



Women
Pretty
in their
Petticoats

poems by
colin john holcombe

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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.