



# Wessex

A Poem by C. John Holcombe

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# WESSEX

*Tell me not here, it needs not saying,  
What tune the enchantress plays*

*A.E. Housman*

## One

*Would you retain me in our few letters,  
reduce me, laughing, to some purblind dream?  
The paths in the sunlight are not the same.  
Ours was a falling into headlong waters,  
a bewitchment further than the earth again.*

*Why reiterate that every chit of stone  
brimmed with a music that now is silent?  
In the torrents of spring we yearn for attainment —  
for the yielding, the belonging, the outward turned in:  
how fast that epiphany is put away.*

*Say what you want to, exactly: I shall not care.  
Enough were the words once to clothe the heart.  
But now I am part of all the inanimate  
small and the suffering. Tell me: does the circling year  
return with the scene where our own bird sang?*

*Pretend to yourself— why don't you?— I shan't be long,  
what with the sun up, the air soft, and the leaves warm.  
There is no one to hear you. It will do no harm  
to hold me awhile though the summers bring  
tangible wonderment only once.*

*Why the incessant indulging of old regrets,  
playing the martyr? We have done our stint.  
The fields have reseeded; the little that went  
on from us soaring to a famed romance  
is burned out and sintered, the first child spilled.*

No, that's not true. There is an inner weld  
where still I may find you and feel the stone  
warm with your touch, and the doorway creaking. Lean  
out of absence a moment and I will build  
stairways to rapture from a patchwork song —

that flumes in the telling as an underground spring  
irrigates later when the great storms are gone —  
inwardly always, and my hooded skin  
is smooth and persuasive as the lawyer's tongue.

Smile, disbelief: yes, they are best.



A cottage with a garden, among folk who crossed  
briefly to speak to us in the rain-dressed streets. Not  
laggard nor kindly so much as that  
old way of customs, observances — at least  
so we then hoped, and so it was.

You do not know how your absences leave me. Is  
this then the upshot, a thermometered heart,  
to be wheeled up and down in this tremulous state?  
Round me, delinquent and splendid,  
the past years progress,  
dilatatory on their antique spindle.

*Dear man, you are changed. Your very hands tremble.  
Come, let me hold you as you once held me  
in the footpaths and tangles of past kissing places — I  
laughed as you lifted and on my own back thimble  
set me to reach out for all I dare.*

Where is it written that the years must grieve us? Are  
there not runes in the wind-sifted trees?  
Must I cast fortunes from my lot of tears?  
No, do not preach to me: I cannot bear  
even a breath of that upland place.

I am nothing but sunlight on the wet-cut grass —  
succulent for the instant, then a heavy listing  
to darkness, to discharge, not even lasting

to reflections, excuses, the saying because  
of this matter, that — just the light wind idling.

A leaching to nothing, to the indolent sailing  
out in all weathers as the whistling jays  
burst from the hedgerows, and the cumulous trees  
soar and dissolve, and with the seasons are curling  
and colouring and ever diminishing daily.

*What's the strange quandary that you wander so slowly  
about these grey quarters in these solemn towns,  
long-sashed and elderly, where the ponderous stones  
are eye-holed with sockets and smugly lie  
prebendary to the plain, always the dull*

*flat of the brickwork, cobbles, cheap lavatory stall.  
The small, the ungenerous, the never-kind.  
Beneath, when I'm silent, comes the bricked-in sound  
from corridors and basements, as though the pull  
of earth on its kinsfolk returned again.*

What am I doing in this lace-doily scene  
with a waitress beguiling in your pride of moving?  
Why am I seated like an old man perceiving  
how the past unravels, that the tea leaves spin  
for him as for others, that I appear

but aged and spent, with the odd coin to spare  
for someone to humour this white-haired creature,



smiling and shambling while the inward rapture  
rises, and shakes him, a recusant fire

that laughs as I go, and am vacant under

a tumult of cumulous, which is water vapour —  
that and no more — without length of purpose.

Days pass, the rain. Will nothing possess  
the past as it was, and will no one keep her  
alive in the lift that the soft wind has?

Who can be sure that the years don't deceive us?

Who can shake tears from the prescient air?

I can, and I do, and around me are

the emboldened and ever more certain as

the sunlight turns golden through this Hardy land.

Here you are standing, were standing: where does it end?

At times I still see you and I hurry on

fast to the car park, the café, small country inn.

But no, it's not you, someone different, and

I do not know if you are far or near.

I've toured our two counties but find nothing there  
but banks and small businesses, a fast food chain.

How can it be they do not rise again

the sturdy, the undeserving, the resentful poor

opposed to the bailiff, and the enclosure acts?

Throughout these long Downlands, though it may vex  
me, still I come back to in these rain-scooped acres,  
to trees half in mist as though they might lead us  
on with that journey when with shovels and picks  
they cut their way to the frontier castles.

