



Still Abiding Fire

Book Three: Colin John Holcombe

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by

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1. Introduction

Time takes and moves us dreaming pieces on
as though its measures were the smiling face
that we remember when all else is gone.

Why ask of purpose in this hurtful place
that tells of other ways than what we are
when first of inwardness and childhood grace?

And yet there stays for us perhaps some star
whose homewarding will shed its steadfast light
and guide belatedly, if from afar.

Some house or hill or tree, some common sight
we saw unchanging on our evening strolls
that yet will reverence its keepsake rite.

Not part of us, it's true, but which consoles
us when we see some tended wayside shrine
that speaks of comradeship in passing souls.

The rest we do not know. The swelling line
of those who've gone before is endless night:
and what's come is yet untested wine.

Yet lives are various: each morning's bright
with dowered majesty that's plain enough,
if all the rest evade our mundane sight.

But these went questing on, a pathway rough
or smooth, ascending suddenly, or kept
to honest byways and parochial stuff.

They gave their lives to that, and overstepped
the settled limits of their scope and time,
to stare out earnestly while others slept.

Some used their gifts for image, word or rhyme,
or those of music-giving, dancing, found
in body's ecstasy their one sublime

accomplishment. Still others, fenced around
by darkening phantoms, made things fierce and rare,
to reach the margins of more shadowed ground

where ghosts alone survive. And yet it's there
that we perhaps must learn to live instead,
in hesitant but yet prevailing prayer.

For otherwise we are but ill words said,
the lonely mindlessness churned up by days
of reckoning in every wind-tossed head.

Two portals mark the ending of our ways,
with lives that briefest interval between
our looking onward and that backward gaze.

The dead are all about us in the no more seen,
the desolating loss that nothing mends,
the summer's happiness that should have been.

2. Alexander von Humboldt

Some men are born for what their future sends,
and any more they need is quickly won
by time, occasion and the help of friends.

My mind is clear, well organised, and one
accommodating stiff bureaucracy
that makes our Prussian state. As soon as done

are detailed summaries required of me:
each ruled as is my thought, methodical
and rooted in proactive accuracy.

My day-to-day appointment book was full
of famous names, indeed of Europe's best
in all the sciences, and through their pull

I won appointments. Then as Bonpland's guest
I toured through Venezuela, Cuba, saw
the vast Americas, there laid to rest

many a tale of what their people wore,
their modes of dance and hunting from the snow-
clad Andes to the rich Atlantic shore.

How crops were harvested, how best would grow
the cotton, cacao and the sugarcane,
the mines of Mexico, the points to know

in their prospection, how the constant gain
of knowledge helps both rich and poor,
and plumed officialdom in titled Spain.

I published all my notes. Each volume bore
the imprint of a well-appointed mind,
the drawings illustrating some small store

of what this world will offer, not confined
to specialized and limiting debate,
but what, adventuring, we all might find.

For man must trust his senses, not vacate
that place to some preposterous deity
when teeming nature is her own estate.

Abundantly she's eloquent, to be
abroad in spectacles that make our hearts
rejoice in rapt and blessed humility.

That world is one, albeit now the arts
and sciences are disciplines so far
from integrating they're but separate parts.

How beautiful the morning sunbeams are,
the garden ways, the ceaseless beating wings
that draw their energy from one small star.

No more than that, and yet its knowledge brings
the warm benevolence of summer nights,
an aching peacefulness when some bird sings

the long day through in music that unites
our heart-felt vision to a vibrant place
where leafy miracles are natural sights.

Sometimes at evening with a wistful grace
the poplar trembles with its silver leaves
arrayed in concert where the light winds trace

their own recitals round what heart conceives
as woodland deity or sylvan sprite
that trails her summer-coloured spangled sleeves.

So held our brooding forebears — who'd invite
the spirits from some inward-templed day
to guide their otherwise-directed sight.

We all of us contain that brighter ray
of insight that the wiser statesmen will
invest proposals with lest millions pay.

And all around are symphonies that fill
our hearts with thankfulness: those listenings pass
beyond this well-known house or field or hill,

to dance belatedly, as summer grass
will hold no record where our footsteps go,
or what's emergent from the mirroring glass,

but what our unrepentant senses know:
the breath of millions in that inner fire
that animates this gladdening picture show.

