



Women  
Pretty  
in their  
Petticoats

poems by  
colin john holcombe

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Ocaso Press 2016

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Traditional Poems 2015-16

by Colin John Holcombe

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# Introduction

Here are seventy-eight poems written as though the last century of English poetry never happened. It very much did, of course, and still continues as material treasured, taught and emulated by state institutions and serious poetry outlets across the world. But that work is now becoming so prosaic in style, so arbitrary and unsatisfying in content, that it can hardly be said to register as poetry with the common reader. I doubt anyone really cares for it, beyond university-based circles of poets, and perhaps even those evangelists not over-much, judging by their reluctance to buy each other's publications. The sensible thing to do is surely to close the book on Modernism, enjoy what it did produce, but accept that the ceaseless experimentation has finally run out into inept and shallow streams of irrelevance. In short, it's time to start afresh.

So, horror of horrors: poems that rhyme, that scan, and have something to say on themes that have been anathema to serious poetry since W.W.I. destroyed the European belief in progress and common purpose. It seems idle to argue that most people still seek substance, beauty and meaning in their everyday lives, and often achieve them in a world that has materially improved for almost everyone in the last hundred years. Or that the notions of Modernism were dubious to begin with, and have latterly become so remote from everyday concerns that literary criticism has largely given up trying to fathom what the poetry means, if it means anything at all. Or that contemporary poetry can be as iconoclastic, solipsist and anti-establishment as it pleases, but each shift is only likely to hasten retreat into autistic and self-admiring coteries. I have recently surveyed the fields of critical theory (here on Ocaso Press as *A Background to Critical Theory*), and the pedestrian nullity of the poetry it encourages. More is unneeded. If you enjoy some of the very traditional re-renderings of the *Hesperides* here in modern dress, I shall be more than rewarded. If you retort that *undress* seems more appropriate, then I can only plead a change in outlook, and suggest there is nothing here that we do not see nightly on our TV screens, though I hope expressed in a little more grace, wit and understanding. If *that* fails, then I respectfully suggest you try *Some Still Abiding Fire 2*, where there is no prettiness or avoidance of the viler aspects of our natures.

I have simply tried to write something different here, ringing the changes on conventional themes by re-echoing rhyme and imagery through these song-like pieces. Many poetry books have a central theme, of course, but here the repetition is denser, giving key words a wider connotation as they operate in different settings across the collection.

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# POEMS 2015-6

For Patricia

# 1. Women Pretty in Their Petticoats

Abroad in flounced proprieties and blessed  
through storms of bony underwear, they had to thank  
the staff of grand hotels, who, while they dressed  
in fine things laundered to their table rank,  
had toiled to keep them warm and fed.

The rich, that is, with umpteen maids and trunks —  
how many trunks they had: good leather, gilt-embossed.  
They swept like popes among their simple monks.  
In transatlantic dining rooms they crossed  
the others like them, each well bred.

But how they got with child, God knows. A maze  
of ribbons met the ravisher, and eons went  
in climbing perilously from slips and stays  
you'd think that passion would be largely spent  
before they ever trooped to bed.

Yet in our prurient world of porn today  
when an intimate anatomy is laid  
out to our queered approval, what's to say  
which one's the mistress, which the maid  
with charms and privy looks outspread?

And where is dreamt-on woman in her state  
of lambent passion with a famed contrariness,  
her petulance, her periods, her urge to mate?  
Who knows? — it may best that the silk-lined dress  
and petticoat left things unsaid.

But if we dwell on form it is because  
it adumbrates that well-appointed, inner wealth  
of self-delighting womanhood that was:  
her moods, her winteriness, her very self  
expressed before that shaping fled.

## 2. The Snowdrop

All night long, to inner quietness bred,  
the snowdrop lifts above the frost-touched earth.  
With tiny petals tucked about the head  
it gazes calmly down, as at a birth

it is oblivious of. A tiny corm  
is certainly no boundless flowering spree,  
but one of innate loveliness to form  
a wimpled, nun-like blaze of chastity.

How very pure it is: a chilly white,  
that's neither virginal nor intertwined  
with harmless domesticity, despite  
the garden plots to which it is confined.

No tranquil deity of woodland dell,  
but poised and dutiful and ever bred  
to brute persistence in a single spell  
of aero emptiness before it's dead.

### 3. How Commendable

How commendable would beauty be  
if blessed throughout with fragrant modesty,  
imagination turning less and less  
to vast intoxications of the dress  
when one with innocence and gentleness.  
If every softly glowing part were dressed  
in things new-laundered, fresh and neat,  
her peccadilloes would be sins confessed  
in childhood once she won't repeat.

How frank and admirable would be the brief  
of slip and bra and camisole beneath  
the towering embassies of air if all  
we gaze on fondly would those breasts recall  
of limpid innocence, before Eve's fall.  
Let us have no unadmitted scope  
of sense than settled by the heart:  
a grace and honesty, and simple hope  
that she'll adopt the kinder part.

How reprehensible would be the pride  
in that imperial but lingering stride —  
where arch of instep in the straightening goes  
both on and out as round the ankle flows  
the whirl of hemline and its little shows —  
were not the well-bred courtliness to keep  
the compass of its scarlet powers:  
instinct as eyes are ever, soft and deep,  
that wake us in our midnight hours.

And if ungovernable would seem the clothes  
that silk to living article betrothes,  
let all that softness be as summer breeze,  
which, full and self-delighting, takes its ease  
among the green-sap mansions of the trees —

that those who put such laughing riches on  
in happiness to dance abroad  
be one with all their bounty, blessed and gone  
with what those dresses well afford.

## 4. The Primrose

The primrose with its smouldering yellow hue,  
so soft and fresh but oversweet, as though  
its frank ingenuousness would quite outdo  
the sumptuous freshness of new-fallen snow.

Why should we think of pleated innocence,  
or modesty as part of sovereign youth,  
of kirtles and the maiden joys to fence  
her off in trenchant leafiness? In truth

the plant's tenacious, and, from its broad, thick stock  
in round leaves' ending, thuggish roots reach out  
through leaf-mould, gravel or the hardest rock  
to make of earthiness their strong redoubt.

So is virginity, as poets know  
who take good care to emphasize its bloom  
of air-fresh loveliness that won't forego  
the plumed pre-eminence she must assume:

that you will love her, always, her alone,  
when that most intimate of parts will sow  
an efflorescence through that smiling zone  
these clumps of thickly ruffled petals know.

## 5. The Northern Tradition

If not pulled up, those startled beauties would  
in time put on life's homely blooms,  
but left to flourish in more airy rooms  
they make rich sport of spinsterhood.

From idleness there come the practised wiles;  
the flaunted charms we shouldn't view,  
with witchcraft practices they just might do  
and all too happily, with radiant smiles.

At the Lord's high altar here they're stood  
most proud, with flagrant bodies clad  
with just the clothes to make their sisters mad  
at such a spoof of maidenhood.

They brought in harvests, bronzed by sun,  
and worked with men-folk in the fields.  
But then, as one by one the needful yields  
were spent in spectacle and prompt undone,  
they put themselves about in dance and song.  
From care and worship of a jealous god  
they were their wants, just that, and blithely trod  
the ways their men-folk called most clearly wrong.

And worse, if possible, they clean forgot  
what makes us different, what their duties were:  
when she was lost in him, as he in her,  
who worked for livelihood, our common lot?

In short, a nascent thing, the antique nude  
and apt to muddle up the golden mean  
with frank anatomy, though none more keen  
to have her licences made self-renewed.

## 6. Why So Condescending Wise

Why be so condescending wise  
at how I dress or do my hair?  
How comes it common folk should care  
about the sun-downs of my eyes?

In curtseying will come surprise  
at how that rigmarole would fare  
if I were standing stark and bare  
of all the stateliness that lies

within the strictures of my clothes.  
Beneath is muscle, flesh and bone  
as any born of human clay,

but you will find it ill behoves  
to legislate what we shall own  
from fall of dark to new-born day.



## 7. Lady's Smock

Loosely clustered, frilled in pink or white  
or delicate in subtle lilac hue,  
the spires of candid lady's smock delight  
the open pasturelands when May is due.

That happy month, when winter's dress is shed,  
and youth steps out, and with its lively tread  
now pirouettes and with a toss of head  
will dance in this green fume of spring instead.

So put no trust in former lover's things,  
or spruced-up phrase that any lad will say:  
there is no wealth in future promising,  
but come and kiss and sing us well-a-day.

Now, turning, bend your lightly fingered leaves,  
and show your airiness in dress instead.  
Step here, step there and laugh, for who believes  
in words of caution from a frost-spiked head?

So conjure in yourself your own sweet spells  
beyond what care or crabbing age forestalls.  
Stop here and listen: through the forest dells  
the booming, strange, hypnotic cuckoo calls.

## 8. The Life About

I am both in and of the life about  
the warm soft foliage of the forward spring,  
when leaves, in holding their small fingers out,  
rejoice in such new festivals of everything.

The fresh green leaf tips sparkling after rain,  
the simple graciousness that's in the sun,  
where all around the radiance will gain  
once more the green munificence of growth begun.

