

A close-up, high-angle portrait of a woman's face, looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. Her eyes are dark and heavily lined with makeup. Her lips are painted a vibrant red. The background is dark and out of focus, showing what appears to be a patterned garment. The text is overlaid in the lower half of the image.

Some Other  
Person, Year  
or Street

Poems by Colin John Holcombe

# Some Other Person, Year or Street

Poems by  
Colin John Holcombe

Ocaso Press 2011

# Some Other Person, Year or Street

by Colin John Holcombe

© Ocaso Press 2011

Published by Ocaso Press Ltda.

Santiago, Chile. All rights reserved.

Copyright applies to this work, but you are most welcome to download, read and distribute the material as a pdf ebook. You are not permitted to modify the ebook, claim it as your own, sell it on, or to financially profit in any way from its distribution.

# Contents

1. Home Town
2. Wiltshire Downs
3. Deptford
4. Norfolk Broads
5. Ely Cathedral
6. Surrey Heights
7. The Black Country
8. Henley on Thames
9. The West Country
10. Lincolnshire Wolds
11. Bournemouth
12. Kew Gardens
13. London Suburbs
14. Aberdeen
15. Cotswold Estates
16. Linlithgow
17. The Peak District
18. Inner Temple
19. Housman Country
20. The Midlands
21. The Shire Counties
22. Midland Canals
23. Belgrave Hall
24. Chiltern Hills
25. West Riding Towns
26. Dover
27. Dartmoor
28. King's Lynn
29. The Windrush
30. Merseyside
31. Wastelands
32. The Potteries
33. The Vale of Beavoir
34. Botallack, Cornwall

35. Bath
36. The Mendip Hills
37. The Pentland Hills
38. Hatfield House
39. Mercia
40. Cambridge
41. The Welsh Borders
42. Bickling Hall, Norfolk
43. Burford House, Shropshire
44. Broadstairs, Kent
45. Tottenham
46. Highgate Cemetery
47. London WC1
48. Hadrian's Wall
49. Wookey Hole, Somerset
50. Some Other Person, Year or Street

# POEMS

## Home Town

An endlessly subverted dream: things falling as though in slow motion to their own place, particularly it may be in the tenements and small-windowed apartments, beyond where the roads run round scratching a living or the derelict factories give way to industrial parks.

Improbably, they are all hung upside down in memory. The buffers rise slowly into the small town terminus, the rails rusting but incorrigibly present, the glittering thread lost among sleepers or the scatter of weeds carnivorously dark by viaducts or dank canals.

Scenes that are variously lit by the blaze of drinks, and bars hoarsely incontinent with Irish voices, the cash-till ringing up stories through the recollections of drink-stacked happiness that time the home team won.

## Wiltshire Downs

Half mythic are these Downlands, where a steady fume  
of cloud will lift all day and fade into a tranquil  
blue. A wealth of pasturelands, of ragged trees,  
and incandescent rapeseed interspersed with wheat,  
that forms a counterpane to realms beneath, that chalk-white  
world of towering, gold-torqued men who charioteered  
across the warm abundance of their breathing earth.  
Each day a lived inheritance, a born again,  
till brute extinction met them with the glittering legions.

To misplaced reveries are gone their soft white bones.  
Whole armies of shadows together inhabit the standing corn.  
Red blusters of poppy are seeded on the sacred wounds  
and at evening the warriors encircle the hill forts and couch-  
grass knits a restless silence over unkempt tombs.



## Deptford

Particularly in autumn with estates massed as smoke,  
and buses running past with bright-lit destinations  
a litany of something defenceless in the lines of posts  
and the concrete that runs on implacably into cul-de-sacs  
or the memory we have forgotten of childhood names.

So come the occasions with their unbearable thoughts,  
in crucibles of streetlamps, of neon lights winking  
above the trucker's pull-up places at Christmas, packed  
with girls pretty as ever, legs dangling from love nests  
over the streets below that are awash with evening.

Later the hopelessness of breasts loosed at mirrors,  
and love portentously weeping in showerheads,  
as though they lasted forever, the days, and every joy  
were entangled in the lettering on their pillowslip.



## Ely Cathedral

Along the nave the hooded candles wink and flare  
as though their pinchbeck innocence could light up faith.  
The small hypocrisies of Sunday dress or talk  
enlarge to radiant mummeries of coloured glass.