3. Robert Herrick

Primitive and savage was Dean Prior
and scarcely changing all my long years there:
folk fiercely silent in their black attire.

It was a banishment, though I would fare
no worse than many of my company
who would their worldly hopes and titles wear.

Yet from the muddy brook, if we would see,
are drawn the smooth and sweetly running streams,
reflecting earth and sky's confederacy.

We find a natural courtliness that deems
itself the better for its unlaced charms,
for all that women once were famous dreams.

Images I have of hands and arms
that link and whirl above the pretty feet,
that even in this place the Sabbath calms

reflect but modesty — poor, plain and neat —
defined by rough-cut stones and thistled field
and gives but niggardly: no country seat

that was my world before, a hope revealed
in high connections and the famous names
the expedition that I planned would yield

towards preferment. Here my living tames
the wildest longing, when the thirst for fame
are sooted outlines in the candle flames.

A quiet existence, poor, and which became
at times unconscionable and not enough
for one whose company would seek acclaim

from modish fashion, richly-fashioned stuff
that gives advancement to a great divine
where all is mundane here, and plain, and rough.

It is sufficient, though. I drink good wine
and by a wedding speech am also blessed.
Pru cooks and does for me: the pewters shine.

Perhaps that rural order stays the best
of all we once desired, from youth's fresh face
to robes of purple for our final rest.

My verse is simple, then, and tries to place
my what I hope are common, heartfelt thoughts
within the homilies we all embrace.

In spring it is the golden, honeyed courts
that daffodils will keep, or May's rich flowers,
the downy sweetness that the air supports.

And those to me in thought, in passing hours,
appeared more child-like trusting and sincere
than I remembered of those erstwhile powers:

the lisp of courtier in the proffered ear,
the favourite's rich-scented, pouting kiss,
the steel effrontery of brigadier,

or swelling bodices of loosened bliss,
the dayspring eyes whose splendour has the sun
itself ascending look to be remiss.

Such plumes and titles that they had not won
became to me brocaded, puffed up days
beside the rapture of the spring begun

in quiet coppice paths or passing ways
beneath the ancient shadow of the oak,
or meadowlands where sheep and cattle graze

in rough contentment, where each colour spoke
of long, hot days to come, of hay or corn
to wreath the bonnets of their reaping folk.

What to these are ornamental lawn,
or satin dresses as the night hours pass
into the radiance of new-made dawn?

4. Marie-Henri Beyle

The ways of candid happiness were sparse
enough, and mocked the bearing that my father made
contingent on observing wealth and class.

A stiff conservative, and one who laid
much weight on rule-bound duty to the state:
to me as fashioned out of puffed brocade.

What honesty can thrive on that, negate
the love of precedent for simple good,
or serve the interests of the truly great?

By which I mean Napoleon, who stood
for discipline, for armies, peoples' right
to choose whatever made for parenthood.

An international cause I kept, despite
the war in Russia and the long retreat
across the corpse-thick, numbing depths of white.

The towns and settlements and stocks of wheat
lay burned before us, all their livestock killed
to make predicaments the more complete.

And even I who shaved each day, fulfilled
what oath and army duties must incur,
knew effort here was only dully willed.

Not drawn as daylight blesses, as it were,
but forced conscriptions out of dead-beat limbs
that from their longed-for rest would scarcely stir.

Worse I have survived, and not on whims
refused to deck myself with pinchbeck gaud
for all that bold adventurer yet trims

his sail to what the passing winds afford
in passage out, or as a silk-thin glove
more feels the upright vigour of the sword.

I gave myself to music, art and love,
to dissipation most, of course. In time
the coarse, bluff warrior was murmuring dove.

A dilettante in truth, and, lacking rhyme,
I drew a potent fatness from the soil
as champagne vines grow best on barren lime.

I wrote assiduously, and learnt the toil
of making words evoke the would-be heart,
and with the accuracy of pointed foil

brought honest men to smile, and others smart.
I wrote of plain realities, as bring
the soul's high mystery to common mart.

And most of love, which is a dangerous thing,
that those who welcome it should rather try
the innocence that nurtured summers bring.

Some woman's beautiful and takes our eye:
we note her carriage and her quiet tread
that in their modesty still dawdle by.