The months of flowers and sun's increase,  
the growth of hesitant and small-eared things,  
the changing shape and shadow, day's caprice,  
the rich, full-throttle sweetness that the blackbird sings.

All things renewed as are the chestnut flowers,  
those candelabras of the pink and white,  
where afterwards the thick confetti showers  
of falling petals set the whirling air alight.

The birth of animals, the heavy gloss  
of new spring coats and tails, the pitch and fall  
of rooks about the rain-soaked sky, the toss  
and back of trees delivered to the wind's rough brawl.

The warm earth smell in early summer days,  
the scent of rodents that the dusk distils  
until the evening closes with a settling haze  
in village interludes and distant, misted hills.

Now old men pottering by with panamas  
and smart new canes: each stumbling past  
is full of edged regrets, as old folk are  
who see that not forever can such sunlight last.

But know full well that no such looks persist,  
nor forwardness that offers all its charms,

albeit that the early air enlist  
such memories of mornings with their loving arms.

## 9. Model

The unfair heritage of former powers,  
the droughts and toil beneath a brutal sun,  
the thrum of cotton mills, the sweatshop hours:  
through untold drudgery the thread is spun.

The worlds of fashion with their febrile dreams,  
that smell of profit in the high-street chains;  
the blatant marketing that only seems  
more travesties than were the last campaigns.

A breathing entity that everywhere  
extends the body's own capricious need  
for poise in stealth and movement, though it wear  
to gossamer both top and business tweed.

A little girl who has her hopes expressed  
in flagrant declarations quietly kept:  
alert, self-knowing, with that waking dressed  
in case the springtime in her over-slept.

## 10. The Crocus

The most inviolable, where coloured plumes  
will ache on upwards into earnestness,  
and where the thinly petalled globes compress  
a wealth of splendour into steep-walled rooms.

And there, within those sheer extended lengths  
of fluting upwards into open sight,  
comes colour vexing slowly out of white  
to strange portentousness of pointed strengths.

In globed rebelliousness the petals fold  
in chilly ambience the April skies,  
but brighter, deeper hued, as though all lies  
still in the sacrament of winter's hold.

## 11. Walking Out

Today I'm walking out in pleasure as  
my limbs, my body and my high-heeled shoes,  
withdrawn from winter, have the spirit rise  
to graciousness that every woman knows.

Between the homage of approving eyes,  
and Red Sea passages to pick and choose,  
I feel the clasp and lift of plumage as  
in pageantry this breathing body goes.

Whole lives are mine and in their voyage go  
as did the mariners on troubled seas,  
exposed to dangers till the spice isles lay  
about in blue and misted opulence.

When, after storms, the lengthening evening calms  
to crinolines of feckless, surf-edged waves,  
I shall let my cargo down of dreams  
and incantations as occasion weaves

into the troubled hearts of men's desires,  
those hopes' dominions that they see in us —  
who are immutable, as are their tears  
at being faced by what true beauty is.

## 12. A Toast

The sunny air and long facades  
of stone and marble promenades  
between the lake and junipers  
were memorably and wholly hers.

The carved, once ducal coat of arms,  
the tenancies and scattered farms,  
the all-but-sacred mystery  
of precedent and family,

the very things that we must think  
as illegitimate, and link  
with all that should be put aside,  
assembled in their feudal pride

make beings who were born to rule,  
whatever much-ribboned fool  
she'd danced before, bewitched and wed,  
incline or not that addled head.

Which spread to everyone: the maids,  
the cook, the butler, umpteen trades  
in truth subsisting on the place  
and not-too smiling madam's grace.

Their future prospects took the form  
of how that woman was: the storm  
or pleasantries or sour disgrace  
all written on that morning face.

And how they walked! Such airs they had  
that Sheba's queen was not so clad:  
that imperturbability  
in body's right to wholly be.

But always bound by how it's done,  
the sumptuousness not overrun

by modish fashion or by thought,  
but long-remembered years at court.

Indescribably they knew  
themselves in person, shape and hue:  
their body was as body wore,  
with always licence to explore

all manner of their inward self  
befitting one of rank and wealth.  
Mere gelt was much beneath them, got  
illegally, as like as not,

from trade, or factories, linen mills,  
those harbingers of coming ills  
in agitation, votes for men,  
the fault ignored that let in ten.

And so we think of them towards  
the end as much the age records:  
forever descending marble stairs,  
erect, imperial, with distant airs

that like the odour of a fine champagne  
retain the splendour of a reign  
that's past and done with, yet can stay  
the toast of one full, happy day.



### 13. Bodies in their Breathing Shape

Though all is passing, their eternal ways  
we glimpse in walking, when the summer heats  
condense to fragrances and evening haze  
in long processions through the shaded streets  
of well-cut ankle, thigh and swelling breast:  
a limpid architecture where the arms  
ward off whatever forwardness professed  
in sun-flushed modesty of moving charms:  
both blessed and beautiful, who only wear  
the rich embodiment of brimming air.

And while the lingering summer evenings bathe  
the streets with warm benevolence, and throw  
a shimmering indolence on trees, and swathe  
the world eternally with that soft glow,  
a flushed contentment lights each vagrant's face  
who holds her moment to our passing gaze.  
And then there's reticence and smiling grace  
returned to innocence, a bloom that stays  
immured long afterwards in us, now clad  
with all the promises it one time had.

So no doubt thought the Greeks, half reconciled  
by beauty to this senseless world of pain  
and wayward sophistry that in a child  
dissolves to sunlight after passing rain.  
They had their rapt processions along  
the shore to worship gods in annual rites,  
as though obedience in words and song  
bestowed companionship: by gods' own lights  
they were thereafter rendered whole and one  
in common loveliness beneath the sun.

## 14. Instruct Us

Into that mutinous and sudden hair  
where Circe has her solemn lair,  
is brought the acquiescence of the thighs  
where daily hurt and anger dies:  
lady, in that soft and sylvan light  
give us long delight.

And teach us happiness that late or soon  
we venerate that breathy swoon,  
bewitched by those sweet murmurs we assume  
the labours of that pliant room:  
lady, let our eyes be further praise:  
lead us, let our gaze

evoke the miracles the nights we passed.  
For though the eyes were shuttered fast,  
we sensed that softly breathing body stir  
with arms about us, till there were  
but festivals of loving where we men  
were blessed and found again.

Come, what incantations weave the spell  
about that modest wishing well?  
Let those who never ventured out of doors  
in parables of fabled shores  
but say a shimmering and holy land  
will lie unasked to hand

if we attending to her wants are blessed  
to have our own deep hurts addressed,  
and sense beneath the empires of her dress  
that music's further loveliness,  
by this inhabiting that larger you  
in all we hope to do.

You go before us as some heavenly light  
accrediting what's just and bright.  
Then through the wilderness that makes our days  
without you, hem our ways  
with your forgiveness, my lady: all  
at passion's flounce and fall.

## 15. Azimuths

What vessels on uncharted seas  
could be as forwarding as these  
high voyagers forever tossed  
by expectations, oceans crossed  
on azimuths of one frail day?  
Walk in beauty, stoop and pray:  
attend to what the others say:

We go to undiscovered ends,  
reward of work or caring wife,  
towards the suburbs of our friends  
and children rounding off our life.  
To each a satisfaction where  
we act as all who'd venture there  
in vagaries of human care.

But these coy beauties loitering by,  
with scarce a nod to swelling breast,  
would cast a shamefaced, scornful eye  
to be accounted as the rest.  
They make of prospects as some phrase  
condenses latency from haze  
inherent in their own high ways.

So rise the choruses for good or ill  
at reprobate or blessed of youth:  
half lies, half envy, such as fill  
the happenstance with doubtful truth.  
Because there's naught but what they win  
by passion on that dewy skin  
to them assigned is every sin.

But all should know within their pride  
how meek are pointed breasts put out,  
what hesitation holds the stride,  
or petalled softness in each pout.

These are as others had they scope  
to make their prospects as their hope  
and go on down that darkening slope.

## 16. The Heart's First Fullness

The heart's first fullness does not come again,  
and bodies given us do not re-bloom,  
but ask and querulously of how and when  
we pay admission to that modest room

where all earth's treasures are accounted lost,  
and willingly, for one brief hour of bliss:  
the fall from grace, the pain, and all the cost  
that follows, pell-mell, from the slightest kiss.

And so we sell ourselves, and by degrees  
become no better than the most despised,  
those summer's coronals that winter sees  
but distantly, dishevelled and disprized.

But when that garlanded and negligent  
of locks become perplexed by morning rain,  
how brilliantly the tiny teardrops lent  
their silver diadem to sprinkled pain,

which, mirroring all the world, must seem  
a chill come early to that heavenly sight,  
and those infractions that we can't redeem  
from this hard world will take their flight.

## 17. Summer Rain

What portents come to us as quiet as rain,  
who know our only source of comfort lies  
among the smiling levees of her eyes  
and emperies that sated bodies gain?

The calm within that irised counterpane,  
beneath mascara of her turbaned skies,  
will bloom with wonder and a dark surprise —  
and so must tell us how we may regain

those glorianas from the gathered breeze  
that carries all before it till it fills  
the weighty canopies — lest we begin

to know the sad processions of the trees  
that make of innocence perpetual ills  
through worlds of leaflessness they wander in.

