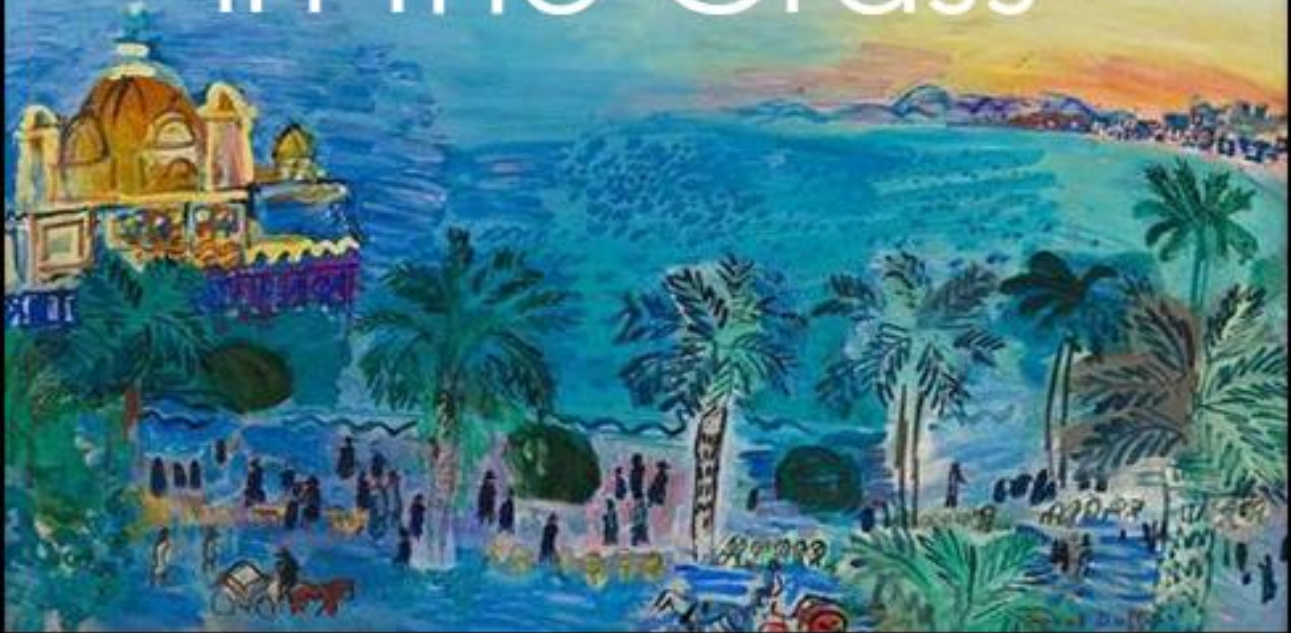


Ocaso Press 2020

Morning in the Grass



Poems 2019-20

by

Colin J. Holcombe

Morning in the Grass:
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Morning in the Grass

A land damp in that awakening,
where leaf-lined streets had names,
and schoolyard bells were ever making
havoc of our games.

The hopscotch sandals kiss and splay,
soft flips the skipping rope:
and youth's hot scent is scrubbed away
in fierce carbolic soap.

Yet here were miracles out walking
through each suburban street,
long intervals of parents talking
where fence and evening meet.

So were the high day's dawns, were
the sunlit worlds of sleep,
and loud abroad the brute wind's stir
as in the stones that keep

inscrutable their solitude
through hard days and the wet:
if lives to be are many hued,
come, kiss and place your bet.

And in those long-enchanted streets,
with girls we'd hardly know,
what phantoms and what sharp deceits
our tantrum hearts would sow.

Dust, dust in the evening, and smell
of morning in the grass,
that we in looking back could tell
how swiftly raptures pass.

Patch and Mend

Unerringly, the photos bring them back,
the out-of-focus, long-bewildered lines:
a world of patch and mend, that didn't lack
for fees beyond the library fines.

Or things not mentioned in the lost campaign
of shell-shocked landings on the palm-clad beach,
the shrieks of dying men that still remain
a numbness that they couldn't reach.

