where the rain-bent grasses  
stand in idleness that time devours,  
and all too rapidly as boyhood passes.  
But not to emptiness or total loss —  
I thought its aptitude would be remade  
in things as tangible, as real as they,  
that if they vanished even, something stayed  
as sunset lingers after some hot day,  
as do the melancholy water smells  
with flights of swallows and the evening bells.

A friendly child and popular, I lost  
no time exploring Downland ways, and crossed  
its quiet villages on foot or biked  
great distances about it, always knew  
there loomed some other continent I liked  
as distant prospects not yet come in view  
but glimpsed on outings and on school events —  
which I would treasure, long for, count the weeks  
until I stood there, gazing out to sea  
past donkey rides and deckchairs, small boutiques  
to summer's rimmed and silvered alchemy.  
Between the cliff-tops and the sea's blue sweep  
I found a country that was mine to keep.

And then all changed, at once. My thoughts came home  
and never afterwards by choice would roam  
from one who trotted past that day. I saw  
a blaze of eyes, short nose, a pointed face  
that bobbed, so delicate, that it too bore  
an embassy for that slight elfin grace  
with which she held herself. Back home I asked.  
Whatever for? my father said, the boy's gone daft.  
It's riding lessons now: whatever next?  
I'll give up pocket money. You would? He laughed,  
but looked at me the same: suspicious, vexed.  
But, though he sanctioned it, the awful cost  
still kept me thinking that some line was crossed.

And so I learnt: not well, not easily,  
as something needful, which was new to me.  
I got to ride and jump, to mount, dismount,  
to have control and keep my posture straight.  
Among the regulars I didn't count,  
indeed I hadn't meant to, though of late  
had come to cause a certain stir. I'd pass  
the girl the locals called Miss Emily,  
and passed her loftily, my head held high.  
Whatever the occasion there might be  
I merely nodded, kept on riding by:  
there, but for hazard of a passing car,  
things would have ended, neither close nor far.

We saw it, both of us, and blaring as it neared.  
She reined, the horse now terrified. It reared  
a few yards off. I cantered, took the reins  
and held the creature till the nuisance passed.  
Then, doffing cap, I would have gone. *'These lanes  
are dangerous'*, she said, and smiled at last  
the look returning to that startled face.  
*'So tell me therefore why a lawyer's son  
should take this way to ride, or even ride  
at all?'* Perhaps it was a cause begun  
by some such figure in this countryside,  
or so they say. I laughed. *I cannot tell:  
my sweet Miss Emily, I wish you well.*

She coloured and was cross. At length she said  
*'It seems like Ampersand you've lost your head,  
I'd ask you to correct your forwardness.  
A passing stranger's kindness is not claim  
for true acquaintance, is it? Please address  
me as Miss Davenport: that is my name,  
and one your father anyway will know.  
Good morning to the gallant stranger.'* Then  
she reined and turned. *'To Anthony'*, she said  
and laughed and cantered off. Again, again  
I stopped and wondered where such prospects led,  
and what of it or her I had to win,  
so asked my father, breathless, soon as in.

*'Well, that's as far as it will go with her,*  
he said. *Not now the force that once they were*  
*but still good family, a county name.*  
*Let be, my boy, and pitch your hopes elsewhere.'*  
Sound words, but still we met again, became  
at length inseparable, the constant pair.  
Through her I saw the countryside as use,  
a place for generations, husbandry:  
the crops, the fertilisers, costs, the pests.  
It came alive, an unwrapped memory  
with humans minimal, mere passing guests.  
I went to agriccollege even, books  
there more of Emily and her good looks.

How much she laughed and teased me all that time.  
*'So how much mulch, now farmer, how much lime?*  
*Tell my father what you would have planted,*  
*what seeds, what preparation, expected yields?'*  
What could I tell her? That her looks enchanted,  
I saw her clean, taut contours through the fields?  
How could I tell her that I heard her laughter  
run through springtime music of the brooks?  
That in her hair I saw the evening trees  
fill out with sadness of the cawing rooks?  
My whole world jockeyed round such sights as these  
but I was dumb to say so: felt alone,  
and bit the matter off, replaced the phone.