## 18. You're Matted In My Eyelids

You're matted in my eyelids, are not kind  
to that maternal thing I'd be.

In stout and unclothed probity they stand,  
my breasts of many-hued but human clay.

In me there is no sauntering summer breeze  
but more the spurt and drench of hair.

Like the limpet, hard and clenched, my gaze,  
and un beholden to you what I hear.

As though of warmest amber were my skin  
and ambergris has filled my pores,  
hold me, weigh me, have me flaunting on  
in rich proposals that each prospect wears.

I am my office and my future hope,  
am larger always than my sins. I wait  
as some astonished consciousness of shape  
will in the morning clothe itself with light.

I am the blessedness that body wins  
to be its own intent, and bear again  
in rugged fortitude those burly runs  
that must at length collect quiescent man.



## 19. The Two of Us

Freshly laundered, neat and pressed,  
in Sunday clothes so stoutly dressed,  
we walked to church as walk we should:  
the two of us, both you and me,  
along the paths of serge-clad modesty.

We brushed our teeth, and lay at night  
apart, alone, a pleasing sight  
to those of upright parenthood.  
No, nothing untoward was there:  
our virgin prospects stayed as brief as air.

To school we trooped, from school trooped back,  
our lives moved forward on their ritual track,  
and if at times we were not good  
our waywardness was not too far  
from tears and tantrums, as all children are.

We breathed, we prospered, ate our fill  
of civic virtues and of homework still —  
and nothing, nothing understood  
of that fierce press in need and pride,  
that to an earnestness is close allied.

Those days, my dearest, I now think  
were written in the sternest ink,  
but we, as children in the wood,  
with crumbs of comfort lost our way  
and would, as parents said, now have to pay.

Eternally, and for the two of us —  
for rapture is as rapture does —  
I must now speak of maidenhood:  
old-fashioned virtues, prissy things,  
of which the heart in torment sings and sings.

## 20. Trailing Sleeves

It is the spring, the reckless spring  
that brings to lovers mortal pain,  
in hurt that tempers everything  
as sunlit shadows dull with rain.

So, is the heart as are the limbs,  
entangled but in essence free?  
Indulgent of those childish whims,  
committed, but would feckless be?

How brief the torment in the street  
in temperaments of glad green leaves;  
the flouncing chicas turn and meet  
the would-be in their trailing sleeves

of scent and posing. Virgin powers  
inherent in the picture shows  
of brief disclosing: hours and hours  
are given to their smallest clothes.

Make haste, the undone breathlessness  
of passion does not come again,  
and after is but wantonness  
that plays with us, poor mortal men.

## 21. For You

For you I'm hung up in this web  
of loneliness and tainted skin,  
and worse, the recognitions stab  
me with the reckless things I've done.

For you alone, and to my shame,  
I've given up what pride I had.  
The trees conspire together, seem  
to whisper how my good name fled.

My ecstasy is foul disease,  
my skin is gross with leprosy.  
Undone! the ragged body cries;  
its howls accost me every day.

All my looks are hateful lusts.  
I cannot walk now in the street:  
my looks, my legs, my heavy breasts  
shout rabid things I would be at.

Unclothed, my limbs were given you,  
obediently, for you to kiss:  
from sweet to bitterness of myrrh  
is wretchedness become my dress.

## 22. Half in Indolence

Half in indolence and half asleep,  
the petals of the peony  
thick close to keep  
their ruffed and crinkled splendour furled  
against those festivals that have a world  
entrammelled by its gaudy shows.

In airy nothings let her lose herself,  
in such as give the bodice breath,  
but there drink deep  
of sanctity the breast assumes  
in opening slowly in her blooms,  
as such the wild magnolia knows.

And in that lustrous, freckled fire of skin,  
with veins that murmur deep beneath,  
repose and sleep  
through mutinies of marbled hue  
to nacreous colours, those rich-blessed few  
whose own contentment such rich pleasure sows.

## 23. The Poppy

Cast from the ploughman's hand in bright excess,  
the scattered blotches of the poppies sow  
their fumigations into depths below,  
as though they too would know forgetfulness.

Beneath the wind-occasioned, nodding head  
of arrant wilfulness, each stem perceives  
a fibrous web of rootstock that retrieves  
its food from rotted kingdoms of the dead.

The furrowed fields, thin-tilthed with clay-and-flints  
to let the porous Chalk lands breathe beneath,  
the beech tree grove that stands as thick-set wreath  
through which the tonsured daylight darkly glints

are hidden parables: the golden torque  
or arrowhead that's rusted with the soil  
and amber-baked as is the adder's coil,  
or dance of harebell and the careless talk

of goddesses, whose moist and fragrant mouth  
is in the blue-soaked goodness all around  
in cloud and coppice, where the close-cropped ground  
will rise to open wheat-fields in the south.

## 24. Forfeits

Each to each the plain birds call  
as once again the minutes fall  
to quiet contentment in the grass,  
while centuries and centuries will pass

unnoticed in the nodding corn  
that's ripened, reaped and so reborn,  
as are the little lives of men,  
collected and resown again.

The inquisition of the flowers  
indignantly would cast its powers  
on both of us as we too lay  
about them on that unspent day.

And when the last of daylight folds  
itself to muffled purple-golds,  
and everywhere's a peaceful glow  
that only faithful toilers know,

then hurt and bitterness and pain  
are no more permanent than rain  
that drenches earth but then is gone  
as intermittent sunshine on

the sights around us that we hold  
as daylight in our eyelids' fold:  
the scent of grass and fingers' touch  
whose very sensing seems too much

to understand as round us go  
the coloured jousts of picture show,  
that frank and elemental blaze  
which animates our passing ways.

We are, and feel ourselves, alive  
in this rich world through which we strive,

but have no patent on, and pass  
as summer's footsteps through the grass.

In brimmed magnificence that slow  
condenses as we thoughtful go:  
one day, one hour, no more than that,  
which we were happy in, and sat

about with friends, or more than friend,  
the one we'd hold to till the end —  
that was and will be, ever bring  
some part to that encompassing

the pilgrim in us, going on  
where warmth and kindness ever shone,  
to that eternal, bridal day  
when we shall all our forfeits pay.

## 25. Words

Girls gone in their confounding  
of every 'hope to die':  
aloof with that abounding  
clenched and fretful sigh.

How well I thought I knew them  
through every fragrant mouth:  
where recklessness did not condemn  
the hot fields of the south.

Give me back that schoolgirl candour  
of brief and freckled gaze:  
the goose shall have his gander:  
and we our tangled ways.

You must be pure as loving sends.  
So tell me what to do.  
I am the bestest best of friends  
and pledge myself to you.

Remember then that gentleness  
is what we do not touch.  
The secret of true happiness  
is not to hold too much.

For ever the heart has seasons  
and what is tagged comes last:  
far, far from time's own reasons  
comes the spell we cast.

Range you far in rainy weather,  
and when we both are old  
we may then, laughing, lie together  
and be as words foretold.



## 26. How Many Scents

How many scents has every haunt of hers.  
What joys and bitterness at each address.  
But tell me, when I'm gone, who yet remembers  
how well-becoming was that full-cut dress?

The streets inhabited are flat and dull  
and tired at endlessly remembered things.  
The sunset skies are not so beautiful,  
nor does the day have sudden wings.

Dear loving God, I must be growing old  
and fretful now, and cannot hold my tears.  
And is it only sadnesses enfold  
the hopes and triumphs of the years?

My dear, my only dearest, I can see  
how beautiful you were, will always be  
about, continually, if distantly  
till all that past will gutter out in me.

Like stars that turn about their distant pole  
that's hidden from us and our mundane sight,  
aspiring then to fill one common whole  
abroad and brooding on that larger night:

how beautiful they were, those saddened eyes  
that told me candidly of all the rest,  
compassionate as when the clouded daylight dies  
in smoky torments bannered through the west.

## 27. Amsterdam

It is through others that we live  
in this harsh world of make-believe:  
proportionally to what we give  
we gain from others by their leave.

So run our tiresome homilies,  
those Sunday schools of sermons, bland  
and trite. I will tell the how it is:  
the hourglass runs on cindered sand.

The grand cremations in the glass  
sift out our time in bitterness.  
Accumulating, still we pass  
from fond abundance into less.

A word, a single word had stayed  
the hurt in those we have betrayed  
with honesty, and so have paid  
with tourist strolls in that arcade  
of shop-front lechery. We go  
with fickle hearts now justly spurned,  
with lies come back to make us know  
how penitence was justly earned.

## 28. Only Half Awake

The bed, the chair, the varied heaps of clothes,  
for you were never one for tidiness,  
but gave impetuously your person up  
as hands are prompt about a loving cup.  
Here all that captivating wealth of dress  
and hair are only as the air betrothes  
itself to odour in these mouldering rooms  
so redolent of ends and scattered blooms.