The footfalls echo into dust, but quiet as nuns,  
wimpled and unruffled, the pillared transepts soar  
in grey processionalists across this land of smoke-  
entangled alder woods and flats and marshy creeks.  
Afar is Palestine, bright-templed, robed in blue,  
and bounteous with olive, or the unfavoured fig,  
but here is only Ely, doubt and what men do  
who drudge for pearl and sustenance in oyster beds,  
for all that storms that daylong batter shores will leave  
on pools the benefice of glittering evening light.

## Surrey Heights

Throughout their years abroad, these called them back  
— the good-  
earth smell along the thick-mossed paths, the topiary  
of leafy ways that led to croquet lawn, the haze  
of midge above the green and lily spangled pool —  
and which they saw, in counting-house and fevered port,  
with breath of evening lifting through the temple smoke:  
the Leith Hills crumbling always to a loamy quiet,  
the winds still warmly perfumed with their Wealden miles.  
Old memory's contentment came with evening prayers  
that fell profuse as candlelight on leaded glass.

From rooms that smelt of childhood ailments and of spinsters'  
breath, the eye looked on through rainy, green-soaked glass  
to charcoaled roofs of cedars and to tea at five,  
set down with chintz and silver on the sun-warm grass.

## The Black Country

A history no more mendable than broken glass  
but still the gentrified old streets withhold their thoughts.  
Above the slag heaps, coppiced or thick strewn with grass,  
the sky looks crossways, jagged and about to rain.

No loud hosannas sounded through this land of Cain  
when blood-red cauldrons emptied out their glistening steel  
and worked it into viaduct and railway track.  
Past the pink-red sandstones rimming the chilly vales,  
the streets of back-to-backs and blank Victorian villas,  
impenetrable brickwork, factories and dank canals,  
a sullen, hard-nosed people served a hard world's needs,  
and were not paid in charity or preacher's word,  
but wholesale penury that took them, heedless, on  
past Sunday bouts and lie-ins to their lands of rest.

## Henley on Thames

The hush of ceremonials, Gethsemane  
in upstairs rooms, the quiet of clocks or Sunday clouds.  
Communal breakfast, school run, and the children's tea:  
events to disconcert, but which the houses live on through  
in quietly prosperous and dormitory streets  
through which the middle classes move and marry, have  
their beings. Inherent decencies and cleanliness  
see all the clothes fresh laundered, folded, put away  
in drawers, or hung in shimmering ranks to step on out  
in gossamer contentments on the needful day.

How rich the sacrament of breasts on crisp white sheets,  
with sun to wake them in the satin-painted stateliness  
of rooms long-marinated in a happiness  
beyond the radiant apostasies of coming dusk.

## The West Country

Levelly monotonous with its whaleback hills  
and dairy pastures stretching from the white-walled farms  
that hold an uncommunicative Celtic people  
encamped on granite bosses or the tin-rich slate.

March brings the ever-forward, temperate winds, which,  
for all they coax the first of April daffodils,  
are only transient, a month-deep breath of warm  
benevolence that's spent on unfenced, stony fields.  
With rough-dressed walls, thin roofs, and unforgiving streets,  
and never charity among the Sunday prayers,  
their lives are tamped and closely fitted as the harbour  
wall that holds the mackerel-coloured, rough Atlantic swell  
from off the mournful chatter of the fisherfolk  
communities, who, if they listened, would never sleep.

## Lincolnshire Wolds

Out at all angles, where the unfenced fields produce  
a sense of being elsewhere under soaring clouds.  
Rough-metalled roads to farms through miles of  
hard-raked grass  
with scarce a hint of that nose-pinching wind that blows  
on some days from the fjorded and bird-filled north.

Beneath are glacial drifts, a hint of chalkiness  
that speckles coomb or hill, or spots their balding tops,  
where Painted Lady, fritillary or the short-tailed blue  
can flit among the straw-entangled wreaths of flowers  
or perch on spires of orchises when spring is past.

The land in steps falls eastward to untidy tracts  
of scrub and marshland and then to strips of shingly beach,  
when distant blaze the Norfolk guns, and diminishing  
the skylark as a pupil in the eyelid's blue.



## Bournemouth

A hint of thirties' raffishness: trim waitresses,  
striped blazers and the off-the-shoulder evening gowns,  
and, far-off, shimmering in deliquescent winks across  
the bay, the fabled Isle of Avalon in Cowes.