A strange business then. Where the heathland jostles,  
and the birch is sfumato in the evening light,  
there was haze, thick presence, no end of it,  
impenetrable dead furze, and stiff stands of thistles.

Bristling to the sea's edge, wind-shaven, sheer,

it dropped like a bird to the sheeted roar  
of the sea out in harness, the continual spill  
up the shingle of pebbles, the weltering fall  
in beacon after beacon to the dwindling weir  
of a far land, rain-misted, that is the west.

## TWO

Hardy, he knew them a little — that at their last  
meetings with frock coats and with getting on.  
They were brazen, curmudgeonly, taken in  
by nothing and no one, and never on trust  
took word of gentry or the new addresses.



sturdy, ever present, and bereft again  
of the law, its protection, abiding care.

I make no mistake: this was a surly poor.  
Would strip you promptly as take your pulse,  
and leave not a tale but the wayside grass  
flattened, blood-speckled — nothing there  
but the spoil of the fox, and the wind's dissensions.

Yet these are my people, not the long generations  
tall in their topiary or in flowered stone.  
No halls, no portraits, no quartered line  
of embassies, statesmen or of invitations  
in coronets crowding the mantelpiece.

Yet there can be memory in the vales of trees  
in the brooks, in the Downlands, in the bare,  
ploughed fields,  
where the sun at first rising still lingers and folds  
on the green hill its gladness and, glittering, lays  
the elixir of morning on the brilliant lake.

In rain that is spendrift in the long-raked Chalk,  
then summer returning to the warm dry slopes,  
to corn with its burnishings, to soft grey oats,  
where appear and continually the simple folk  
who come in the evening when the light is thin.

Their call is in undertones. 'Countryman,  
attend to the gate as the cattle gather  
adrift to the wind and to the rainy weather,  
to what is known and apportioned in a faraway heaven:  
    whoever the bailiff, whatever allowed.'

## Three

My kith and my kinfolk, a full century away  
from the clerks on stools in a gas-flared light  
flat-spreading to ledgers where, propped up late,  
they toil on in Clerkenwell under a sky,  
    gothic and muddy, with a heavy breath,

pregnant with soot, with wetness, with  
smells of frying and of lunch in boxes,  
the air spitted, then fraying with the sound of taxis:  
sticky, unending, like the rough-cut cloth  
    on which they are printed, all of a piece.

High on the skyline, tilting place to place,  
bundles of the elements and piebald at evening  
with a vast inner longing, and the horse plumes waving  
as they came in their wagons and took by force  
    chattels of the landlord and minor gentry.

There is a family of mine in the midwest country  
that held fiefed possessions before the Normans came.  
A good name among many in that broken time,  
a blur at this distance, hardly an entry,  
    but a start, an event, an erstwhile home.

For a century or so, till that Doomsday time  
ushered in records, and their rendezvous  
became the thickness of night in the flinty shires —  
segregating into the us and them,  
    small, a contagion, and running on

to woods and high pastures. Not a vigorous clan,  
not breeding that much, a tight-fisted lot —  
forever mistrustful, bristling, yet  
seamless as weather or the wind to the vane  
    advancing, scattering and in retreat.

Sometimes in summer at the fall of night,  
when doorways are open and the warmth spills out  
there brims such a crinoline,  
                    such complexioned thought  
that yours was the feminine, that this or naught  
    was the frankness of knowing beyond all want.

There are thigh bones, their sockets, the nodular flint —  
indomitable, incalculable but always large.  
They build up the wall and the bedroom ledge,

roughcast but solid, though the dream is spent:  
the breath we remember and the going under.

And then there is nothing but the evening's tinder,  
a tree that burns red, the brushed hedgerows cut  
with a circular, flaring, incandescent light  
that makes the heart darkness, the memory blonder  
under teachers, with schoolbooks, a forgotten aegis.

Only at evening when the shutters in pages  
close on the day and the wide sky glitters  
with a thousand sharp points, and the leaves in tatters  
are waving, long-gloved, and the far wood smudges  
with the returning, red-brown, of the autumn tide,

does the fox sniff the fields for the sharp days ahead.  
The badger has its scratchings, the letheret twitches  
at the first chill of winter, and by it hatches  
windings of straw, in warm burrows conveyed  
to the new world at springtime, where soft green grass

is fattened, thick-planted, where the wet stones hiss  
in the sunlight, and even the rain-doused air  
breaks open with a lucence, and the mud-caked fur  
is cast off in patches, and the mottled sky  
patterns with storm-clouds and will never stop

from lifting in consort, as passion's own sap  
into April quiddities, to flagrant jest.

Who is the gambler and who the host?  
Whatever the stratagem, the lattermost step  
has hot tears only out of focus.