Yet wraiths and demons fill that pretty head
and apt companionship is worlds apart
from hard and detonating pain instead.

For of one body then and beating heart,
in hopeless gluttony of sprawling limbs,
becomes the litany where all things start.

Imagination, therefore, that bedims
our sober knowledge: what is hardly there
becomes the object of our earnest whims.

She's what? An essence kindled from the air,
a limpet entity we can't remove
from conjurations of her scented lair.

In fevered hour on hour, we cannot prove
that this is love or otherwise, but whet
the appetite for what our hopes approve.

And in such conjurations we must let
the sorrow salting round us crystallize
to otherwise than what we shall forget.

All dreams, all suppositions, where our eyes
are both participants and breathy gain
of rich embodiments where custom lies.

And love from which we cannot long abstain
will stay the one, still image in the glass
to smile and haunt and give us hope again.

5. Alexander Scriabin

I met Rachmaninoff in Zverev's class
where fifteen hours of practice turned the day
from famous diligence to well-nigh farce.

A thickset, dour and troubled youth who'd play
from first tuition to Conservatory
in some precise and tough, plebeian way.

Those hands were webbed in steel, were by decree,
to rule the sweep of verve of glittering keys
as does a packet-boat the stormy sea.

No, Sergei was never one for ease
in work or comradeship or brief affairs,
nor were his compositions there to please.

But built up as it were of mounting stairs
to sovereign festivals in every chord,
not things that came or crept up unawares

as mine are apt to do, who can afford
to be both Chopinesque and just myself,
that composition be its own reward.

I toured, wrote music, taught a wealth
of fresh new talent as the licensee
will drink the profits into doubtful health.

But then there was his Symphony in D,
which, frankly, no one liked, no, not a soul,
as all in Petrograd were prompt to see.

What doubt and anguish then must take their toll
of one who ruled his hands but not his head,
who came on destiny he'd not control.

Three years went by, three burdening years of dread:
the gifts were fraudulent or never there,
the rising prodigy now spent instead.

Three years of treatment, psychiatric care,
repeating to himself he'd write again:
he would, he would: it was his constant prayer.

What melancholies spite us dreaming men,
or with strange maladies infect the brain,
which reason occupies but now and then?

And then the torment passed. My friend was sane.
That C-sharp-minor Prelude went before
and made him what he was, and would remain:

the best of concert pianists. A score
of compositions followed, then the songs
beloved of everyone. Who asks for more?

Quite rightly feted now, to him belongs
a true celebrity: he made the taste
for ringing inwardness each chord prolongs.

My own were much more doubtful, based
on half-heard melodies that led the ear
to vague creations that the next effaced.

More disembodied, some have said. For here
a music that entranced the soul was shaped
in veils communing in some other sphere.

Indeed my last two symphonies escaped
all precedents together, as the skin
round which the notes themselves were lightly draped.

No one had heard such things before. Akin
to nothing but projected hopes, and these
evoking only further depths within.

That's all that I can say. What guarantees
a piece of music is its inwrought shape.
Not worlds in movement like the restless trees,
but more a woman seen in shawl or cape,
whose very carriage speaks of charms unseen
in haltered sweetness that we shan't escape.

A loving, giving thing it would demean
both her and us to call but nature's schemes,
by turns both innocent and libertine.

Dear Tatiana. How that prospect seems
a frayed and distant world, that to my mind
but what remains to us of passing dreams.

Four children and a wife were left behind.
I lived with Tatiana openly,
a toast to new-found life and art combined.

That set our country by the ears, so we
removed abroad: America, to France,
and Switzerland, but still the bourgeoisie

denounced our heresy at every chance.
To me a radiant thing, both pure and rare:
for love, like music, is that cosmic dance

of depth and dalliance, and in the air
are coloured shapes we grasp at, which the mind
will fill with apprehensions scarcely there.

Just notes, ineffable, that do not bind
to things material, indeed are bare
of comradeship that gives us humankind

our hopes and purpose here. Why do we dare
to find some meaning that reclothes the soul
in love's high majesty we cannot wear?

And yet we always do, and more, console
ourselves for all the hardship, pain and cost
of spent concessions that become the whole.

Long centuries may pass; the works are lost
to reputation, left to specialists,
yet once that interval of taste is crossed

how well they bloom again. Though once dismissed
as over-conscious, artificial work,
they have their presences, and still persist.