10. What girls I knew there as the camera stops,  
tight-clad in jodhpurs and their riding crops:  
stiff-backed, their buttocks waisted in with tweeds.  
They came from paddocks, houses, county schools  
not talking down so much but as one needs  
to deal with yokels and with tiresome fools:  
they were the gentry and would always be.  
All this I knew and also, on their own,  
how natural they could be, and unconcerned  
that raffish assignations could dethrone  
that well-bred haughtiness so clearly learned  
at some expense to joint accounts. Who cares  
when country manners breed their long affairs?

It's class with class and they are always riding  
horse with horse across the stubble striding,  
and I was one of them by sovereign choice  
of girls and family and Emily,  
but in that fellowship I had no voice  
but on approval only, courtesy  
of Peter Davenport and no one else.  
I had the run of manor house and farm,  
I knew their history and each crossing place  
from old security to threatened harm.  
I knew each lineament and chiselled face  
upon their chapel walls, each plaque and urn,  
how long the centuries that don't return.

And so we'd sit there, she and I  
and watch the evening splendour slowly die,  
but here most beautiful where setting sun  
slants through the high lead windows, phosphoresces  
on pew or lectern as the thread's undone  
that links the family as day progresses  
to squire and baronet and county earls  
beyond the taproom girl and surly poor.  
All have their entrances: the exits weave  
their light steps quickly on the dust before  
they too, dancing, bow and take their leave.  
Old graves, new headstones, and the springtime's flowers  
recalled but briefly what each life devours.

How many sleeping in this musty air  
of quiet desuetude knew springtime there?  
How many body's yearnings took on trust  
those confidences uttered in a voice,  
which once was reassuring, now is dust.  
Do generations pass but still rejoice  
in some such Michelmass or Whitsuntide?  
And does the laughter and the bitter wrong,  
the summer sunshine and the silent tears  
pass on to nothing but a onetime song  
that stirs occasionally but with the years  
moves on and fades as daylight on the wane  
that floods, exults and drains from window-pane?

The bust of marble and the shadowed grace  
in eyes that smiling inward saw a face  
still looking at them, musing, in itself  
not sad or haunted but in time betrayed  
by mundane circumstances that mere wealth  
or beauty's aura have not much delayed.  
All had their moment, took it, watched it pass  
as time moved forward: slowly, on each spoke  
the tiny figures gestured, danced about  
as though eternal till the instant broke:  
a flare, a glittering, then guttered out.  
Life is a continuum and on this floor  
the pattern will be as it was before.

15. *'This is the place where I shall be,' she said,  
'beneath that dryad with the weeping head.  
A plaque, a name on marble, nothing more,  
but you will come here, won't you, sit and pray,  
or step more thoughtfully across this floor,  
and turn the once and smile and go away?  
No more than that, dear Anthony, your pledge  
that if you love me and you always will,  
then I will wait for you till times be done  
in life, in waywardness, for good or ill.  
This is the enterprise we've here begun,  
or something like that. Anthony, we trace  
our destiny together from this place.'*

As winds collecting turn the weathervane  
we grew together in the sun and rain,  
and things between that made the days incline  
towards acceptance in her father's gaze,  
that shuttered guardian's well-kept line.  
Abrupt and courteous, but not in ways  
much based on feelings or his children's hopes.  
Increasingly I grew the constant guest,  
in timewas almost family, but still  
was kept at distance, or a lack of zest  
among the walks and topiary, a chill  
I felt in monuments and mouldering stone  
occasionally when left there on my own.

Perhaps I knew that, having seen the strain  
if I should try to make intentions plain.  
*'Tom will keep the place', said Emily  
'Myself and Clare and James, will have to think  
of other stratagems: the famous three  
to add their small part to the family's link  
with other lineages: that's how it's done.  
You've seen the family portraits, maps  
of the estate as once it was, the lands  
we owned, administered that now perhaps  
are not unwisely farmed by other hands.  
That's the truth of us, the Davenports  
with tales of grandeur and their Agincourts.'*