Before us loomed the wreck of innocence,
the Red Sea's path of childhood tears:
perhaps in that first kiss we'd also sense
the apostasies of coming years.

But through those instances we came of age
and filled the outlines that our forebears drew,
and grew more conscious, too, at every stage,
of attitudes we donned on cue.

Then all occasions were our first of days,
entitlements before the thunder spoke
and running heedless through the hills of praise,
that dream from which we never woke.

But laid up in the warmth of summer skies
your soft blue eyes were alchemy,
intoxicating as the evening dies
to morning-lands so soon to be.

So was love's rapture in the world of ten
that, long lives after, would not come again.

High Homes on the Weald

There was a holiness in all you said
I'd cycle through for weeks,
and even now the spoke's sleek whisper speaks
of some soft, festive bed.

But girls we yearned for once have moved away
to high homes on the Weald,
where gated citadels would never yield
their solemn, bridal day.

And even if I put on tennis whites,
wore sensible, well-laundered clothes,
there's still a larger sense that it behoves
us think of summer nights.

Love thirty, forty. Pause. First game to us.
And so the long suburban evening falls
to smouldering sounds of tennis balls
hard hit and ominous.

Yet in these games we played our manhood out,
long back and forth, avoiding blame,
though strokes and cancer come the same
on life's brief roundabout.

And much too soon will come the left unsaid,
misunderstandings we let pass,
where daisy-chains and elfin grass
outlast the sunlit head.

So go our adolescent, earliest hopes,
that hesitant and probing kiss,
and all the mansions that we somehow miss
as plain occasion mopes

about the boy we never were, the innocence
condensing to a troubling gaze
in middle-class, reciprocating ways
of small, unsafe events.

Plain Anatomy

So tell me why your image stays
now always with me, just the same.
You wear the clothes that others wear
who flounce about and do their hair
in many fetching ways.

I take the old train back, which you
would find refurbished, as to frame
as colourless that friendship's guise,
yet what we see with keener eyes
no travel cards undo.

The council flats are edged with pain
though memories play their maudlin game.
This is our alleyway and still I see
the pebbled brook and trysting tree,
the schoolyard just the same.

I turn the corner, climb the hill,
renewed, the prospects make their claim
in heartbreak's first, most loved domain:
what never was becomes again
if heaven speak its will.

The adolescent in the loose pink bows,
unruliness your mother couldn't tame:
with top and gymslip pulled awry:
what is it you wouldn't try,
to spite the pouting clothes?

But plain anatomy, the body's form
in all its raptures, hurt and blame:
but body is as body roves
through adumbration of its clothes
to futures neat and warm.

All lives are those we lived before,
though time will play its peepshow game:
our past is as the image glows
a moment in our picture shows
of spells and nothing more.

Tidy Lives

The rules were iron-clad, and all complied,
or judged their erring to the right amount.
However much they, laughing, spoofed and lied,
it was to safeguard feelings: didn't count.

The middle class who proved the golden mean
of what we hoped for and in fact would be:
the sort of couple we'd have doubtless been,
that much-about and trusted entity:

Who volunteered for dinner duties, chose
their friends from others like them, never broke
the bank for gambling debts or summer clothes:
good, dependable and giving folk.

We would have had two children, girl and boy,
in which our mutual admiration shone:
there'd be the usual troubles, but much joy
in helping them go safely faring on.

And so the promises we haven't kept
for flawless house and garden, tidy lives:
the bounteous few with whom we haven't slept
that make our wholesome, smiling wives.

And slowly, year by year, our youth withdraws
from lingering potency and watchful eyes,
and laid out in the moth-balled, tissue drawers
are clothes more flexible, of ampler size.

Which nonetheless are us, the things we give
away at last to jumble sales, so gone
with all the tournaments by which you live,
the cups and daughter's match at Wimbledon.

And so I think of you, both dutiful
and of a sterling merit firmly knit —
where simple character that's gone to school
outlasts the beauties blessed with none of it.

The Surrey Hills

In fact I knew them all too well,
the sense of Englishness that slowly fills
the clothes and consciousness, the smell
of pinewoods in the Surrey hills

on sun-flushed evenings draining out
to foursomes, bridge and married ease,
a worsted, well-bred affluence about
the lawns and topiary, darkening trees.