6. William Orpen

Certainly some sharp misfortunes lurk
in painting diplomats and soldiering folk
who want cathedrals where there's only kirk.

All carried worldly status with them, spoke
of self-importance, destiny, the tacit rules
that mitigate the empire's heavy yoke.

But I am Irish, and our history schools
us in the manners that the English wear:
I found my brushwork ruffed a line of fools.

In clothes and gestures, how they did their hair,
we portraitists become the connoisseur
in making viewers of our work aware

just who these rich, parading worthies were:
be-medalled chests, sagacious heads, an eye
perhaps to set the matron's heart astir —

disclosing further depths, when all will try
to navigate that stormy, hidden reach
of character where no doubt shipwrecks lie.

Reserve, the social cachet, each to each
the padded epaulets or corsetry:
aloof the etiquettes we cannot breach.

Myself, I'd go for heartfelt gaiety,
for good-time girls of stage and music hall,
the laughing mistresses who make us see

this gross hypocrisy of art on call
that here's embellishing the social scene
at costumed garden party, fete or ball.

If art's philandering, has only been
a dressing up of things we would be for,
with trusted confidant or go-between,

not so my great, blunt canvasses of war,
with wave on wave of men sent on, who got
the dodderers I'd painted years before.

Their wives and sweethearts good as shot
by telegrams awaited, howling shells
that would obliterate each blood-drenched spot.

What is the ignorance that so compels
the very gentlemen who made my name,
consign the other ranks to wretched hells?

No doubt I drank too much, and knew no shame
in flaunting mistresses to pique my wife,
yet new commissions flowed in just the same.

Then off to France I went, recording life
for those who never knew how bullets go,
or stench of bodies or the jabbing knife.

Lloyd George, the US President, Clemanceau
and all in speaking likenesses, each one
a living miracle my hands bestow

on passing generations, each one run
by stiff-necked statesmen and their staff
evoking merit that their titles won.

The morning dress, the uniforms, the chaff
of neighbourly deceptions, well-bred lies
they told for friends or scoffing fame's behalf.

Around them shimmered the Palace of Versailles,
resplendent mirrors with their lofty panes
to magnify each gesture, every guise

of warm humanity, where fine talk gains
applause of millions, and the ruined towns
must wait in silence on the snowy plains

in war-torn Europe, have the pinch-beck crowns
of bankrupt empires once more bar the gate
to honest dealing, when the whole world drowns

in sleights and fictions, where affairs of state
are no concern of jumped-up serving men,
to whom democracy has come too late.

Come, tell the mutilated: not again
will come the manliness of how they were,
the long, hot summers of their lives as then.

No Jack and Jill, no honest him and her,
no world they'll make together, children bear,
when each awakening into must incur

a consciousness of what is gone, must dare
them think beyond the reprimanding look
in hurt's collusion, every guilty stare

betrayed in edging by. In duty's book
they left an entry, marking some such day
when orders or their country's prompting took

them on past crowds and bunting, on to pay
for class and privilege that their England served
as norms for countrymen, who had no say

in what their social betters did, but nerved
themselves for still more coming loss and pain,
for what obedience in deed incurred.

Yet indisputably, though each campaign
went on to ultimatums, total war,
inherent decency could not abstain

from thinking on, beyond the army corps,
to quieter comradeship in life's hard school
that made a future still worth fighting for.

7. Tamara Platonovna Karsavina

I was born to dance. Each length of tulle
or gauze was destined for another dress,
and so that daily-practiced childhood rule

would make the great performer. Nonetheless
I had to work consistently, and soon
became my own unbending governess,

who from each morning on to afternoon
rehearsed in step on step that iron law
that draws performers to the backdrop moon.

It was the body's spectre I'd explore —
me, this small, aloof, pert, prancing thing —
in childhood kingdoms all are searching for.

Which is to live abundantly, to fling
our arms out, hug and enter each event,
not merely tell of it, but dance and sing.

And that is difficult. My father went
from principal to largely unemployed.
His rivals' work, he thought, a banishment
from all he knew and loved, a life destroyed
by dark intrigues, that tragic civil war
of gross barbarities we'd none avoid.