## Four

Still I go back to those unturned acres,  
to the whaleback swallow over the late spring wheat,  
tousled with day's end but breathing out  
a warmth, a contentment, something to hold us  
in a contour of keeping to a quiet land.

Here we began and it is here we end;  
the temporary steadies to an allotted place.  
The passion dissembles, dissolves, and a gentleness  
at last stands proxy for the common bond  
born out of fervour that is put away.

The grave holds the bones, and the grasping yew  
fragments what was and there are none to tell  
how the lichen knits thickly in the churchyard wall  
and the past days are real as they ramify  
into us vaguely, for some remark





## Five

*Why must you track me wherever I fare  
as slowly the evenings reach out in March  
and the couples form up and from church to church  
rings out the happiness for all to hear,  
the lives continuing and passing on?*

Vast and withdrawn, they are silent again —  
the forest and the Downland, not now sending  
to an old man bewildered, trembling and handing  
on from a patrimony hardly his own  
what is shadow even of erstwhile fire.

*How can you say that? My successors are  
abroad in my purpose, and even their clothes  
extend in my walking. The story book leaves  
surely a wonderment. What is the fear —  
that you will not find me, not here or far?*

As a man traduced and disfigured by joy,  
dwindled to misogyny who knows not why  
but must cancel your syllables and on his cue  
behave as a stranger and, as you draw near,  
ever go sauntering, carelessly on.

*I am dust on the roadside  
and the first breath of dawn,  
the frost that holds fast to the pinnacled gorse,  
the faint line of green in long-travelled grass.*

*I am this and am nothing but the notice sewn  
in a thousand small touches of temperate pain.*

Who would not feel for the terror I'm in,  
when every dead creature and each small thing  
is around me attending, and insistent and long  
they call to me, speak to me, that the solid stone  
dissolves in the patois like emptied smoke?

On some days, some weathers, I'm heedless and take  
the paths through the forest, which is restless or still.  
The stands have their rituals, which is admirable.  
The sycamore, beech and the heavy oak  
are nodding their heads and turning and caring

for me not at all. Was my gift of hearing  
by you then encouraged, or my double sight?  
My learning is slow and is naming by rote  
pubstops and roadstops, and the churchyard staring  
hard at me passing with my course near run.

You do not know the afflictions I'm in.  
You do not know what that absence sends.  
It is silent. It is listening. Even my hands  
are flayed with your touch, and the small parts sewn  
on my skin are a leprosy and a loss.

I thought the refusing would further contain us,  
I thought in enchantment you would hold me where

retrenchments would make me even more  
reverent and truthful, content with less:  
but no, there is only hiss of the tapes.

## Six

I have walked up bewildered through steepening slopes  
that pass into hawthorn, then nettles, to stunted oak,  
the path growing broader into gleaming Chalk  
until there is nothing, just grasses, and the windy tops  
of the high beeches tossing: alone, cloud-cropped.

What stays, what passes? Through the deep-mired yard  
the cattle are plodding, the gate lies adrift  
to the weather, the sunlight, the ever-soft  
rain of the springtime, however viewed —  
still I am chastened and only chose

to be nothing in this, not the nights or the days,  
but only the pistil in the small hopes springing  
like poppies from the seed-drill, opening and flowering  
in gardens, allotments, the terraced rows  
where the lives are still parcelled by the simple laws.

I know them, I like them, they have battered cars,  
are kindly, hard-working: they come to the door  
smiling, hands wet, as though to adhere  
to a "take us as you find us", as the daylight steers  
round and again the cluttered room.

All have their habits, their workmates, the same  
sequence of moves on the checkerboard  
outing and shopping and breakfasts in bed.  
A start and return, following a dream  
heartlessly etched on the daylight's skin.

## Seven

I want on such occasions to be walking again  
with the wind in my hair and sauntering free  
of thoughts, of long hopes that whistle away —  
that whistle to nothing, to the frequent, inane  
repetitions of the tame and small.

You do not know how this endless recital  
of grieving will stricken and bring me down.  
You do not know how forward would burn  
your looks, your soft laughter and dancing till  
the darkness turn dawn, and the last volunteer

turns and turns helpless till the body tire  
in the bones and the fretwork: *did you think my breath  
but beckoned you back to a brutal hearth  
to be emptied of passion, discarded and sore,  
fragrantly entered into no accord?*

*Why should you censure what is simple need,  
to be yoked in tempest to some other being,  
but then not knit tight, but outward and straying,  
open and playful: have we not stayed  
a testimony to all the summers lost?*

Like the finest denier, the early mist  
curdled around us as wet with dew,  
aching, unconfined, and stretched out we lay,  
entangled with the seasons, by those seasons pressed  
into the pregnant and yielding turf.

Lengthily extended and in the sprawlings thereof  
of the body, decorum, the unclothed heart:  
brought all together this meeting at  
one woodside, one summer, when the scampering laugh  
of the wind was the witness and would not tell.