My dear, my only dear, with me believe  
there are no heavens to come but what is here.  
No overbearing hangs upon the air:  
in shapes and odours there is no one there,  
no tunes or melodies enchant the ear,  
and tell the listening heart that it must grieve  
for what was given us that is no more  
until we stand upon that further shore

where all's forgiven us, if so it is.  
Who knows? It may be where we once again  
relive our errors, heartbreak, hurt and loss  
but now continually, where pain and dross  
must constitute the little lives of men,  
those stiff ambitions that have come to this  
despair and turpitude, this place of rest  
in which, perpetually, we're ever guest.

The odour here has not a bitter taste  
but sombre, as beneath the ripened fruit  
there lingers something of the honeyed flower,  
an over-sweetness which, long hour by hour,  
has so bedrugged us on our fervent route  
that all things chosen were in reckless haste  
across itineraries we were to take  
reluctantly and only half awake.

## 29. New Begun

Tell me you are still the same,  
tell me I am not to blame.  
Tell me that the mocking eyes  
will not as formerly enrol  
your mischief only but be wise.

Tell me that your look betrothes  
the greedy fabric to the clothes,  
tell me as in former days  
there is for you no simple stroll  
but empery in full displays.

Tell me that you hold your court  
beyond what we poor mortals thought,  
even that your eyes conspire  
to be but windows of the soul  
and so to lambent dark retire.

Tell me like the golden sun  
you sweep the earth and then are one  
with all its shy inhabitants —  
the mouse, tomcat and the mole,  
inviting each to brief romance.

Imagining how would be days  
when locked into that smiling gaze,  
and how that looking could be spun  
in one but self-delighting whole:  
tell me we have new begun.

## 30. Summer Nights

The strange possessiveness of summer haze,  
the stench of paint, of tar and brimming diesel fumes,  
the fierce and hot bewilderment of days  
that grow oppressive in the upstairs rooms.

Beneath there simmers a breathy gentleness,  
the heavy body one with its confining scents,  
though frank licentiousness is still the dress  
that folds to courtesy and common sense.

Bewildering avenues where canopies  
of glad green leaves forever given to sauntering:  
all things complicit with the lifting breeze,  
tousled and abundant in everything.

A richness in the bodies through moist nights  
and opened in their ripening to a restlessness  
that agitates our person, and invites  
such hopes of overwhelming happiness.

## 31. Quiet as Soot

Obliterating and as quiet as soot  
accumulate the footfalls in the street:  
in open shoes and sandals, every foot  
immaculate, with toenails trimmed and neat.

The summer's dry cicada sound of shoes  
more comes with evening, for the morning's press  
must speak of urgency, of steps that choose  
to know no settling regency of dress.

But prompt and purposeful as footings mark  
how tough and pliable perspiring skin  
wards off those gross enchantments of the dark,  
when sad Persephone who's deep within

calls out continually: make good your days,  
in your processions walk on proud and free,  
for not forever does the springtime blaze  
appoint you sole-occasioned nominee.

Across the earth, and through the darkening streets  
as sun turns westward, swell the lemming tides:  
a swirl of dresses floating on through summer heats  
until that long enrapturing dream subsides.

## 32. The Harebell

Most fastidious, most delicate,  
the belle of toy-town in her thin blue dress,  
the nodding harebell's under no duress  
but steps and flounces like a marionette

that's held by yet the thinnest hair  
of stem, that's wiry though, as will appear  
in shore or Downland winds, when you can hear  
the trail of crystal tinklings through the air.

Thousands of them with a white inside  
which are the stamens, though they could be feet  
or crinoline that's satin-tied and neat,  
which no prim modesty will make her hide.

Of heaths and stony places, dry dune sands,  
though native to these islands, still apart  
and listening for the distant ball to start  
in these transplanted, cold and different lands

where there is order's seemliness, no place  
for breathy honesty or natural skin,  
but all refined and painted, kept within  
a tailored petulance of wind-tossed grace.

### 33. Forgive Us

Forgive us for the centuries of loss  
in women finally we left unwed,  
our gross duplicity, who come across  
as negligent in heart or head.

Forgive us constantly that all the pain,  
the desolation and the hope we made  
so willingly, withholding till again  
the recompense we owe be paid.

For we brute men go ever forging on  
to have some name or body wholly ours:  
and at each conquest is affection gone,  
and promises of golden hours:

that we will love you, always, only you,  
and, while such dereliction pays,  
forgo all others, truly, and undo  
the promises in rivals' days.



## 34. The Long Summer Days

At once companionable when out we lie  
among inhabitants of dotted flowers  
at ease beneath the wide, untroubled sky

that seems protective of us, and with powers  
we hold instinctive in a summer day  
of fragrant indolence in noonday hours.

It hardly matters, therefore, whom we pay  
our court to candidly, or let our smiles  
but hover over what we do not say.

Around is summer's breeze and mile on miles  
of quiet contentment where the waist-high grass  
will screen wild beauty in her studied wiles.

Aware of this, we let occasions pass,  
nor have habitual questions make their stir.  
True hours of happiness are much too sparse

to bandy words about some him or her.  
Relent and let them go as dresses sigh  
with long, long summer days that simply were.

## 35. How Many Scents

How many are the scents that make up you?  
The warm, maternal smell of cotton cloths  
about the bodice and the pinched-in waist,  
that hungry pungency both rich and chaste  
in troubling pheromones for which the moths  
will flutter radiantly through evening dew.

The scents that wake Persephone as through the fields  
of earnest decorousness the days were long,  
when afterwards she had that rendezvous to keep  
until in popped innocence she fell asleep  
and left reluctantly, though here the song  
is men still harvesting their happy yields:

the succulence of arm, the winkling hip,  
the legs in striding movement down the street,  
the consciousness reposing in itself —  
all have abundant, rich and inner wealth  
of being in themselves, and so will meet  
the promises of smiling eye or lip.

And when the quiet evening calls across  
the misted autumn lands and bids each breast,  
hip, leg, arm be no more seen,  
withdraw to seamliness in gabardine  
and boots and woolly things, that inward zest  
for life but hibernates, is not a loss

but some continuing by other means:  
an underworld of slips, bikini briefs  
and tops, that turns the long-remembered sights  
at each slow dimming out of bedroom lights  
to childhood catechisms, quaint beliefs  
one time vouchsafed in us and quarantines.

## 36. The Cast-Off Shoe

They're in our clothes, our cell-phones, half our shoes  
and in each stitch and solder dot disclose  
a finger latency they will not lose;  
no more than grandiflora roses choose  
a wealth of petal-work they never use,  
but ruffle out each lip-tinged hue.

How hard it is that every mother's son,  
despite the urgency in setting out,  
in fights, in tussles, and in battles won  
must gain his dues as does the speeding sun,  
and then, as most of us, come slow undone  
when sand has run but halfway through.

We hear around us in the suits we wear,  
our homes, our businesses, our sporting grounds,  
the roar of crowds or in the pews at prayer.  
Professionals, pauper and the millionaire  
will leave their light touch on us unaware,  
whatever we might think or do.

We stare with stupefaction as the bills  
for perfumes, underwear and restaurants mount  
to what's unpayable, which wholly fills  
our monthly annotated Visa bills,  
while her parading here and there distils  
acknowledgement of what is due.

But then how beautiful she is, at which  
the strolls through smart boutiques and changing rooms  
become in retrospect the winning pitch,  
to make the maxed-out credit cards enrich  
the demi-monde deciding how of which  
entitlement might come to you.

The mock repentance that is shrewd and meant,  
the changing preferences we can't undo  
for skimpy things that seem but barefaced theft,  
the tensed unknotting of the weave and weft  
of last idolatry, with which we're left  
in one petite and cast off shoe.

## 37. Wind and Rain

Give by, give by, the old refrain:  
the trees throughout the wind and rain,  
will put their leaves on, take them off.  
The clouds in consort kiss and cough.  
Let us take those gentle hands  
and curtsey over quiet lands.  
My little dear, how life is lost.

The wind in mocking every day,  
the newly minted made to stay:  
not here, not there, nor everywhere,  
but in the turmoil of the air.  
So let us make a new accord  
and, turning, sailing far abroad,  
be cognisant of oceans crossed.

Some world of loving or of work,  
some promise that we cannot shirk,  
nor count the pennies we become  
by staying still the constant sum.  
Let us throw off prim-eyed gaze,  
and running heedless as the days  
be prodigal of all the cost.

## 38. Love Once Mine

Love once mine, where are you sleeping,  
who is in your perfumed keeping?  
Does your breath entreat the day  
to be yet brighter, have the nights  
more folded into fresh delights  
that waking there must long delay?

Who is in that amplier living,  
still insistent, still forgiving?  
Who will have contented limbs  
assume their dewed and nestled form?  
Who will leave you soft and warm,  
attentive to your murmured whims?

On whose head does hot breath falter,  
or loving neck the soft arms halter?  
So you hope and so you may  
admonish him with every charm.  
Flare the fingers from the palm:  
be you gentle through the day.

Yet if that heart were quick of learning  
should we be the more discerning?  
False as Troilus lips have kissed,  
how artfully you turn the cheek  
and take another in a week,  
but, but, but do not desist.

How droll and empty would be dreaming  
if of goodness you were seeming.  
Or glowing passions in those eyes  
retained no stealth or studied guile,  
and we, in innocence the while,  
weren't one with all those winning lies.