Along the pier and promenade, perpetually  
at evening, well-dressed couples stroll as marionettes,  
and a small boy trudges with them, no doubt held  
on this his last of tedious family holidays  
from those entanglements called girls, reproachful  
mysteries of scent and bodices and smiling eyes  
who walk through days quite other to the way it was:

no chores or loitering, evenings with unwanted friends,  
but manhood's temperate riches, and a happiness  
astounding him as now the band begins to play.

## Kew Gardens

A moping restlessness, with which the querulous  
and rain-filled wind among the branches seems, with all  
its moods and lifting dynasties of sun and cloud,  
to pour from cedar fastnesses the emperors walked  
in once, from hills aflame with poppies and catalpa  
groves to framed, high vistas of the snow-clad peaks.

All things that pass from greatness are returned to earth,  
to tamped-down loam and sand and to the gardener's mulch,  
and, even under these great buttressed entities  
of trees, the changing summer children look on through  
the fashions to the same green lawns and hothouse palms —

by which, through catalogues and seed repositories,  
belatedly there comes the half acknowledgement  
of trade and annexations and the Opium Wars.

## London Suburbs

Interminable, packed in with well-proportioned lives  
absorbed by office, golf club and the shopping jaunt,  
and conscious as they must be of the snobberies  
that mark off postal district and the leafier streets,  
the quiet battalions of the London suburbs make  
a need to walk the dog at evening through the park,  
where it must forage after smells and friendliness  
beyond the lost millennia of campfire smoke.

And then there follows urgency in owners too  
with local fetes and gatherings and council votes,  
which have the scenes preserve them in their tribal meets  
at daughter's wedding, holidays and doctors' bills,  
until an affable belligerence ensures  
a family provided for and small plot booked.

## Aberdeen

Thrift, straight dealing and a brawny enterprise  
are built into this squarely prosperous, granite city.

Everywhere is wall-eyed quartz, the handsome lathes  
of off-white orthoclase, the sprinkled muscovite  
that crinkles black to silver when you look at it,  
all brought and locked together in these white-tiled walls  
of banks and high street businesses and rough-hewn kerbs.

Municipal creations of a most far-sighted kind  
that knew too well that families could fail, the best  
fall off from earlier excellences, hopes fade out  
of offspring long continuing, that partnership  
across the gold-backed countries of a steamship age  
become at best a memory when these would last,  
irredeemably, as bastions of the God-made rock.

## Cotswold Estates

Exhumed from damp-stained centuries that hold their class accountable for balls descending into summer fetes, this house the county guidebook calls authentic Jacobean withdraws to shaded pinnacles and evening fires.

High-ceilinged rooms and darkneses of lozenged glass, the lichen etched in crevices of yellow stone, the measured crunch of footfall on the gravelled walks and close attendance from the briskly sculpted yews —

all breathe tonight of something rising from the ground through bailiffed generations, field and husbandry as wealth refined but gathered up the same, in books set down events that did not scant the social year but saw the titled and beautiful conveyed in time to family vaults with anthem and their sober name.

## Linlithgow

Linlithgow – the very syllables repeat  
the lisp'd effrontery of that fabled Stuart claim.  
A roofless palace and a stripped-out church nearby  
suffice to show that lace-ruff'd courtliness would not  
survive the press of moorland, tarn and mountain peak.

But here, most beautiful of all the island queens,  
was born a child made fatherless in days, espoused  
abroad, but made so mettlesome that all her learning  
spelt but steps to dancing with enchanted looks.

Beware what beauty and the waken'd heart will want,  
for Knox in tune with Darnley and blunt Bothwell too  
would make that lightness quit the dour-faced land she ruled,  
and England's sour and calculating, pox-marked queen  
snuff out the laughing gaiety the French court bred.

## The Peak District

There are streams rich in their industrial past,  
if now assiduous of neglect, where water spouts  
from stacks of thick, micaceous flags, and after pools  
in hollows scooped out from the mountain limestone,  
weathered  
white with bryozoa, ossicles, sometimes  
the crinoid cup itself, its long and feathery  
arms trailing after some forgotten reef-side current —  
as flail the wheels in long-abandoned cotton mills,  
the haunt of mouse and ferret or small butterflies,  
whose consort of the wind and careless chequered shade,  
and sound of water falling through the steep defile  
combines with women's lives gone through these walls,  
as though their tied-back, sweated penury could be  
effaced by benefice of water pouring through.

## Inner Temple

However tawdry or disconsolate they seem  
in streets, the maples here preserve a mouldering  
and condescending air of being lopped and added  
yearly to the balance sheet. The faint green sheen  
that falls through bare glass windows onto lawyers' briefs  
and testaments become in time the tenured part,  
not only of the seasons passing, but of us ourselves  
who live within our annotated settlements.