*'You have no money, Anthony, or name  
or wealth of ancestry nor claim  
on what, alas, with us will always count:  
some ancient kinship with this homely ground,  
with elves for neighbours and where stories mount  
of ghosts returned from tryst or battle mound.  
This is our country, all of it, and one  
we served our king for countless times. A name  
is nothing marvellous unless it hold  
itself inviolate and not the same  
as other modest, kindly folk, a mould  
that's no doubt passé and ridiculous  
but still means family, at least to us.'*

*'How can a man then win his lady's hand'*  
I asked half-earnestly, *'when naught of land  
great halls, retainers, chivalry are his?  
Unless, I added, he can make his way  
to find the worst of places that there is  
and use his energy to make it pay.'*  
I spoke then vaguely of the Sahel sands  
a place of raging emptiness where crops  
were millet, sorghum, and alfalfa grass.  
Where wind is ever present, never stops  
while wondering wide-eyed nomads pause and pass.  
A place of emptiness, of dust and haze  
of sweltering evenings and of hotter days.

20. *'Don't', she'd told me. 'Listen, Anthony  
what you're proposing hurts both you and me.  
We're friend, the best of friends, and, more than that,  
are close on kissing cousins, of one heart.  
You know the most of me, and where I'm at,  
you know I think of you, and wake and start  
that one day suddenly we'll be no more:  
we'll both be married, separately, with lives  
that run on differently to diverse ends.  
I want a friend, an honest friend, who strives  
to be my guide whatever fortune sends.  
Anthony, remember when you're gone,  
how much it brings another's prospects on.'*

A UN mission paid the passage out  
to wastes of dune and thorn bush where the drought  
was more depressing than I'd thought. They knock  
the stuffing out of you, the sickness, heat,  
the wind-scoured landscape lifted out of rock.  
They went as mirages on silent feet,  
the people, cattle, and the herds of goat,  
the women foraging, bowed down, the flies  
thick hazards of them in their warping swarms  
to fasten on them and their children's eyes,  
a cataract of blackness after storms  
removed each village, road and straggling field:  
a land of pestilence that never healed.

My work? Bureaucracy: those tiny cogs,  
of fields reports, assessments, careful logs.  
But what was that to them? The waste went on,  
their wives grew leaner and the cattle died.  
We foreigners consulted, smiled, were gone,  
but practically to help them barely tried.  
I did: that second leave I spent my cash  
and hired a drilling rig and Arab crew.  
'*Marvellous*', said colleagues: '*who's to pay?*'  
*The UN will*, I said, *for seed-corn too*.  
The which they did at last. I got my way  
and gradually, in small ways, sprouts of green  
broke through the level, sun-baked, dusty scene.

For three years afterwards, on flat or hill  
across these desert wastes we'd drill  
a spoor of holes, for small communities  
to draw some sustenance from dusty soil,  
not quite a living, true, but such to please  
the funding governments: their cash, my toil.  
And what a toil it was: my skin grew black,  
my hair more sun-bleached, and my looks more strange.  
But still I stuck it out, the money mailed  
back home to England since the locals change.  
I wanted proceeds safe if all else failed.  
A tidy sum, and sums, and with them went  
a note to Emily as heaven bent.

Each day I thought of her, each night I dreamt  
quixotically of warmth and hair well kempt  
within that dark and smoothly tapered hat.  
I saw the neat-cut figure, what I missed:  
the imperious and easy way she sat,  
the unloosed, dreamy way she kissed.  
I missed continually that body's press, and heard  
instead inside that stifling driller's shack  
the howling wilderness of driven sand  
that dinned at walls till changing tack  
it brought the hissing breath more close to hand.  
Beneath the pillow, though, not inches deep,  
her letters comforting, I went to sleep.

25. How well she kept in touch with all the news  
from combine harvesters to dancing shoes.  
I had the run of her and all her thought,  
and in the very paper smelt her scent.  
I saw her outings, picnics, what she bought;  
it seemed that hard-to-fathom distance lent  
a charm and detail to that small estate.  
She had the time to tell me how it went,  
the farms, the fields, the yields spent working for.  
Far from vague, it was a picture sent  
with much more detail than I'd had before.  
Indeed the whole complexity was such  
it seemed a thing I'd never thought of much.