A constant in our lives, which I foresaw
as needing all my skills and gifts. I rose
quite rapidly through school to ballet corps,

and thence to ballerina, where I chose
to dance the full Petipa repertoire
that, challenging, is still rewarding those

who helped me onwards to a trained desire:
to have my muscles, body, breath and soul
become intractable, untethered fire —

when all the famous names, and every role
with Fokine, Diaghilev and Balachine
were worked according to their strict control.

All dance is hazardous, has always been.
Each move is fraught with effort, where we face
a fall or misstep ending every scene.

Why do we dance and dance in any case?
Why do we give ourselves and all we hold
most precious in this artificial place

of strange successions as the nights unfold
to yet more acts and movement, turning still
as week on week the same forced tale is told?

I need not catalogue the parts that fill
the repertoire today and have not aged,
and danced with insight, which is more than skill.

Of course it's choreographed, of course it's staged.
We dancers live a life of servitude:
indentured, tutored, strictly dressed and waged

on pittances. Our earnest work is viewed
as mere vocation, where we only put
on demonstrations that we should exclude:

the laced-up architecture of the foot,
the tendon spreads that interdigitate,
us lightly settling there as soft as soot,

yet still will bear aspiring body's weight,
to leap and be alive, to greet each day
as fresh denial of the endless freight

of tired existence, where we work and stay
within a habit, till it overwhelms
us like that long-forgotten, first bouquet.

8. Ivan Bunin

I am of earliest Russia, those far realms
that call out endlessly, for all they're worth,
across the sky-soaked lines of distant elms.

And from a family that traced its birth
to tsarist farms and settlements as give
a place and purpose to this black-soil earth.

In that continuum our senses live:
there is a consciousness of happier times,
some lingering residue from that rich sieve

of life in memories: of sun that mimes
the burnished metalwork of Tartar lands,
and silvered nights on which the pale moon climbs

to sovereign majesty, and, hovering, stands
complicit with the soft, half-silent sounds
of earth awakening, where the mole's small hands

are ever moving under heaped-up grounds
about the church and cemetery, the row
of wheat-packed merchant houses that astounds

us still to see them as they were, that go
on holding up their mossy, speckled heads
along the pot-holed track we used to know:

unchanged, immutable: that quietness spreads
into the simple lives we onetime had
as deep astonishment in newly-weds.

Here all is quiet and spacious, calm and sad,
a Russian town asleep a summer night.
A thread of moonlight like an ample plaid

lies thrown across the river, sparkling bright
and dark together where past days recall
the radiance echoed into steppe-land light.

For then our ears could hear the least leaf fall
and eyes pick out the dusty Pleiades.

Then tirelessly we'd watch the swallows trawl

the lakes for flies, the kestrel float at ease
above the rise of thermals through the air,
as crimson nestled in the smoky trees.

All known to me, all felt and made my care
to sense, convey, to render so alive
that readers are themselves existing there.

But not existing only, but will strive
to sink with all their senses into, scent
the snow's thin fizziness as rooks arrive,

the hazel with its heavy catkins bent,
the blaze of leaves beneath the outstretched sun,
and all the happiness they represent.

To be alive and feel the spring begun
within itself and have the golden shout
in life that's echoing and never done

with names and places that without a doubt
we shall not see again, a world that's gone
though still, continually, we think about.

How is that possible? The sun that shone
upon a house or wood or field still shines
as though eternally, and yet anon

the vast and breathing world around resigns
itself to what was then and of a time
which, like the sun in splendour, then declines

to what is scarcely there. The youth in prime
of love or self-sufficiency, which each day draws
to certainty, becomes a distant mime,

a thin, faint shadow of itself, a cause
we barely grasp at, though the waking day
obeys habitually its self-same laws

that turn unconscionable. Can we not say
how brief and passing all our warm hours are,
that life is bountiful but doesn't stay?

And shan't we stand in tears at that, and far
from being comforted, would ever see
that sadness trailing in the evening star?

That's what I am and write from, what I'll be
to those who read my works, who with their eyes
regain the wonder once reposed in me.

Why do we live and with renewed surprise
pass by these miracles, and do not feel
in each day done with more a little dies?

We should in reverence and quiet kneel
and think of what is here as some new start
towards the purposing our works reveal.

9. Dr. Rosemary Walker

A year, I told myself. The easy part
is that you lose yourself in each new case,
in names, in medications, progress chart.