So flare what lives we have within unconscionable  
but plainly written text of wills and witnesses:  
the how and where we'll live, whom marry, very often,  
the schools our children go to, and the paths they take —  
all in bare windows and the bricked-up probity  
of love's entanglement with lawyer's quills and fees.



## Housman Country

To be, late summer, in these sun-warmed Malvern Hills  
among the brown-tinged heather and the bracken staves,  
with the birds singing, and in the misted vales below  
a world alive with farmhands at their seasonal tasks  
about this ill-drained, red and prurient ground.

What can it be of place that makes men sink their trust  
into some ingénue and laughing, pert-nosed thing?  
And what enchantress dances through these thistled fields,  
or through the vales would leave her footprint by some marshy  
dock-and-yellow-marigold-encumbered pool  
where cattle press their heavy forelocks in the mud?  
And is it possible that some unsleeping Sappho  
hears in the Pleiades long-faltering on the far Welsh hills  
the thin, unsettling music men will call regret?

## The Midlands

The small and humdrum with their needy industries:  
the uncouth names call up the grey and leafless streets,  
the patched gasometer, the church and hemmed-in council  
parks of Reddich, Wolverhampton, Birmingham.

From this teeming workshop of the hard-pressed world  
of lathes, thin strips of lighting, and long lines of men  
who stood their eight-hour shifts and had each bathroom visit  
logged, there rose the covenants of local speech,  
the cloth-capped syllables and the way they stood  
in unison at prayer meetings and the football club:  
a stocky independence and a rooted sense  
that they were British always but their own class first.

So what was wholesome in the underlying rocks,  
and waters permeating, and the summer winds  
could not be steeped in soured and stagnant hopes  
but places different, distant from them, far beneath.

## The Shire Counties

To fields elm-bordered once, but now thick-set with hawthorn,  
elder and occasional oak, with yellow swathes  
of ripening wheat, lush pasturelands and heavy  
soils that make up England in its coloured shires,  
the frosty Christmases, frail Easters, and the annual  
fetes with all their swiftly blossomed beauty queens  
that fruit within a year or two to buxom wives,  
and knit their name with nature that the large farms need,  
there comes the birth and wedlock and the cottage death,  
the ceremonials that the parish church records  
as family entitlements, to which the gentry  
vault will add its luxury to local stone.

All these the brown earth gives, and fields enclose, at once  
an end of hopes and still-to-come of harvest home.

## Midland Canals

Exposed at last by differing circumstances, now  
laid out in leisure walks or local histories,  
the dank and interlinked, parochial passageways  
that joined the sulphurous grime and grit of the industrial  
north with London's high top hats and velvetens  
will let you walk through endless, scoured digestive tracts,  
past blank, elaborate brickwork arching over railway  
lines or other lengths of duckweed-dotted, dark  
retreats. And even these, beneath the cloacal drench  
of effluents and expunged human wastes, burst out  
at intervals, in howling wildernesses: weeds  
and ferns, pale lichens that absorb the light: as though  
these wormholes to an unadmitted, northern past  
rose up as sooted portals to the lives they cost.

## Belgrave Hall, Leicester

That world was almost over, with its angled views  
of lawns and coppices encased in glittering mist:  
the moated house with ornamental battlements,  
the not-yet venerable nor blessed with county name.

Why build these hoary throwbacks in the age of Anne  
when wealth from great plantations beckoned, and such cloth  
was cut a good deal kindlier and was satin-stitched?  
An age of quality, moreover: income counted,  
indeed was spoken of and buxomly displayed.

And so we see them on their Chippendales, their bodies  
gossamer in stays or in embroidered silks,  
their legs half fringed in silk and lace-clad petticoats,  
with all the courtesies and courtships of a belle  
epoch made decorous and shimmering as some chiming clock.

## Chiltern Hills

A well-appointed Englishness in retro styles —  
half-timbered properties, mock Georgian, whatever —  
but all expensive on this closely marked-off Chalk  
or set into the loosely terraced gravels of the Thames  
as was before the ice sheets forced it further south.

But in this well-protected world of swimming galas,  
riding schools, of point-to-points and local fetes  
you'll find occasionally some recessed manor house,  
the home down centuries of well-connected names,  
where of a mellow summer-scented evening you  
can walk where maids, high-busted, laughed and went on silk-  
lined slippers, soft as vocatives across the floors,  
and think these properties, for all your visiting,  
were once as ostentatious, nouveau riche as ours.