*'We need a bailiff,'* once she wrote, *'or so I think but father is the one to know. Dearest Anthony when will you come?'*  
I'll come immediately was my first thought but then of course came money, that real sum she handled for me, mounting up, that bought an independence for us, livelihood without excessive debts and loans. I knew the country life, indeed my college course was much on economics: that quaint view of mellow cottages draws age-old force from grants and privileges: the lawyer signs across the documents of grand designs.

All changed again. *'My dearest Anthony,'* she wrote, *'this letter's awfully hard for me. I married someone whom you will not know, two weeks ago. We came back yesterday. My time with you, it seems an age ago but close and dear to me in every way. It's true. You must believe I never meant in any way to hurt or lead you on. We knew such happiness I hadn't heart to spoil the hopes of it when you were gone. You have the money now to make a start again with someone pretty, someone fun, who loves you very much as I have done.'*

I stopped, reread the letter, read it twice,  
at length remembering that sage advice  
my father gave me long ago. I saw  
the look come back into the careful eyes  
that glanced at me and down, not saying more  
for all the years of counsel in that wise  
old head. My boy, he'd said, she's not for you.  
The Davenports are long established family  
who spite the customs of the present age  
and keep their privileges, their urge to be  
above what law or government can stage.  
Good Lord, they still receive, pay calls,  
and ride to hounds and hold their summer balls.

I sold the business, took the next flight out  
in dazed bewilderment, all turn-about.  
I felt the overriding darkness pressing  
in, a giddiness, an ache in what  
my thought was slowly working on or guessing  
as in some long detective novel's murky plot.  
I saw her candid laughter and that look  
confiding, secretive and always kind  
that took each thought of mine and warmed its hand  
as though to put suspicions out of mind  
as heartless, undeserving, over-planned.  
I read my novel twice, but nothing there  
reclaimed me from that hurtful, chilling air.

30. Arrived, I hired a car and headed west.  
The opening countryside in front progressed  
to prospects colouring at every mile  
to town and stopping places known before.  
I saw the kissing bridle paths, each gate, each stile  
as haunts of memory that held in store  
the opening happenings the future gave.  
All that was closed to me. I travelled on  
across the chippings-fixed and stanchioned rails  
to place-names friendly to me, yet was gone  
that land of linnet haunting summer vales:  
I knew that, met my father, heard: *Yes, pay  
respects, if I were you, but do not stay.*

It seemed a life away from that event,  
I turned the chapel knocker, in I went.  
The door went hush and back and quietly shut.  
The years returned. I saw a smiling face  
whose breath was close to me but also cut  
with something sharp and hurtful. Altar lace,  
brass candlesticks, a wreath of blooms. For her?  
I did not know, but walked on past  
the font, the clerestory, the choir stalls  
to stand there looking at the wreath at last.  
No name, no cut there in the chapel walls,  
no dryad weeping with its formal tears  
accreting silently the fruitful years.

A passing interval, no more. I thought  
of wealth, of beauty, all it brought  
in this harsh world of hope and enterprise,  
the smiles, appearance, the double face  
we show continually, her candid eyes  
that ruled the sovereignty of sylvan grace,  
and knew that blessing lost to me was ever  
lost, unalterably, for all time lost.  
And not as brightness fallen from the air  
but a whole world folded up at wrenching cost  
of moods, of bitterness and hard despair.  
And this is how I was, had ever been:  
a bit-part actor in a rural scene.

Again the generations that I saw  
but now more distant in the marble floor:  
the diamond lozenges, the shields, the polished brass,  
the vanished regiments, the titles gone.  
Reserve, obedience, the mark of class  
that misses generations but goes on  
in church, academies and old professions:  
a caste fantastical, outmoded pride,  
the thousand families, I'd heard it said,  
they married into, were by blood allied,  
the names which England links by land and bed,  
with hope of better times, for stalwart men  
to do her work and purposes again.

And so I was myself as they had seen  
me: honest, loving, who had no doubt been  
in all things honourable but not a name  
to link the family through what had passed:  
no fighting men who gave their blood, no fame  
to add its lustre to that stainless caste.  
Not bad, they would have said. An honest man,  
without a fortune, though, no certain lift  
above the commonplace of sturdy poor.  
Land and family is not a gift  
but need for vigilance, to close the door.  
All these I knew, and Emily as well:  
she knew the truth of that, though wouldn't tell.