## 39. In Truth

What a curse these changing fashions are,  
which currently is for the shortest shorts  
that show a undone drop of leg that's far  
from apt or pleasing to an old man's thoughts.

Remember you who queenly float on by  
this shambling, panama'd but smiling man,  
as much as you he had the practised eye  
for telling truth from tease and courtesan.

If beauty knew how old age is, that youth  
how soon must put its preening splendours by,  
it would be kinder to us, more in truth  
repenting of that flourished length of thigh.

I beg, you, beauties: put aside such airs  
and do not follow each peculiar fad,  
lest all those fancies catch him unawares  
with untold prospects that he one time had.

We are the same, in truth, both you and I,  
grow sadder, older, not much wiser: try  
to think of me as you are now, and by  
all that counts, turn down that knowing eye.

## 40. The Common Broomrape

Parasitic, in appearance viperous,  
with tubular and clustered filmy chutes  
of pure ingenuousness, that quietly roots  
on other grassland plants. There treacherously

it draws up waters, sugars, needed fill  
of minerals and other nutrients:  
a long, thick, pinkish stem that vents  
no leaves or proper trace of chlorophyll.

No trace in this of virtuous industry  
or thrift, or doing good by small degrees:  
no, it's all or nothing, here one sees  
the unrepentant, great performer, bel-esprit

of summer grasslands, heathy places, fast  
deceiver of a thousand showy heads:  
profuse and purple-veined, it does not spread,  
but from the earth throws up its venal cast.



## 41. Those Better Days

The days will come to us, and days will go  
and leave us wanting all that's here below,  
though given warmly, wholly and in good part  
to those who'd lose themselves within the sheets:  
good lovers who must pump up body's heats  
and not be dilatory to win the heart.

What can I say the more? That years will pass  
and dancing fickleness be put to grass?  
Yes, you'll grow old at last as I am too,  
though smiling, thinking of those better days,  
to wonder, no doubt with a strange amaze,  
at wild, abandoned things we did not do.

## 42. Then So Was I

For as you were, then so was I,  
and all the summer long  
beneath the bright blue, heralding and forward sky  
poured out that glittering song.

And all was in our reckoning:  
how full those prospects lay!  
Who knows through every wind-encompassed, feckless thing  
what hopes our hearts convey?

But all we said and all we did  
upon those happy scenes,  
were only as the ever fractious wind would bid  
in trusted go-betweens.

Of my first rib-bone you were made,  
and in my touch was yours.  
How softly into dusk were laughing bodies laid,  
and warm the day's applause.

Whatever we commemorate  
while still the wind has speech,  
let's praise that unrepentant, strange, transfiguring state,  
and not what age would teach.

## 43. Hayfields

The smell of hayfields after rain, the scent  
that's over-sweet in May's rich blossomings  
the hint of pain that recollection brings  
of things thought permanent but only lent

a little while, or so the moralist  
would shout in beauty's heedless ears.  
Imperceptibly all disappears  
till, inexplicably, it's wholly missed.

The warmth of bodies that were once adored  
so fervently, so reverently that all  
we gathered there was our first fall  
towards entanglements we should afford.

If not continually: the pointed breast,  
the smiling mystery of eye and lip,  
the drop of hemline from the touted hip  
are fond fraternities that find their rest

in spells and conjurations, candid stir  
of congregations in the peopled air  
and ever thought on as we fare  
to lingering essences of what we were.

## 44. Like Fumes of Animals

Like fumes of animals that Circe made  
inhabitants of her entrancing den,  
for all Odysseus had there betrayed  
his home to gullible and hungry men.

How dull and ordinary seems the day,  
bereft of happiness with you away.  
We work, we pay our taxes, only stay  
a touch regretful of that long delay

till you are here and warm and one with us.  
So come and fill the sudden day with worth,  
be rich in us, and yet more generous  
to give that first enchantment back its birth.

## 45. And So She Sleeps

She sleeps, and in that underworld of white  
must have the vole and field mouse keep  
their cold and whiskered nose away.  
Nor let the sharp-toothed ferret sleep  
too long within her smiling sight.

So have no drab or humid woodland smells  
accost the spirit living here,  
nor let unbuttoned sounds betray  
their discord to her tufted ear  
the while her breathing sinks and swells.

And in those citadels that speak of love,  
within the soft repose of arms,  
we'll see her solemn majesty display  
the high insignia of her charms  
encompassing as clouds above.

Continually, impossibly, such wealth  
is in the prospect for our eyes,  
that here are summer lands, each day  
more opening out to soft blue skies  
that offer us untroubled health.

## 46. Unless They're Fetishists

Unless they're fetishists, few men can know  
the wealth of fabrics here through which they breathe:  
it is in finery their natures flow,  
a sense of circumspection that they leave

upon the humid pageants of the air,  
that wealth of spectacle and coloured scent,  
and all the majesty that once was there,  
to which entitlement was briefly lent.

No doubt years later, on the bedside chair  
the bra and panty and the girdle slip  
are not so celebrated, not so rare,  
nor long imagined with the flare of hip.

No, dull and ordinary, a plain expense  
that's itemized as spouse's clothing bill —  
so much of this and that and common sense,  
an apt extension to their own goodwill.

When all that rapture will be somewhere far  
from this first person and the worlds they range,  
who was no mortal but an avatar  
of something passé, but still passing strange.

## 47. Leaders

Let clothes assume whatever shape  
will give immediacy its outward grace,  
so are our lives attired, where none escape  
where skin and clothing interface.

Who wants a world of as we are,  
of foul anatomy that doctors see,  
those worlds in passing that are never far  
from stale and sad sufficiency?

Yet the beautiful are not dismayed,  
appropriating in their ways  
the different hairstyle, or the different shade  
of lipstick that their choice repays.

Nor are they purposeless automatons,  
or witless props or manikins,  
nor is their calculated gold and bronze  
a product of their perfect skins,

but are their leaders: what they wear today  
the rich and fashionable declare  
the orders, darling, none will disobey,  
retune their sports car, do their hair.

Nor should they when such effort goes  
in just that jacket or the choice of shoes:  
whole months of window-shopping: no one knows  
how hard it is to pick and choose.

Irrepressible, insufferable, hated most  
by dearest childhood friends, they party on,  
all too conscious that the smartest host  
will miss the flashlights when they're gone.

## 48. Aaron's Rod

What magnificence is in this Aaron's rod  
inhabiting old churchyards, far around  
in wastelands, sunny banks and broken ground  
that it, biennially, may speak to God.

But one year squat, a loose rosette of leaves,  
white-felted, hairy as a maiden aunt  
that's grown quite homely, like some cabbage plant  
throughout long summer months, which then retrieves

its former loftiness, unbending spike  
of primrose flowers, paler though, each bract  
curiously prodigal with them, more in fact  
a mendicant, or clumsy look-alike

of those rough friars who trod the rugged miles  
from holy festivals to hiring fair:  
who rang their bells the same, and had no care  
for church indulgences, beyond all wiles,

impassioned and towering over church and fen,  
or towns and dynasties, time altogether —  
indifferent to opinions or the changing weather,  
reborn each summer into stalwart men.



## 49. Old Manor Walls

Much of me is in old manor walls,  
the moss on flagstones, homely loaf:  
you find me in much-folded, ink-stained wills,  
the patched and mended bedspread cloth.

I am the chipped, rejected, second set,  
the mute acceptance which the standby has,  
the rusted gas ring that is never lit,  
the flare the damp match makes, the earthy kiss.

Knowing mine is not of regal wealth,  
nor even spendthrift but as softly lying,  
accepting much of age is ague and tilth,  
the husbandry of harvest and of sowing,

I am the old, worn-out that always is  
beneath the gaucheries of summer green,  
before the paupering that winter sees  
retrieve from homelessness the tribes of men.

## 50. The Carriage of Our Gaze

I think we carry all our former days  
within the careless carriage of our gaze,  
a world we look on kindly now because  
of that rich benison of how it was.

In thoughts of that companionship, we lie  
where blissful body and contented eye  
become so open to us, promising  
an endless tenure for a pampered king.

A certain time of year, a sound or scent  
returns the fullness that was only lent:  
I do not know if you will think of me  
as I do you, and now, continually.

You were and are my salt, my living bread,  
the hurt that nourishes this nodding head  
that I shall hold you, always, ever one  
when this poor interlude of life be done.

Yet to those lands I shall not come again,  
to these far haunts of you with other men.  
Rest peacefully, and smile, and maybe earth  
that thwarts our purposes transmits some worth

to what we should have been, both you and I,  
who were not born to stop and question why:  
my dear and dearest, with these strange hopes dressed,  
remain as once you were, reviled and blessed.

## 51. Cloud-Soaked Hinterlands

From cloud-soaked hinterlands, corroded trees,  
the miles of cul-de-sacs and corner shops  
that lead to rained-on wedding days,  
and twosome lives with nothing there  
beyond more keepsakes in more heaps of drawers:  
how they blossom out and fall  
between the post and coffee break,  
in pot-bound beauties bred to go  
forever onwards, sure to make  
the best of secretaries with tooth-flossed smiles  
that eddy over miles and miles  
of politics and office chores,  
the desks, the filing cabinets, wall-  
to-wall of carpeting in sober, useful greys —  
like dust that's fining through the air  
of life spent elsewhere, thinking, not to grow  
alive with sunlight and the breeze  
that fills, invigorates and never stops.