## West Riding Towns

In cities that would praise immoderately the steadfast  
loyalties of leafy neighbourhoods and sun-dashed  
streets that give to charities, occasionally,  
the inhabitants

— the millions rising, working, eating  
and lying down to sleep in calicos thrown  
out unceasingly as looms delivered them  
from Puerto Rico to the Chinese sweatshop belt —

of dull grey streets preserve a modest tip of hat,  
acknowledging the lives quite foreign to them, thrown  
like unwashed children into campers, fed and left  
on moorland lay-bys damp as eyelids with the dawn,  
but all awaiting word, the resurrection, end —

as a louche holiday with bohemian cousins serves  
for a life that, unaccountably, still fails to come.

## Dover

And over it there loom the frumpish falls of chalk,  
with strings of flint-like dirty linen, regularly,  
as though the built-out harbour reached for cleaner seas  
and not the dirt of England scraped off by departing  
feet. No novelist has liked the place, its narrow  
streets, the tar-patched, littered beach, the cheap hotels  
the smell of diesel motors and parochial shipping,  
and above all, tawdriness, a cheapskate, made-up air  
that foreigners have noted, and the poisonous food  
pursuing them long after they have made it out.

England's backstreet outlet to the continent,  
and seen by long returning residents as airy  
whitenesses controlled by queues and custom men,  
with all that England stood for here new-sponged and pressed.



## Dartmoor

An ever-rained-on, inland place of brute irruptions  
into granite tors, entanglements and treacheries  
of cotton grass, which thickly meditates but does  
not bless the peat-lined pools and frantic tumbling brooks.

Across these shut horizons where a Celtic race  
hoed up and down their narrow plots of peaty soil  
that ate their bones before they died, the long-robed priests  
observed a harebell music and a holiness  
that came with dark encirclements of standing stones  
to mark the passage of the older gods, their need  
to be propitiated and be blessed with gifts.

Today the sky is bare of miracles, and only  
ruminating sheep observe the thrumming miles  
of wire-fenced fields diminishing till out of sight.

## King's Lynn

Small of stature, prim, and so Kings Lynn: untouched  
by fashions, businesses or wholesale city-planners.  
In fact it all was business— shipping — and fine Norfolk  
folk enjoyed more wealth and good society  
than other towns supplied, Defoe had thought. So now  
the medieval High Street packed with modern shops,  
a terminus of coach trips to the tulip fields,  
the quiet monument to Hanseatic guilds  
where displaced Flemish weavers and transplanted kin  
could note the quality and knit of stouter weave.

So spreads the Ouse its silt of centuries, so holds  
the patterned Guildhall to its coat of arms: St Margaret's  
to its bells, the cobbled wharfs, and all that titled  
England deprecated in the rush to trade.

## The Windrush

Beneath the slow incontinence of cloud and sun  
the Windrush pours its sour translucence into ripple  
glass, more corrugated where the willows hang  
on water deeps and hold the costive river smell.

Upstream, the stream is water-silvered into tiny bubbles  
and runs in twinkling rushes over gravel beds,  
and there are roach and dace as glinting flakes, and bream  
that nose on upstream with their oddly bulbous gills.

All stilled or slowly passing with the centuries  
of stipend, book-bound learning and the eloquence  
that made the Oxford martyrs and the great divines  
a home of manhood's last munificence, and dreams  
that haunt whole families, and still go on, widening  
as the river does, to cities, grime and work.

## Merseyside

Pinnacled in ever-painted, pastel splendour,  
in walls of pilasters and windows' intricacies,  
there looms the Liver Building over Merseyside  
that stood for wealth and commerce and acknowledged trade  
in dark molasses, cotton and Barbados gold.

Here turned the stream of human traffic that it bought,  
from new lands to the old and back again. The bible  
sanctioned it, and that most ancient trade of man  
was chained in four-deep, narrow pallets under deck.

How many left their names and fetid breath beneath  
the grey and thunderous north Atlantic's angry swells?  
But those who went on smiling to another life,  
for all they'd know the overseer's lash, would have  
the blessing of a Christian burial at last.

## Wastelands

That first inheritance beyond our given name,  
where troops of shirtsleeved followers would urge us on  
from playground interludes to walks in ruffian streets  
that were forbidden us, abandoned factories where  
the sun dressed up with morbid and an oriental splendour  
the coils of wire, the slag and shattered window glass,  
those argosies in distant fields, through mist-hung woods  
across the duckweed kingdoms of the water flags.