35. So there it was, a dream, a walk-on scene,  
an empty pageantry where hope had been  
betrayed or settled. I took the long way back  
that wound through trees about the old estate.  
I thought to call but didn't, knew my lack  
of courtesy advisable, the gate  
now shut on Emily. The Davenports  
were Davenports both now and then. I wrote  
and waited anxiously the counted hours  
the usual courteous but formal note  
but got '*your happiness is joined with ours*',  
the last that I'd expected, one brisk hand  
extending from that fabled, closed-off land.

She called the following Tuesday. In the car outside the husband sat while I was far from acting rationally. My father said, '*A friend for you*', and took his leave. '*Not just a friend,*' she answered as she leant her head against my shoulder, '*but the man I trust, and always will. My dearest Anthony, how have you been?*' She smiled and searched my face. '*How strong and manly you have grown! The years have not been wasted in that far off place.*' And then the acting faltered. There were tears from her, from me, and, somehow, all we'd been dissolved into this pained and forceful scene.

'*My dear, this will not do*', she said at last and took my hands and smiled. '*All that is past. Come, you need to meet my Radley now, and you'll be kind to him and wish us joy.*' *Why would I not, dear Emily?* But how the heart caught meeting such a untried boy who trembled slightly as he took my hand. I played the also ran and bowed my head receiving some such careful phrase he'd learned. But then I took the sting from it and said whatever trust or friendship I had earned of Emily I'd wish to earn of him — a truth that time has made some passing whim.

I thought to settle down, that hers and mine  
retain in hills around a wayside shrine,  
but that was morbid, and the riding crop  
impatiently would flick the thought away.  
I thought of that and how the days would drop  
their serious contours with her words at play:  
quite effortlessly, thoughtlessly she'd laugh  
and urge her mount to race me: on we'd go  
across the meadowland, along the Kennet where  
the stream would pool and falter, pause and flow  
more thoughtfully with her now mocking stare.  
And then she'd dash away and I would see  
a spirit unconstrained, alive in me.

With that I'll leave her where the sunlight seems  
a dark reflection in the clear Chalk streams,  
where pungent yarrow and the water-weeds  
return the heady scent that was her hair;  
where sorrel darkening drops its copper seeds  
and cuckoos call on absences, on nothing there.  
The years that passed brought nothing good. Abroad  
I worked a time, came home and bought a place.  
I married in the end, of course, had kids  
who start as I did on life's callous race.  
The memory perhaps it is forbids  
me think more seriously on what was bidden:  
a countryside more saddled up than ridden.

40. Its hills were holy ground. I moved away  
so not to think of them from day to day.  
I have a happy marriage, caring wife,  
three kids to manage for: I run my farms  
with such efficiency a whetted knife  
could not be sharper than my foreman charms.  
I have few friends, perhaps, but earn respect:  
a man to tussle with but not outsmart.  
The rest is otherwise. I tell myself  
to meet the day's requirements, do my part  
in what is different, with a different wealth.  
I am a man accustomed to the gritstone Dales  
far more than mooning after cuckoo tales.

Indeed some flintiness of Davenport  
has built its walls in me, as well it ought.  
I grow more sober-sided: work or play,  
I do the necessary, sometimes think  
of what has passed: an interval I say  
of no importance, just an eyelid's blink  
at something possible, now locked away.  
Perhaps, with summers past still in the air,  
in pulling boots on, feeling body leap  
towards companionship with someone there,  
I could outwit the dulling senses sleep,  
and reach behind it to a larger day  
there filled with just supposes children say.

Each life has many entrances. I think  
a man in daily purposes will link  
to what he would be in some other dress  
of handsomeness or money, finer birth,  
the which he'll never understand unless  
he try them honestly, with all he's worth.  
I did, I tried with Emily, and did not lose.  
That opening episode is with me still  
in how I move, my joins, my sturdy bones,  
more deep than consciousness, and will  
perhaps outlast this Daleside grit and stone.  
For life is what we hope of it and trust  
to write our troubles on until we're dust.