A breath that's life itself, which other lungs  
have filled with tenderness, though swelling on  
as tall legs rise from fastened shoes,  
a first embodiment of rich estate.  
Then Eve was one with us and generous  
in all such matters menfolk lack:  
more palpable, more give and take  
that naturalises hurtful things  
to fresh occasions when we wake.  
We saw as adumbrations in the air  
a universal, solemn care  
for what comes singing after us —  
no feints or parables of black-  
and-white, but incantations of those fervent hues  
that make us pack our future mate  
with just those festivals the summer brings

in congress of a thousand tongues  
so close and kind to us, however gone

to good suburban, fenced-in lives,  
the lawns immaculate, the pathways swept,  
and all the payments up to date.

Where are they now, the maddening creatures,  
the dear, dear bodies with their varied potions,  
cleaning pads, the stubborn jars  
of God knows what to have the skin  
smoothed out to sweetness, swell and rise  
to fill the bodices of far within?

Those vast imprudences the days disclose  
in maypole rituals of the clothes:  
why would we trouble with such notions  
if life were not of strange bazaars?

So make that first unfolding in us profligate  
with wildest of impromptu features  
that warmth of afterwards bring no surprise,  
but charm and candour that survives  
in laughing naturalness we shall accept.

## 52. Again I See

Again I see  
my father sat beneath his reading lamp,  
how quiet with catalogue I'd be  
at coin or stamp.

The window frost,  
the warmth of sunlight, and the rain's soft fall:  
unfathomable in childhoods lost.  
Beyond recall

each look or face  
particularly, though the smell of loam  
still conjures up some happy place,  
and warmth of home.

And names of those  
we don't remember now, a seamless blur.  
Remorselessly, cold Lethe flows  
on him, on her.

## 53. Each Given Hour

There is no fall of fruit or petalled flower  
but yet commemorates its kernelled hour.  
Above the tangled trees we heard  
the piteousness that is each cloud,  
while woken pebbles in the streams conferred  
fresh music on us, new endowed.  
For, otherwise, we men have little space  
to celebrate that childhood grace  
that claims a portion in each golden hour.

But run our long days out in dusty rain  
read parables in brooks, declare the stain  
of winter on the sunburnt earth  
is punishment for purpled days misspent.  
The progenies that were our birth,  
from which in ignorance we're ever sent,  
will have no agencies to hold in fee  
the cloud, or hilltop, field or tree  
but blank occasions of our joys and pain.

The sensory inwardness we can't restore  
in leaves that slowly float to coppice floor,  
the trails the shambling badgers use,  
the spring-clothed blackbird with its glossy coat,  
raw cone the tufted squirrel chews,  
the red-eyed squint of weasel, fox or stoat,  
the adder's opening in the rotted bole,  
the florid windings of the vole:  
all things most magical but now no more.

Because of this or that. . .The fault is ours  
who walk distracted through the changing hours  
and no more use those gifts aright.  
No semblance here to childhood dreams,  
no dryad world of fresh-limbed hours,  
or unclothed deities entrancing streams

in bubbled syllables of tree and sky,  
but what our natures can't deny,  
the ebbing, slowly out, of all our powers.

## 54. Broom

Broom, green broom: what simple upland songs  
amend that clemency to local needs:  
to sweet inhabiting, and such that feeds  
a wish for guardianship? — and so belongs

to open woodlands, heaths and shingle tracts:  
an all-encompassing and leafless plant  
that flowers gloriously, but can't supplant  
its dull economy of rural facts.

It's needed. Was so. Surely when we see  
beneath the thatch the carefully burnished look  
of pot and warming-pan in inglenook  
that speaks of sweet retired tranquillity,

we bowdlerize how hard those rough lives were,  
the thousand hurts that toughened up the skin,  
and denigrate the wilder life within  
that, having led and used them, would inter

them far from churchyard plot, on the windswept moor,  
or cloud-corroded heaths and skyline hills:  
all places where an undeserving sadness fills  
the annals of this ill- but fiercely-rooted poor.



## 55. As Is the Summer Sky

As cold and distant as the pale blue sky  
when under, all at hazard, out we lie,  
at one with interludes of clouds and trees,  
and traffic's murmur or the muted bees.

With clean shirt on, we'd buff up shoes,  
review the morning's tasks as though we'd choose  
to be then different, have our lives  
rebuilt in other children, workmates, wives.

In venturing on from what has been  
we'd come across a pristine sylvan scene,  
there start again and, out of hand,  
would cultivate some virgin plot of land.

In new Elysium we'd find  
some woodland creature to be apt and kind  
to all our cursed contrariness,  
beyond amalgams of this breath and stress

where men must close their eyes to pain  
and sordidly tot up the loss and gain,  
long wars against whole nationhoods  
of hoarded matter and material goods.

But of ourselves, for one brief hour  
we'd be as summer rain will soak the flower  
with memories that seem a distant song  
to which, at some remove, we still belong.

That bourn or birthright, an abiding sense  
of women slept with but in innocence,  
of whom we knew but nothing, why or when  
there came such blessedness to us mere men.

## 56. In Warm Luxuriance

In warm luxuriance the bodies lie  
at ease, contented, where the sky  
is blue, pure blue, descending into haze  
announcing soon that autumn days

will sprinkle fields with chilly drops of dew,  
and sheaf the corn with softer hue,  
while pendent elderberries in purple spreads  
of gluttony hang thick their heads.

Ineluctably, the days draw in,  
and colder mornings clothe the skin  
with thin apparel, every part and limb  
succinctly fashioned, close and trim.

Then time that's generous will never be  
inhibited by constancy,  
and we shall feel these sun-flecked summer days  
throw off untroubled, far-off ways.

And in that think of work and kiddies' schools,  
and mundane things where conscience rules,  
quite naturally, of course, and as we must  
in matters of implicit trust.

For otherwise we reach indifferent ends,  
when time, our fretful mother, sends  
us hopes and destinies to come undone  
in these long days of sleep and sun.

## 57. Small Things

Small things: the tumbler of cold water, chill  
to the touch, and sentinel and full  
of quiet serenity but still  
mercurial and strangely beautiful.

The simple gladness in the sunlight's fall  
that seeps so quietly in the tablecloth,  
or its absorption in a wall  
inert as is the daylight's folded moth.

The all-too mutinous and milky gaze  
of porcelain that makes up coloured plates,  
the way a gleaming wine cup stays  
oblivious of its inner states.

Unconscious patterns that small fingers weave  
in prompt adjudicating to their care  
the change in tunic or a sleeve,  
or way continually they do the hair.

The tread of rubber shoes across the floor  
as though the very soles were bound in stealth  
to flat abase themselves, implore  
returning softness from the ground itself.

All things that in their long-accustomed modes  
we need to give no look to or a thought,  
but are as real as heavy loads  
that walls with reinforcing beams support.

Alert and gleaming cars that noiselessly  
will stop, reverse, or dart along the street,  
involved, metallic, absentee  
as are the items on some balance sheet.

The trees that stand apart on winter days,  
with all their architecture thin and bare,

which stay defiant to our gaze  
if not indifferent, with a stubborn air.

The scattered sidewalk cafes with their chairs,  
half empty, that await the absent guest,  
alert, reproachful, injured stares  
that we won't come and treat them as the rest.

Shoals of impenetrable pedestrians walking  
along with cares and in their private thought,  
continually promenading and hawking  
their persons round as though on life-support.

The mundane things we're not attentive to,  
or would not count indeed as strictly ours,  
but stand about as such things do,  
as though indifferent to communal hours,

yet have their own lives nonetheless  
and go on lasting for a little space,  
but like ourselves will evanesce  
and go their own ways out with such a trace,

that we remember, too, in visiting  
the lattices of street and corner shop  
we haven't seen for years, but bring  
a flood of memories we cannot stop.

A world regretfully we sense full well,  
which almost suffocates us when we go  
and find, as hermit crab, a shell  
confines itineraries to what we know.

## 58. Its Hour

Some woman glanced at, or has looked our way,  
that were drawn to, and, unfathomably,  
our wits deserted us, or words to say,  
or something hidden there we couldn't see.

As one I met when crossing late at night  
from Istanbul to some small island port:  
a strange assertiveness, a gloomy sprite  
that took its stern possession of my thought.

The court of men about her also lent  
an air of wonderment, with evil there:  
she was strange, apart, malevolent,  
composed of Lermontov or moonlit air.

And then that blush of young thing in her teens,  
we gave a lift to, where it well behoves  
us think of innocence, though that demeans  
the purpose of her latest disco clothes.

So scrubbed, so beautiful, so very trim  
with all her fresh, bright clothes new bought that day,  
who would be earth's first paradise to him,  
however hesitant youth's tongue will stay.

And I remember at some dancehall place  
and in a waltz more Thai than Viennese,  
how moderating was that body's grace  
that in my foreign rhythm took its ease.

The flash of eyes, the bright-bejewelled ear  
the tap of small shoes in their practised skill:  
how paper-thin partitions keep us clear  
of dangerous cauldrons where we drown at will.