All scenes of local desolation, wildernesses  
strewn with builder's rubbish, clays and scattered brick,  
the haunt of lesser celandine and cabbage white,  
and gold of slow-worms under corrugated iron  
sheets — that ever-thought-on kingdom where we go  
with all our gains as naught and with a beating heart.

## The Potteries

An immeasurable poverty of shard and crockery  
in unloved implements the archaeologist  
will find on settlements and nearby rubbish tips  
from homely Wiltshire out to John O'Groats.

All manufactured here, moreover, in this sag  
of pinchbeck charity and factory roofs. How fast  
it changed, this land of brogues and clayey soils,  
these air-tossed leagues of vale and leafy hills  
above the clays and ironstones and glittering coal.

Yet God had spoken in the broken piles of rock  
laid down in humid marshlands or in sandy deltas  
before the deluge of the ferric staining red.

The bricked-up chimneys sweat out acid, and the clouds  
are edged cantankerously with sunset's smoky light.

## The Vale of Beavoir

A land of shorthorn cattle and extended lunches,  
thick woods, long fields and heavy soils, the rainy days  
that smell of thickset sedges and of water parsley—  
succulent long roots that only stop at depth.

A quietness immemorially in shadowed ends  
of days that gain in brilliance as the evening dims:  
the buttercups in fields assume a spectral sense  
of stems, frail leaves and heavy petals, inward-lit.

Sedulous whisperings of rain-prinked mosses, blurred  
with water laid along the spore-pods bristling red.  
Peculiarities of smoke that hang on farmstead  
trees, of August moons, robust and brilliant,  
that pour untarnished silver through the elf-horn kingdoms,  
with nuclear acorns cooking in that filtered light.

## Botallack, Cornwall

A chimney, unroofed engine house, a shaft or two  
cemented off, a plaque that sometimes gives the name,  
the throughput, dates of operation, ownership.  
Informative and businesslike and no doubt best  
with Cornwall's Celtic, walking poor but six-foot men.

Six days a week they gouged at the cassiterite,  
the steely grey in purple-tarnished copper ores  
that twisted, far to seaward, out in broken sheets —  
the explorations, failures, rockfalls, floodings all  
but lost in careful copperplate of mine reports.

But for the men and threadbare families who lived  
or clung to close-cropped hills and chapels hereabouts?  
Each day they hauled the boxes to the hoist and saw  
the antimony that killed them in the dawn's first light.



## Bath

A town of winding circuits, lawns and leafy squares,  
of honey-coloured buildings where the pilasters,  
the apt proportions and the fantail entrances  
recall their drawing rooms, constructed inside out:  
a reckless elegance with middle-class restraint.

How many couples here were matched, the documents  
drawn up, the settlements agreed and lawyers called  
in starched formalities that saw them to the end,  
whatever that might be in house or grand estate,  
in drinking clubs or pensioned-off sobriety.

On hills around are tight-walled farms and coppices,  
warm sunshine, local bubbling brooks, priapic elves:  
a world of rural spots as much remote from them  
in life as now the Pump Room teas and smart boutiques

## The Mendip Hills

Variously from clays emerge the limestone blocks  
that make the Mendips and the airy Quantock Hills:  
siliceous, massive even, and resisting man  
but worn away by time and sky-bound elements:

in truth dissolved, reduced to suspect grey suspensions  
that is the air itself on rainy evenings which  
collect the images of some great beauty's face,  
the one we would have loved, or maybe did, with all  
the fervent hopelessness of selfish, headstrong youth —

that knows but nothing of this world, how hard it is,  
how much is calculation, repetition, toil  
towards accumulations of but keepsake joys,  
that in the end it's these harsh limestone blocks that stay —  
and ebbing disappointments, which outlast them yet.

## The Pentland Hills

Above the porridge-plain and lumpy, cloud-stained hills,  
the haunt of pewit and the wind-blown speck of hawk,  
the days are gathered up in aqueous falls of shade or sun  
but still will sit there, mawkish and importunate.

They thicken autumn's somnolence in roadside tree,  
in leafless hedgerow and the red-barbed brier stem,  
the humid tracery that fills with twinkling dew,  
the for-a-moment, gelid condensate that is  
itself and nothing else, a distillate as clean  
and imminent as coming rain, while all around  
and steeped in melancholy hangs the prescient day.