All understated as the old school tie,
weekends at Cowes and sailing jaunts:
the long, long afternoons just gliding by
the Thames in dimpled, trout-pooled haunts.

The well-connected city folk,
The Archers on, or *Evening News*,
Third Programme music types, who never spoke
of double-firsts or rowing blues.

It's not the girl but class you wed:
discreet, reserved, that never pries,
but knows at once the feckless life you've led
by dress and accent, all your lies.

Upholstered, modest, born a caste
beyond the indolence of birth or class,
that close-togetherness that's deepening fast
as apples dropped in cool, soft grass.

For me, impossible. I went abroad
and courted women on the loose:
the temporary stopping places times afford
or with some foreignness produce.

Accommodating to the muscled fret,
and then the cool of evening comes
to small apartment blocks, the vague regret
at something missing from our sums.

Pale, uncoloured, as it were, restraint
released that comes with heavy cost,
the hardly sensed and indistinct and faint
but yet distinctly lost.

So all the girls in untouched briefs
and tops, and carefully-laundered underwear,
retroussé innocence and vain beliefs
will have a distanced stare

in which the varied tempests of the heart
can seek their thoughtless happiness,
where dull conformity, or larger part,
inebriates but cannot bless,

though all our hopes are based on this:
the better school or neighbourhood,
the clubs, the weekend cottage, all that should
be promised in that first, chaste kiss.

Cast-Off Clothes

There is no decorousness in this,
no well-turned phrase or studied bow,
no stratagems that heart can know
to pass off coldness in a kiss:
come: fold your hand and pay.

The vows we pledged were forged in spite
of that quick cooling of the blood:
and rapture taken at the flood
must go at last, as day to night,
to falsehoods kind folk say.

The special tops you lay aside,
designer jeans or cork-heeled shoes;
the rings you choose or do not choose,
all things that in their breathy pride
regret the slip and negligee.

Forget the importuning, let
a silence fall on dog-eared nights
and feuds, the tears, and bitter fights
that mar our better natures, yet
are childhood games we have to play.

The truly blessed are only those
who gladly to their brief nights go,
aware that hurt and grieving sow
their attitudes in cast-off clothes
where even you could not delay.

Repayables

How much later do we note the mouth,
a certain steeliness about the eyes,
and think of loves that took the turn-off south
in differences we'd not disguise.

Professional photos, where a friend will say,
'She's pretty, isn't she?' and nothing more.
Those safe acquaintances that only stay
in gilt assurances they knew before.

And so I see you now in that slight tan
of sturdy purpose in the perfect skin,
and all those businesses your father ran
and hard-nosed attitudes I had to win.

And gain at last the almost hateful sights
of gated roads, long hours and business trips,
severe curtailment of conjugal rights
like voyages in boxed container ships.

But I am nothing like that. Never was,
which you discerned at length as I would not,
who failed the first trial balance sheet because
of large repayables he hadn't got.

Buried Gold

The radio gives the girls' soft voices,
deliquescent with their tears:
so were the chosen truly choices?
Tell me truly, down the years.

Evoke again those varied charms
and only as warm bodies breathe,
as evanescent as the arms
that hold us tightly and believe

in homes and castles of the heart
where all our plots are buried gold:
where still there's path to treasure chart,
and truth in stapled centre-fold.

Where womanhood is passing by
as shadowed bodies in the street
that gather up or give the lie
to what is strictly groomed and neat.

And looks that captured every heart,
the scandalous and scarlet pasts,
deny at length their sorry part,
and tell us only kindness lasts.

If only that were so, if lives
were fashioned to some greater good,
where lovers did not turn to wives
and stayed as laughing womanhood.

All Floors

She is happy, she is yours:
the lift will visit all the floors.
Pay her off or urge her stay:
the girl is wholly yours today.

Yet gluttony will undo hearts,
and actresses play many parts:
it is the kindred, subtle parts
where every cost of living starts.