You meet discouragements, in fact you face
the prospect many here will shortly die,
or not so shortly but with little grace.

No, turned or tossing from that patch of sky,
removed, detached from others and aloof
from all the others are the beds that lie

in long straight rows beneath the rope-held roof,
where friends and all their lives before now seem
a disinfected other world, a mild reproof

that we have failed them, that their stoic dream
in modern medicine and white-man's ways
have served to amputate their self-esteem.

For all are very proud: their solemn gaze
is quite without reflection or surprise
but seems accepting of the tranquil days.

And there you leave it, do not empathize
but stay the doctor always, cut the nerve
against a thinking on, where madness lies.

It is an obligation, where we serve
a people on their final stage in life,
within proprieties we both observe.

And must accept in time. You'll not be wife
nor help your children through their daily cares,
but learn the merits of the surgeon's knife

that severs cleanly, keeps apart. Affairs
are not encouraged here, nor are they wise:
the longings of the flesh come filled with snares.

A world of common effort without ties
to anyone beyond some aptitude
for playing master in some modern guise.

That first, full loving heart is not renewed,
when all we might have been becomes the crutch
of brave ambitions that were not pursued.

No doubt I'll die out here, or somewhere much
the same, unknown and unregarded — one
who gave and gained in time the friendly touch

for others, native peoples overrun
by war or pestilence, continued drought,
the truly destitute who now have none

but us to care and feed them, and without
whose oath there would be nothing to reclaim
from all the dried-up scrubland hereabout

that spreads relentlessly, yet still the same,
stays nature's source and simple, inmost seed.
We are God's creatures, all, and should not blame

ourselves for what in time we do not heed,
although we sense, become the more aware
in others like us, of each human need.

For love is in our natures and a care
for young ones that the savage tigers show,
or birds inhabiting the broody air.

I think of that at times, for all we go
on polished wheels, the true professional:
alert, aloof but kindly, in the know

about their true condition, interval
of life that's left to them, the balance sheets
of what we say to them, and must, and shall.

10. Marcel Proust

Time touches all those sun-bedazzled streets
of Illiers and Paris boulevards
with smells and madeleines in long retreats

from youth's fresh incidents. Here drab facades
were flush with carriages, and rich cravats
were one with actresses in promenades.

Where have they gone, the gowns, the tall silk hats?
How does the true gratin descend by chance
to charm and manners and to fireside chats?

The old regimes, the mounted knights that prance
about in coloured shadows from a bedside lamp,
the territories the ducal names advance,

are living France, and one we can't revamp
from small town manners, but from hard-learned ways
that leave no philistine or boorish stamp.

To me then every single word or phrase
would come inhabited with things not past
but merely sleeping, as the daylight's blaze

will throw an enervating, flatter cast
on childhood memories of place or time,
on things indelible that do not last.

Yet social hopes are all we have to climb
from this dull world of class-bound rites
that otherwise is childish pantomime.

And so in town and country, all the sights
and smells, the tapestry of who we are —
from subtle majesty of summer nights

to lights and movements from a door ajar,
from peddler's cries that rise from Paris streets,
to names as apparitions from afar:

all now re-rooted in those balance sheets,
that catch some flavour now of what has fled,
by which we gather up past time's receipts.

And then the distant names become instead
renewed in us, with the long-lost place
of balls and dinner parties now not dead

but set in aspic, as it were: some face
that once enchanted us, or some such name
that other names and heartaches can't replace.

These are our homes, our holy ground, that came
to be without our wishing it, a treasured place
that we remember, always, just the same.

The mother's kiss or glance that still would grace
some truly fortunate and happy day,
the steps to which we cannot now retrace.

They're gone. Entirely? That we cannot say
but know at odd times yet there still returns
the intimations of those shades that stray

upon our inner thoughts — the hope that yearns
for its accomplishment these long days since,
that neurasthenic trait that never learns

that we are fables like the fairy prince
whom careless beauty kisses, then is gone
beyond what commonsense might still convince

us of: that time, that briefly taking on
our bodies, clothes and name, some patch of ground
on which illuminating sunlight shone,

is only passing, as the others found
to be receding like the backward wave
we see continually in all around.

Why do we vacillate from birth to grave
who have, we know, much worthier things to do
than hold to backwardings we cannot save?