So whisky relishers will note the tang of peat,  
of burnt-off ling and bracken in their single malts:  
soberly, sheer given them, as is their right.

## Hatfield House

Broak oaks and villages on sturdy, flint-filled soils:  
Lord Burleigh's new-built mansion out in Hertfordshire,  
with walks and hunting lodges he had hardly use  
of, being much at court and by the queen's own wish.

But that was later when the tomboy in the fields,  
a raw, red-headed girl who had the Tudor looks,  
and, more, its calculation and ferociousness,  
became the great Elizabeth, the termagant  
who shook her heritage of faith and petticoats  
across the seaways of the world, outwitting Papal  
edict and assassin's knife, by then aware  
of man's rapaciousness in honeyed tongue. What bred  
these thoughts on early nights in what both were and stayed  
a well-bred, quiet and perspicacious country house?

## Mercia

Beyond the leaning gate, the ever-ripening August fields lie thick with corn and yellowed Cotswold lime.

Rough, honey-coloured stonework in a corbelled tower, the melancholy echo of the bells that call up promises we nurtured in the sun-pressed grass when youth was all-imagining and still to be.

Then falls the stealth of evening coming on in barn and house, some bird that pipes occasionally and waits breath-held, to listen to itself and be content to mark this middle England of the Mercian kings as rich and indolent with husbandries that lie broad-bathed and welcoming beneath the open sky — where billowing cumulus like chorus girls can pause and laugh in sun-rimmed petticoats of sumptuous white.

## Cambridge

Austere, not grandiose but coldly presupposing,  
like mirages that float upon the water flats  
when evening in the winter sets in muted red  
and drains to sprawled unpleasantness like pigeon's guts.

So comes there something rising from the Fenland chill,  
not unconnected with the ornate porticoes  
the spires, the prosperous walls and quads and scholar's cells,  
where minds decamp from bodies, grow uncomfortable  
within the quietus that makes another's faith.

Newton, Leavis, Forster: all were lonely men  
who lived in borderlands beyond brute lust that makes  
our empathy more needy and ambivalent.

But still live bodies built these walls and took good care  
to overlook its parchment and too churchly note.

## The Welsh Borders

From here to Wales was warfare and perpetual strife,  
intrigues and sordid lynchings come with sharp reprisals:

in fact a land of limestone crags, quiet coppices and soils  
attentive to their tillage and the hunter's sport,  
with prosperous market towns and local hiring fairs,  
but still a place of never-broken feuds, with castles  
lowering down on them across the cloud-reflecting straits.  
Here streams with stickleback and tench ran thick with blood  
from fields where thousands perished

and the black crow stabbed.

Uneasy was the go between, when England's quietly  
coloured fields approached the heartlands of a misted  
Wales — the druid-ridden, draped in chains of wrongs,  
which they'd remember in the sullen mining towns  
that gave their anthracite to England's fighting ships.

## Bickling Hall, Norfolk

Lord Chief Justice Sir Henry Hobart: at his best  
a glowering, hirsute figure draped in crimson robes,  
or so he's painted, clearly no one's fool. Yet what  
he built, this Bickling Hall, with sculpted junipers  
and gravelled walks, is still a warm, enchanting thing  
in Jacobean brick. Perhaps the architect  
was good, or cosseted by rich, baronial arms,  
beneath their calculating, autocratic airs,  
the dukes, the countesses, the favourites of royal  
beds, were not the parasites that we suppose,  
and though they kept mere yeoman from their doors, they had  
the gilt and leather bindings of their library breathe  
the air of contemplation, knowing what was best  
was in their flesh assembled while they filled the spot.



## Burford House, Shropshire

Shadowed, still and purposeful as Quaker pews,  
or Sunday afternoons in cold Cathedral towns,  
the tidy gardens, now with clematis and lawns,  
surround a monument to eighteenth-century thrift.

Impeccable the windows' chilly rectitude,  
set each above the other, somewhat oversized  
but what a Vauxhall glasswork's owner's wealth decreed  
would make an apt retreat amid the Shropshire hills.

In dove-grey silvered blue, the winter lake reflects  
a tranquil setting for a manufacturer at peace.  
There were no EU regulations, workers' rights,  
or left-wing pamphlets, agitations, Peterloos,  
but only consciousness that workers fixed in glass,  
with breaths most thin and beautiful, the made to last.

## Broadstairs, Kent

The sky's reflection captured in unruly waves  
that congregate and fall as frothings on the beach,  
the damp and sudden scents that take us back  
across the deadening nullity that we've become  
to childhood's radiant hopelessness with sharp-edged pain.