The over-foliaged spectral eyes,
and those still sudden in their mock surprise,
are oriental in their folded skin
and glow with hungers deep within.

The coloured blaze and strobing lights,
that razzmatazz of briefs and tights
will have you take each offered breast
as plumply jealous of the rest.

And not in plans or promises,
or secular in instances
will be the consequence of whims
but in the body's heavy limbs.

If through the tedium and heavy fret
come endless days and always, yet
there's still the enervating swoons
of long-remembered afternoons.

Thunderstorms

The soft, repudiating, cool, damp skin,
the wounded beauty in the shadowed mouth,
the rich, dark splendour in the hot lands south,
the headlong breath where every rush within
denies all need for rein-in, pause and weigh.

The hazard of that deep, reproachful look
in eyes that held no melting tenderness
but amber, acrid-tasting bitterness
of things plain stated in life's open book:
yes, use me once but you will pay.

That even now — how odd that is — I taste
that deep red lipstick, cloying, over-rich,
the scented paragons of giving, which
in over-burdened riches from the waist
will neither urge nor long delay.

I bought you flowers, I brought you gifts,
but pointed fingers in the soft, plump hands
but wove a dalliance, which understands
that there is nothing otherwise in shifts
when consequence is far away.

How endless were the sun-stilled miles in this
warm rain and paddy in the regal head,
and more imponderable were things not said
in that occasional and florid kiss
that spoke of innocence. And so you stay

until your father with his hotel chain
who needed no poor farang in its ranks
may give belatedly his grudging thanks,
that nothing lingers from that first campaign
but far-off thunderstorms and thin bouquet.

Big-Top Circus

It was that warm and self-accepting friendliness,
the puckish, crumpled up but small, neat nose,
an all-encompassing and healthy naturalness
that overflowed in narratives of loose-cut clothes.

It seemed a summer storm unfolding every day,
the postered, big-top circus come to town,
with loud performances and high-wire acts to play
before the multitudes, from suitor down.

How you contrived that narrative I never knew
though living with you all those scattered years —
the which I've not regretted, holding, guiding you
throughout the fanfare triumphs and the tears.

A certain recklessness that I would miss,
I thought, and candour of the summer skies,
that long-remembered, dry and teasing kiss,
those open, staring and unbuttoned eyes.

Your going didn't plunge my flat in gloom,
no aching sense of emptiness or left alone,
but nuclear detonation in a flash-lit room
and laughter shadow-ghosting on the stone.

Detachment

'We both are somewhat. . . older, shall we say?'
Then comes the look that I recall, which went
from bored detachment into innocent,
and with it thirty years then fall away

to show two figures on the wedding floor
that turn and turn about that all those there
were in an instant stilled, as though aware
of some abandonment not grasped before.

And then the night that will not come again,
where pasts in unison must give their all,
and knowingly, whatever might befall,
this is the hazard of us passing men.

And then, in penances of one last scene,
we pay in everything that might have been.

Regatta Days

You came with hats and long regatta days,
full flowered fabrics, and with evening drinks,
the lawns and gardens through the sunlit ways
of track and racecourse and the golfing links.

That other-world of scarlet fragrances
but bitter almond still the scent beneath,
and body's somnolence the morning sees
unwrapped and languorous in warm belief —

that I would ride, the sole conquistador,
your beauty subject to my vast demands:
so tell me, tell me, whom I'm questing for:
my potency is drained to burning sands.

How shamelessly at every doorway I
am listening, sly and shadowy, discreet,
and with your friends interrogate each eye
for plain, unhesitating, plump deceit.

But what is past, is past, and what remains
is now devoid of persons and of blame,
like days quite mythical before the rains,
forever sun-tinged, distant and the same.

That life is but a picnic hamper spread
with things inedible we have to try.
So take what's granted here, the wine and bread,
nor ask for consequence or reason why.

That's all there is, the fragrance of the day
that long persists in us, becomes the place
that we're custodians of, for all it may
beguile delinquents from their passing grace.

The Legions

There was no kindness in those hooded eyes,
and in the kisses more the serpent's bite.
And in that trespass still the body cries
against the infestations of the night.