The sudden smile that's warm and true,
the words once whispered that enchant the heart,
the brief, sad look that lasts a lifetime through.

The which we call to mind, when all our art
is bent on memories that by degrees
become the kingdom where all truths must start.

11. Giacomo Leopardi

A quiet evening where there comes no breeze:
a tranquil autumn silence fills the air
with seeming restlessness, and in the trees

an importuning of vast nothings there,
the isthmuses of days that lie around
on earth that's otherwise and does not care.

But here in funeral monuments, in shaded ground
that marks the halting passage of the dead
lie true eternities, nor is there sound

of that immensity, but winds instead
that ruffle trees and hedgerows with a sense
of long impatience at the angel's head.

We feel continually our going hence
towards a glad extinction, deaths we hear
forever drawing us from past events

towards our tomb of inwardness, which year
by year assumes the kernel of our lives
through which how pointlessly we persevere.

For what? For some possessiveness that strives
to keep us on a certain path we took
from mutual loneliness in friends and wives?

What is our purpose here? Why do we look
so fondly on the sunlight and the rain,
the fall of evening on some much-read book?

We must go further, feel the joy and pain,
the first soft breath of spring within the leaves
and gathering richness as the long days wane.

The death of spouse and friends, the hope that grieves
upon the far side of our growing fears,
the happening that no regret reprieves.

What are our memories? And what inheres
unchanged in us and does not go away,
that dull precipitant of countless years

that make each second, minute, hour or day
inhabit us assenting, breathing things,
which we consider with a wild amaze

as self conceived, no more? That effort wrings
such unbecomings from the future tense
to which our purblind nature ever clings.

And yet and surely there are things we sense
with our whole being, as the warm, soft breeze
that springtime conjures up — a far, immense

inauguration of new life, the trees
re clothed again, the fields with gladness sown,
and all the rich, soft scents of summer's ease,

the which were only sleeping, promised, grown
a parcel of our heritage that, ours today,
where all we occupy we also own

in endless boredoms of our lives, that stay
both near and closed to us, forever rule
the pathways out into the cold and grey.

12. Sri Aurobindo

So at Loretto House, a boarding school,
I learnt the wherewithal of social class
that turns out gentleman from would-be fool.

From grammar school to Cambridge, there to pass
two happy, pointless years in reading Greek,
concerns, like racing studs, put out to grass.

Returned to native service, first I'd speak
of passive non-compliance, where to do
the English bidding keeps our life-blood weak.

Deductions anyone could see were true:
I drew on incidents that every day
the many suffered from the British few.

Regrettable that bomb, I have to say,
indeed an outrage, killing others there.
For that, the perpetrators had to pay.

As did the advocates, which seemed but fair
to that famed sense of British justice. I
and others like me took especial care

to offer no resistance, nor deny
the merit of our case, or fail to tell
the listening courtroom all the reasons why.

I went to prison briefly, where befell
me strange adventures: there, with countrymen,
I sank beneath an inward growing spell

of vile unfathomings. In such a den
with dacoits, thieves and casual murderers,
our husbandry of truth was tasked again.

How long and earnestly would I rehearse
my plans for India and its ancient poor,
the vast inheritance that is our curse.

What hope for anything I could be for?
In those wild eyes, and gestures, tangled hair,
there grew but obsolescent village lore.

All words but wasted in that foul, thick air
that served inhabitants of every cell
though still the soul of India was beating there.

I turned away, as will the village well
collect the water seeping pore by pore
through rocks, would with that thinking, slowly swell,

becoming inner wholeness, ever more
attuned to consciousness that far above,
but also linked to us, sublimely soar

those borderlands of all-abounding love.
A thing inherent in us, pressing, more
companionable than is the nesting dove

if we would welcome it, would so restore
a true dimension to the glowing soul
that was our birthright in long times before.

We're born in purity, in essence whole
and self-delighting in our parent's pride
before those depredations take their toll.

Those cursed attachments to the mere outside,
the scented husk that hides the sovereign fruit,
to which in falsities we stayed allied.

The rich deceptions that we can't refute,
which spell attachment where our pain begins,
the modesty that ends in ill-repute.

Our lives are like the whirling cotton gins
returned with threaded sorrow time can't heal,
where ripening majesty of beauty thins

to fret and worry. There is no appeal
from harming others, nor can we impart
to others kindness we cannot feel.