Where is the fleeting, sun-warmed, chafing happiness  
in hand we held there awkwardly, the fumbled kiss,  
the trusting eyes that looked but once but we remember  
unconscionably and no doubt idly till we're dust?

In thought, the high and brightly coloured gala days,  
the donkey rides, the spade and bucket, parasols,  
the legs laid out in deckchairs and sun-screened bodies  
are still inviting, generous and holding out —  
but for a season only, or some other heart.

## Tottenham

Tradesmen's homes, clean rooms for referenced artisans,  
the low and unilluminated tenements that press  
two up, two down, their doorway to the dusty street  
to hear the tramp of homeward feet and tired-out thump  
of railway shuntings, night on night. The home no doubt  
of immigrants by now, and therefore painted, even  
liked, but from these thin and unforgiving streets  
my father knew, which smelt of scrubbed and disinfected  
doorway stops, there flowed unhealthily beneath  
the cheap brick walls and slate the deep, thrombotic blood  
of unloved London's working poor. Where are they now,  
with caps and baccy and their treasured sandwich boxes?

In time that generation turned more real than all  
the heights of rich-robed London that he moved on to.

## Highgate Cemetery

Strewn about in clusters where the word of God  
lies carved on granite obelisk or marble vault:  
*a much missed father, helpmate or devoted son.*

Among the snowdrop wildernesses, the hawthorn sprays,  
the laurel groves emerging glossed with London rain,  
we walk trajectories of thoughts not wholly ours  
that still assault us with some ever-present grief  
that's immemorial, no doubt, but also marked  
by all that's heaved up on this grasping clay, that makes  
such pustules of these decomposing bricked-in tombs.

What gifts and eloquence are here, what statesmen's words,  
the family dynasties of wealth, the fireside names.

How quietly here they rest, in tune perhaps with what  
some country girl was singing all the fields about.

## London WC1

Long streets of unillustrious London brick, past floors  
of pale-faced, serious-suited drudges hard at work:  
the street names call up past examination boards  
and then the all-night swottings aimed at getting grades.

If now I'm comfortably contained by forty years  
of trade and industry across the high and odd  
ways of the world, and walk recessed, I see  
a small boy with Christmas vouchers looking past  
the books he'd buy but hardly read, the great career  
mapped out for him he didn't want, that awkward mind  
at odds with school and friends and all his parent's hopes —  
to be revealed, insatiably, by lives he missed,  
in faces gone and words he could not say, the hard  
and bustling world of what he sowed but would not reap.

## Hadrian's Wall

All that we became was in this hard-knolled, stubborn ground of mists and barrack room and drinking bouts. Some left and settled, married, tilled their patch among the windswept heather, furze and chilling summer rain.

But still the emperor ordered and the wall went on: we marched it out, by day and night, and nothing changed. Sometimes the northern tribes would make their sallies, rush at us, but ruthlessly our spearmen put them down.

Their women made rough sport for us, but bled too much or killed themselves. Besides, our thoughts grew less of home, for year by year the thoughts wore out like underclothes, and it grew harder to contain the marbled streets, bustling palaces, processions and circuses: the warmth of childhood homes remembered somewhere else.

## Wookey Hole, Somerset

It is the name, the way the `double u's conspire  
to conjure up a blood-drenched witch in Wookey Hole  
that lurked as some deep terror that constrained their lives.

In truth, the setting rather disappoints: we find  
a string of large solution cavities that half  
link up through lighted passages to one deep lake,  
a stoop of water drawn up like an earthy womb,  
the walls quite dry or pobble-packed with crusted lime,  
but still surviving, we should note, as gaps in us,  
some vesicle the check-up doctor pauses at  
and rings as not malignant yet, but not benign:

just things that we must watch for, lest a change should wake  
that ancient hag, who'll have our howling tendencies  
dragged out from grim repositories to public view.

## Some Other Person, Year or Street

Far out on branch-lines, past the usual termini of London's ever restless, packed commuter trains there may be occupations built quite differently with prospects open like the morning paper, ads that float unthreatened by the slowly lifting clouds.

Indeed the out-of-season coastal towns like Tenby, Rhyl or Bridlington may just be that, produced by conversations with a total stranger, stop we suddenly alighted at for no good cause which, like our memories of childhood books became a part of Superman or Dare or Famous Five.

Careers would then have been quite otherwise but still presenting us with purpose, cash or clout in lives complete, but in some other person, year or street.