And I remember small occasions where beyond  
scenarios that give us cause to hope,

how each in smile to smile would correspond  
to dangerous contretemps where neither cope.

However naturally our bodies call  
in tacit signatures of taste and reach,  
long centuries of breeding make their wall:  
aloof the etiquettes we cannot breach.

And singing then those arias, those songs  
of heart in torment, where each human voice  
was wrought in sympathy with human wrongs,  
but, rich in rapture there, could still rejoice:

three party-goers in that sports car air,  
at one with ringing splendours when the light  
assumes its last of evening's golden flare  
and goes out, brilliantly, to star-drenched night.

And then Italian beauties, chaperoned,  
who took each invitation with a bow,  
but still that graciousness was not dethroned:  
yes, they have duennas even now.

Where did each proud and laughing beauty go?  
What are the households answering to their will?  
They won't remember me, nor ever know  
what heart remembers, must remember still.

And in the interval, some empty hour  
between the coffees and the lunchtime rush,  
some waitress acting as the springtime flower  
that holds her being from the midday crush

to form the seed that like the thistle clock  
or dandelion will send its virtue forth,  
engendering its speck of urgent stock  
out with the southern winds or with the north.

A breath of something frank and needy, there  
indwelling with a potent, scented power,

to draw the latency from shadowed air  
what to this moment had not reached its hour.

## 59. I Am the Softly Yielding One

I am the softly yielding one.  
I am the always needing, won  
by reverence in gathered hands.  
Beyond what sensing understands,  
I am the warmth enclosing winter lands.

I am the fullness in the air,  
the openness with no one there,  
a contour and a silhouette  
so fashioned out that you'll forget  
the denizens of past regret.

Be glad with me, entrammel all  
that makes this heavy body's fall  
to flood and quietness. Now you see,  
however lost or brief it be,  
in locked companionship you live with me.



## 60. Admired or Not

Admired or not, the rarest flower dies,  
nor do the seas give up their gathered salt.  
Our death is final, and no treasure lies  
in long encomiums on marble vault.

In each particular all choose with care  
in town or cottage garden to appear.  
All loose their fragrance into love-sick air  
to be the festivals that crown the year.

So come, my beautiful and virtuous one;  
loose more your longing into loving arms.  
Be bold, be bountiful and yet be done  
with all this obfuscation of your charms.

You are yourself, and are so loved for it:  
endlessly the unspent years repine.  
Now let that forward wantoning admit  
of sweetness unfermented in the vine.

## 62. Most Loved

Most loved, most looked for and oblivious  
how all that wayward worship be,  
come, put your breathy scorn aside, to us  
entrust your smiling modesty.

That charming mouth and eyes — who gave you those?  
Is all we had but delegate  
to suns descending when the evening grows  
from mistiness to chill and late?

And years of penances, my own sweet one,  
which you must pay for looks misspent  
on love in idleness. Come, now be done  
with vacillating and relent.

For love your body holds its breathy fire,  
still with the day must die the sun:  
fold up that melancholy and retire  
that this, our speeding day, be done.

## 63. When Shall I See

Still waits the wind-cropped hill that we together  
climbed when laughing through that sun-drenched weather?  
When out of breath we saw the view  
of warm contentment hearts endow.  
Where are they now,  
the storms and petticoats of summer's hue?

Who will remember therefore when I'm gone  
that rough, slow country road that's ambling on,  
so given me that every hour  
recalls the images of then,  
familiar haunts I shall not see again,  
nor fields or coppices or evening flower?

How far in memories must I now roam  
to have new beckoning that one-time home?  
The lands I held I have no more,  
the loves I knew are dark and still:  
must I relinquish now my fervent will  
to once more meet them on that further shore?

Yet in continuing, the trees and sky  
are testament that, though we die,  
their embassies yet stay as one,  
a grandeur making other eyes  
to fill with wonder when the evening dies  
in clouded majesty, and we are done.

## 64. Autumn Leaves

The first of autumn leaves in sudden showers  
and unencumbered beauties in their blaze  
of legs and bodies flaunt their regal powers  
before the sobering and cooling days.

Against ourselves the promises we made,  
to live more fully than we did before,  
to use those innate gifts we have betrayed  
in chaff that thickens on the threshing floor.

Irregularities, faint hearts, the doubtful gains  
in risking all in late, retarding dreams.  
The heart's own cowardice that still disdains  
to leave, however past, those scotched regimes.

The face that we've inherited, with all its lines  
of worry, earnestness or set of jaw,  
ensure that yearly bit by bit declines  
to long imponderables we shan't explore.

In this we join the seriousness of men:  
the emptiness in which their lives expire  
the trust in wealth or wives or friendships when  
there fades, as fade it must, that earlier fire.

Perhaps this passing insolence of limbs,  
this strange pubescence with its smouldering glow,  
are in themselves not instances of whims  
but far more sadnesses than we can know.

## 65. In Tops and Shorts

In tops and shorts so forward dressed  
that nothing here be based on trust,  
each one a gathered figurehead  
or pressing onward from the urgent bust.

Magnificent when afternoons  
condense to sudden, searing heats.  
Those few brief hours the summer blooms  
to consciousness the body heeds

as soon-to-be-departing days  
in morning and the evening chill,  
a coolness in the tree-cast shade,  
its fret of shadows on the skin.

So is that sudden giving all  
of suntanned limbs and bodies bent  
towards a strange, expiring form  
as candles flare before their end.

In bent-back petals still they sense  
that what is near stays out of reach,  
like nourishment that still torments  
poor Tantalus, who could not eat.

## 66. Hemlock

Most sinister, they say, that we should tell  
at once from such an overreaching plant  
that here is devilry, that needs no spell  
of witch's cauldron or a lunar chant.

Like empty sophistries of Queen Anne's Lace  
but loftier, slightly, and with feathery leaves,  
the plant is humdrum and will find its place  
by road or wayside, where the prospect weaves

itself in memories of long, hot days  
beneath the freckled blue of summer sky  
that seemed eternal then, with our small lives  
some portion of a squandered in-drawn sigh

that was Elysium, whose going on  
was never part of simple right or wrong,  
or words at all, no doubt, that world anon  
the Greeks would urge us leave with dance and song.

## 67. Quiet Immensities

What stilled immensities are in the trees  
and winter darkening through the storefront glass,  
when every parasol and café sees  
the troops of summer's sun-blessed beauties pass  
from flounce into a self-forgetting where  
they do not walk with such a laden step,  
nor wrinkle hips out as before.  
Each store or office worker, well-dressed rep  
but seems as isolated in an air  
that has its further depths of absence there,  
attuned to happiness that is no more.

And to those overhanging canopies  
of palms, or trains of bougainvilleas, leaves  
with sun-crisped edges in the bouffant trees,  
come long recitals, where the summer grieves  
in motionless but glittering long cascades  
of intricately entangled dried-up greens —  
and colour leaching from these autumn scenes.  
The wealth of bodies once so bravely dressed  
turns inward now and, in those thoughts refreshed,  
seem parcel only of the rained-on ground.

Through these, the wreathes of coming winter days,  
and bony tracteries of stripped-bare trees,  
come women with their wrapped-up, withdrawn gaze,  
in long boots reaching to their stocking knees,  
drab coats and mufflers making some disguise  
abhorrent to us as they onward press  
in quiet docility as leaves on grass  
adopt the carelessness of casual dress.  
And yet, before that latent spirit dies,  
there comes the livery of mocking eyes  
that pause a moment for us, smile and pass.

And we, in new occasions, once more see  
the rank chicanery of hats and coats,  
where clothes compose their own dark mimicry  
of days on days of summer's coloured floats.  
As though the cobbled pavements would regress  
to vast bewilderments in every form  
abroad in silver and, as silver, cold.  
Yet all their emperies are inward warm,  
and each has subtleties and chosen dress  
to urge us on, poor humankind, to guess  
at what those chilly winter-lands may hold.



## 68. Traveller's Joy

From long processions here of hurried scents,  
the sorrels bruising into copper-red,  
from heaped magnificence in going hence,  
to nothing: clouded winter overhead.

The elderberry with its prurient spread  
of rich molasses that in turn conspires  
to turn our thoughts to housebound days ahead  
with comradeship around the winter fires.

Along the hedgerows where the traveller's joy  
with all its rambling innocence assumes  
a mass of woody stems, where winds deploy  
the bouffant emptiness of fluffy plumes

to urge them onwards, scattering: cheerless days  
with all the goodness leached into the earth,  
unbountiful, begrudged, that still assays  
in us blank nothings of alleged rebirth.

## 69. When You and I Were Young

In constancy, our days out walking,  
when you and I were young.  
Laughing at the echo calling  
with its cuckoo's tongue,  
the tops of trees forever talking:  
so our tale was sung.

Through field and forest, truth foretelling,  
whole lifetimes stretched away.  
The emperies of clouds were swelling  
with our happy day.  
Come, come, there is no compelling,  
each will have its say.

And in each cloudy, wind-topped coppice,  
through miles of misted blue,  
wandering, sauntering and delighting  
in country house and pew,  
how warmly felt was rich blood pulsing,  
and trysts exchanged were true.