From reefs to fathoms of the stormy heart,
at last to contemplations deep within,
in giving of themselves all good lives start.

And are the sum of boundless discipline
of breath and wholesomeness where our true mind
is not the traveller from inn to inn

but inward dwelling, whole and unconfined
by place or time or passing circumstance,
where empty pleasures of the flesh must bind

but to the world of shadows, that expanse
of longing, where our hurt has never ceased,
like long attachment to a failed romance.

It should be happiness, to be released
from suffering into that true company,
and find our wants in this false world deceased.

13. Rainer Maria Rilke

Our death is but a going on. We see
in essences a something of our ends
and know as well with time how patiently

are borne the sadnesses each evening sends
to settlements of streets, apartment blocks,
that abnegating, all-beseeking cry that rends

our hearts. We watch in silence as the flocks
of birds make scattered landfall: finding room
as centuries in old cathedral clocks.

Each soul is benison and blessed tomb,
is both the recklessness of youth and still
the long nostalgia that the years assume:

a fragrance in the air it must distil
as ancient magic out of autumn leaves.

Our life is ever what we can't fulfil

of smiling comradeship that yet deceives,
for all the bountiful, forgiving heart
return in multiples what heart receives.

It lives in absence, has the hours impart
their forward breathiness, will ever feel
impetuously where all such natures start.

A song that moulds itself, the surgeon's steel
dissolved in tenderness, the unlocked drawer,
the porcelain that makes its rimmed appeal.

The open silverware that would implore
us hold its iridescent heaviness,
the grief-stained mirror that we can't restore

to sovereign happiness, where shadows press
against the outlines of some much-loved face
and perturbations there we can't profess

but sense continually, that tranquil grace
the wind-tossed blossom holds to, ever bent
from that true loveliness it would embrace.

All things have their continuum, their pent-
up purposes in every flower or tree
not given us, but day to day more lent

to city avenues where shamelessly
the summer gives itself: a shower of leaves
with which the sunlight played perpetually.

Then comes the winter, where the high head grieves
for what it loses, seeing over them
a sense of passage out, which interweaves

our life with others in that floating hem
of further giving: things inanimate,
which have their presence nonetheless, and stem

from our releasing them, that natural state
in which we lose identity, one got
so painfully and after such a wait

on this our grieving earth. All things are not
for us, nor made for us, who swiftly pass
beyond this briefly-tended garden spot.

Imperiously, in time's much-clouded glass,
we lose the outlines of our lives, once earned
as winds consorting with the summer grass,

and so unconsciously, when we're concerned
with simple restlessness that is our lives,
while all around the smiling spring returned,

reseeding sight with wonder, that revives
the hidden nascent thing of how we were,
that sense, half lost in us, that still survives

beyond the hopelessness the years confer,
the grief in moss-trimmed headstone through the rain,
that wealth of memories we can't inter:

the wasted fellowship, the sweet, half pain
in syllables that made up someone's name
we hardly hear but were the long refrain

of all we listened to, the distant claim
we had upon a world we couldn't plumb
the depths of, ever, but in time became.

14. Envoi

If retrospects of memory should come
to rule both living and the dead, how long
the punishment deserved when we succumb

to hurting others in the onward throng
of obligations, paying what is owed
reluctantly or not at all? The song

denied that's heard along that crowded road
with steady loss of what we one time were,
untried, unburdened by this heavy load

of heart's acknowledgement, that grainy blur
in childhood photographs, the smiling thinned
by what those recollections must incur.

With long-dried leaves, the whirling tawny wind
collects of thousands in its thoughtless way,
each one with happiness and grieving twinned.

Time fells the greatest monuments: there stay
but stone and pediment with unknown names,
the haughty pillars lapsed to wattled clay.

And, through the while, on men with different aims
and strange conceptions, thoughts and febrile dreams,
the dying sun goes down in muted flames.

We toil forever in those hidden seams
of what is gangue at last, the drusy ores
go on ahead, apart, the distant gleams

we spend our whole lives searching for, a cause
we're not to know the purpose of, but find
as blessed entitlement when on those murmuring shores

we stand in wonder, where with hopes combined
we gather up the heartaches undergone
that make perpetually our humankind.