Much then about me I did not will,  
much that I hoped would securely last,  
but you have undone me who, deliberately, first  
were my ignis fatuus, my dropping well  
into silence, introspection, to simple being.

## Eight

*Such was my offer: no kindness, no knowing  
eventually how even the session might end:  
only the insistent, the envenomed, and  
not incantation but a steady fraying  
of myself expended and opened out.*

*Why not commemorate a hint of that,  
the nightfall of fingers in the steady air,  
the weaving of that which was always near:  
a gladness in the yielding, the golden knit  
of the limbs, of the being, the final rapture.*

*So the haunting of that most single nature  
be a wraith like myself, whose unmuddied breath  
pauses on the hillside, through the gorse-strewn heath,  
troubled and unshaping, a dishevelled mixture  
of laughing and calling and nowhere found.*

Further than ever is that final land  
which sometimes is inward but as it were  
continues on outward and as the air  
is vagrant and miserly and in the end  
is nothing and no one and I forget.

What's to be accounted in this autumnal glut?  
As I walk on the towpath and the river glitters  
with a thousand distensions: it elongates, fetters

itself on no season, condition, intention, yet  
is all of itself, a resplendent oblation.

Tough and encased, each scattered addition  
is hurtling to a completion, eyeless and dumb.  
At a loss, not heartened, I meander and am  
quartered again within an older convention:  
that the world is a corpus continuing on.

That inert as it may be, and indifferent,  
the hard small stone  
shimmies and drops. I try one more throw:  
ripples widen, diminish, are swept on by  
the current's rough eddy, intertangled in  
a sunlight that dazzles and darkens, deepens again.

Is there a purpose beneath all this travelling on?  
Where, beneath glare, do the seared glances heal?  
Not in shards of hard daylight is the wide day whole:  
say you are singing and listening and almost can  
fathom from silence what I cannot speak.

Such then my patrimony, all I shall take  
from the forest of evening, from the vast shift and lean  
of the sun spreading outward,  
past the warbler and crane  
that scratch in the shallows, past the red-brindled oak  
shedding last leaves — as a gambler will pay





*Reproach that tags as a distant bell,  
emptying the sunshine and of what we're saying?  
The colours of absence inhabit my being.  
I am last who was first, and the changes fill  
with the call of springtime the barren copse.*

*Past these I inhabit the rounded slopes:  
the ragwort, the speedwell, the thick welts of thistles.  
With these I am bending as the warm winds jostle  
the scabious and knapweed.*

*In the wind's gust and lapse  
the harebell will hold to its wiry stem.*

## Ten

*Let me return as the Maytimes bloom  
in the sharp thorns of hedgerows, in chestnut spires,  
in tempests of cherry and the chaplain rose,  
through air splashed with petals, as the evening brim  
with candour and innocence, as I was.*

*To be conifer dark in the late summer days,  
or sunlight, coarse-spangled, under foliaged trees,  
in the coloured regattas of clouds through the skies,  
in crispness, and stillness, in settling peace:  
when did I say I'd be sweet stay-at-home?*

*Who would desire me if I could do no harm,  
be tansy and milkweed and the leopard's bane?  
I am regal, need loving and tillage again.  
May wander, return, yet time after time  
stand witness to all that was you and I.*

*Would you humble me further? I have melted away.  
No more can my antics delight or disarm you.  
Nor can I hug you as the evenings must hurt you:  
I am gone, am dissolved; what you construe  
as my shadow is a furthering on from you.*

What is then conjured as the springtimes throw  
off mantles of wetness, when the white slopes shine  
with a canopied brilliance, each Downland stone  
is glinting and singing, and will hurt the eye,  
holding its richness too near the heart?

*Wolfbane and bugloss and the bewitched dark state  
of the legs going forward in the long night's weight,  
passion and exhaustion on each storm-drenched sheet:  
this is my turning from such intolerable height —  
a falling and heavily across the floor.*

*If you would detain me, entrammel my ear  
as you turn about in my summer mansions,  
retain in your palms the subtle declensions  
of jointing, of limb-build, each threaded hair —  
though the touch of me now can be only wounds.*

*Adopt my occasions: I have for friends  
such as walk lightly in the daylight's wake.  
Even your forebears, the high-country folk,  
take out the locket with its fingered strands  
of hair that is treasured above all letters.*

*That and no more are the troubled matters.  
Think and work late in the cluttered room,  
saunter in the summer to the world's far rim.  
I am breath and a passing on the jewelled waters,  
a darkness and dimpling of the daylight's skin.*

*I am warm wind, the swallow,  
the stopped light of dawn,  
I am laughter following the first things I say.  
In all my presumption will you deny  
me presage and radiance when I return  
the fuller for wantoning on from you?*

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