The tall hill and the cumulus  
bloomed to our design,  
the wheat-lands, warm and generous,  
the leaf-entangled vine —  
around the hopes, and credulous,  
our happy hearts would twine.

How days, days, days so soon departing  
to leave us stilled and numb,  
precipitant and self-reproaching,  
will to tears succumb,  
but not imagine we'd be hurting  
eternities to come.

## 70. Thistle

Blood daubed on hill forts: so the ragged spears  
of thistle with their upward-jabbing spires:  
a gas-ring blue and purple that expires  
to desiccation, then to scaly spheres.

The errant wind that shakes these sentinels,  
the wide-spined kraken woken in the leaves,  
the ranks of laid-back splendour that conceives  
mere nothing of itself, but ever swells

to sharp malignancy. At last the cost  
is scattered into bristled, flat rosettes —  
from which the stem still rises, clasps and sets  
in hard-pressed dynasties of fibered frost

that hold their own. Their flowering never yields  
to garden splendour or a comeliness:  
a hard world always where they must address  
themselves as crows that darken battlefields

to gorge on combatants who had not fled  
the hopeless conflict or the howling pain,  
but stood their ground, and stand to rise again,  
defiant with the hard, stiff splendour of the dead.

## 71. The Smell of Leaves

The smell of leaves in mouldering garden ways,  
the bronzed-stemmed rose that bears its single flower  
in opulence but languidly that one  
by one its petals, fluting, twist and fall:  
the notes of odd, still piping birds that call  
despondently before the cold's begun  
to burden us with enervating power  
that drenches everything in schoolyard greys.

The ache in bones, the vague unease that clings  
to papers unattested in some shuttered room.  
The sadnesses of dresses put away  
in tissue paper with their naphtha balls,  
the spread of damp and flakings from the walls  
the intermittent shafts of sun that stay  
impalpable and passing into gloom  
about these put-by, old, remembered things.

The fields of hopelessness we did not sow;  
the bitterness of love rejected, spurned  
for others felt less worthy of, the breathy  
tenderness of arms that are no more.  
Or felt, dear God, as those before,  
which won't deny themselves, but constantly  
indulge in happiness they have not earned:  
across the evening lands all people know.

Misapprehensions all our hurried lives  
inherent in us like some carried musk,  
epiphanies of what was wild and strange,  
the wonder with those ordered days of how  
we were, and willingly, and are not now.  
The vague presentiment, though far we range,  
we shall but occupy the one-time husk  
of bodies lived with: playmates, sweethearts, wives.

## 72. All That Matters

The wind comes, and the wind scatters  
whatever we propose:  
so passes all that matters,  
the perfume and the rose.

Let us say what we remember:  
how youth's brief pageant goes,  
that both of us in time dismember  
all our picture shows.

How willingly would warm mouths smoulder,  
in teeth such radiant health,  
till suddenly the heart is older,  
ingrown upon itself.

But the tears, how the tears should come  
at tethered hopes we sow:  
accommodations we succumb  
to as we smile and go.

Let me place my hands in your soft hands  
and kiss and say how wild  
are those far lands, those only lands  
we cherished as a child.

## 73. The Mistletoe

Most wantonly when coppices are bare  
of all but evergreens in chilly gloss,  
and there is only an endemic loss  
in what we, walking, gaze on everywhere.

In sheaves the leaves have fallen: each clasped hand  
lies cast aside, and whether up or down  
is frail and decomposing, green to brown,  
like invitations left from summer lands.

And yet the mistletoe is in the trees,  
a parasite that with untidy leaves  
is simply present, one that never grieves  
at fall of leaf and fruit the woodland sees.

And therefore holy in the Druids' sight,  
who went in awe of such unworldliness,  
where nondescript and scattered blooms undress  
their tiny bodices to globes of white.

The flailing tempests and the scorching snow,  
emboldened hailstones hurtled from the sky  
will have their purposes, though gods know why  
they made the mute, unwinking mistletoe.

## 74. Winter Journey

It is that inward journey each must take  
if not in bitterness yet little thanks.

There are no happy lives, and we must make  
what best we can from our now thinning ranks.

Where have they gone, the trusting hearts and hands?  
and do they brood on some remembered day,  
that rich exception to the shadow lands  
when all our sorrows here have had their say?

And what of those we loved most reverently,  
in all their empery of full-dressed pride?  
How solitary we are, and constantly  
to dreams in petticoats so firmly tied,

that all we would, and have done afterwards,  
each small distinction or a credit earned  
has been too laggardly and so affords  
scant recompense for what the heart had yearned

with its whole being for. We walk the lands  
with half a life that's spent, or lifetime gone,  
and see again a house or tree that stands  
as then, by path or road that ambles on

indifferent to us, wholly so. Where we  
have aged, grown weary of this world, they're still  
unquenched, companionable, the same: we see  
them quietly gesture to that house or hill

that once meant all to us, but must remain  
as learned journals that include our name,  
and all the laurels we had hoped to gain  
in fields of knowledge that are flat and tame.

Yet world is warm and with us still: it stays  
a benediction from those distant fields,

a sense of homewarding to room in days  
of glad remembering that some photo yields.

For would the days delight us out of turn  
or wantonly display their varied form  
if we, the passing ones, did not return  
to see the world around us still perform

its uncut miracles for other eyes,  
its blaze of sunshine and its sudden rains  
in storm and tempest and the clearing skies  
that, dropping benefice, still inward stains

our hearts with strange rejoicing, where we go  
with lighter step awhile and feel our hearts  
inflate with some such wonder, inward glow,  
where small epiphanies have played their parts.

Each day returns a little, gives us space  
to hope and glory in this earthly sense,  
and quietness, and settling into grace  
that makes our sojourn through this going hence.



## 75. Say What You Will

After April comes, as must, September,  
that strips the past of bloom.  
But when I'm gone who will remember  
whose heart was blessed by whom?

The words there said were once beguiling,  
new made beneath the sun,  
and mouths forever warm and smiling:  
so was love begun.

If hopes like cumulous were swelling  
throughout the long blue day,  
they doubtless too were ever telling  
how each would blight the way.

Perhaps it is but happenstance;  
and was so from the first.  
Perhaps we love in ignorance,  
and know not best from worst.

For afterwards is what? Forgetting,  
for nothing here can last:  
a certain time, and then begetting  
more shadows from the past.

Let us be done with this, my dearest  
and while we cannot stay,  
believe how once, beyond the tempest,  
stood eternal day.

## 76. Do Not Leave Me

O do not leave me on this dark earth here  
alone and wanting that expected voice.

What future pleasure is there given choice  
in things most beautiful that are not dear

to ways I chose, or may have chosen me?

I am more pledged and true as now you go  
towards that further world we all shall know:  
more given to loving you I'll never be.

Whatever place we go to, heights above,  
to nothingness, or to the hell below,  
what is it we thoughtless children know  
when all that's given us is how to love?

But let us keep those touchstones close to heart,  
inviolable, intact, beyond the years,  
for all, through sorrowing, this realm of tears  
dissolve as summers from themselves depart

with many a dazed farewell and backward look,  
bewildering us who know not what to say.

On each occasion and at each delay  
our sense of passage out must also brook

a little restlessness, when all things end  
in long imponderables we cannot know,  
but trust the forwarding as on we go  
and to the silent lands at last descend.

## 77. How Brief and Compact

How brief and compact is the skin  
that we delight in. How the body grows  
to fond persistence in itself, though thin  
our understanding stays beneath the clothes.

In spite of all, the breathing body dreams  
itself to consciousness and self-conceit:  
only war, illness, injury it seems  
can shake out innocence from popped wheat.

But unrepenting still, the scythe sweeps on  
and levels each within its curving path.  
The young, the beautiful, all are gone,  
and first apprentices turn former staff.

And those we love the most are vastly gone:  
our homes, our family, our dearest wife:  
all spent, all scattered and sent heedless on  
throughout the instances we call a life.

My own dear dearest: you will never read  
these poor, slight words I set out here,  
nor in those absences will now you heed  
how constant thinking on you has you near.

I mark the habitation made our own,  
and quietly, one by one, turn down the lights,  
but how remorseless has the listening grown  
across the empty stillness of the nights.

## 78. Fill With Praise

Our memories go part way with us, with smiles  
or comradeship to show the path before,  
and in their charity will shorten miles  
that lead us glad or wearied to that waiting shore

where we must leave our erstwhile friends and wives,  
and bid goodbye to all this warm earth was,  
its joys and bitterness, its hurried lives  
that never answered to our long 'because?'

But why indulge such questionings, which come  
to be but sadnesses that fill the trees  
with urgent restlessness. We never plumb  
the least of our most pressing mysteries.

We live our lives as other lives are kept  
within the scope of shared imaginings:  
in dreams and conjurations we accept  
the insights sudden rain or sunlight bring.

No more than that, although we still would wear  
the things not made for us, nor shaped to be:  
some shade inhabiting the nascent air  
that goes beyond our brief identity

with this, the world in splendour, given us  
to room a little in, and to spend our days  
in thought and new-found wonder at, and thus,  
through all our ministries, to fill with praise.