'I am the one possessed, the sinful child
of silhouette and pleasure: inasmuch
as what we gain is gross and wild,
a seeping leprosy is in my touch.'

'I'm in your armpits when you turn to sleep,
and through my breathing is your night-time shift,
Mine are your restless citadels that keep
their leewarding through every seaward drift.'

'I am the kiss and the savouring, the steep,
blunt hours of battering where odours stain
my brute belonging to you, where you weep
for plain encompassing, and more the pain.'

'And not the least regret will pass my lips.
I am the legions brutalising, you,
in nacreous splendour of my unhinged hips,
must stoop to husbandry, as all men do.'

The pomp of orchestras and costume ball,
the arrogance of limb and lordly fare
must flaunt their breathy pageantry till all
that's left is fume and fretting in the air.

TV Show

And when you walked you always walked
as Eve did on our early earth,
that's self-approving, supple stalked
in nature's bounty, ours at birth.

And when you had the TV show
how well the audience would follow you,
and how belatedly would all eyes go
from you to winning prize on view.

'But all you men who ask me out
should know before that I've been wed,
and never should be long in doubt
that mine's a keen and weighing head.'

And so we'd meet, or wouldn't meet
in some odd acting class we shared,
perhaps a sort of qualifying heat
that also found us ill-prepared,

till I would choose to skip the rest.
We stayed companions, simple friends.
'For you are kind to me, but I know best
how love and laughing courtship ends.'

A calculation that of course held true
in ads for holidays and bras,
that all-too winning smile I knew
in various shots of TV stars.

And so I'd see you on the weekly screen
as some strange being, spangle-dipped
into a curious quarantine
where I was stuck without a script

to speak of candid and incurious eyes
and your unending, long, long legs,
a body needing no supplies
of simulated stage effects.

But frank and open, natural, as though
there were no heartaches, child in tow,
no deprivations, things that go
beyond what heartfelt warmth will know.

Was I content? Perhaps, yes, maybe so.
I saw your soft and yoga-practised shape,
its long unrolling body show
the little curls about the nape.

Which last: the odd, small details by the way
that come and quietly occupy my view,
discrete particulars that stay
the all I ever held of you.

A Nascent Otherness

In all good heaven, tell me: what's to do?
I see that clown's round face and flat, green eyes,
and something of my life is also rushing through
where that accommodating spirit lies.

As though in that soft kiss, or would have been,
one sensed the small round breasts and narrow waist,
and something of that sharp, astringent green
of feigned acceptance that I still must taste.

Of course you married, and will have made a house
responsive to that nascent otherness,
but yet according to your life and spouse
and that slight distant, cool, damp tenderness.

That holds him fascinated as I was too
to sense so much of you but nothing there
that was too obvious, or always true,
like clothes on holders that we no more wear,

but some embodiment of life that was
envisioned differently, where we would stay
on the far side always of that small because
of games that neither of us would want to play.

Lincolnshire Wolds

Like you are slumbering landscapes easy with
their Wolds of Lincolnshire, the chalks and clays:
generous, a little broken, such as give
the soft, raw candour to the summer days.

Days of our childhood, long refracted through
the heart's imagining, and so because
of time's imperatives we couldn't do,
that brief inheritance, which only was

immutable, as were the smothered fires,
that indolence of body's happiness,
and more confiding too of frank desires
both apt and brutal in togetherness.

They go beyond the outward temperaments,
the flower of eyelids round the startled blue:
interred Persephone, where sacraments
must bless acceptances of how and who.

And so accumulates our earthly fare
for which in time we will be forward-billed,
as though the vapours of the fretful air
made good their promises and were fulfilled.

Free On Board

And then how ruefully and late we learn
that things ineffable must all the same
forsake the headiness, in time return,
to new provisioning of the tried and tame.

While still our fraught occasions steer a course
through depth-charged intervals in other's lives,
the change we pray for is that loosening force
that's rich and bounteous and yet survives.

With all that reckless beauty free on board,
the cargo's perishable and does not last:
however womanhood may yet afford,
still far and deeper goes the cast.

Dress up, and skip the door-latch: stay out late
we come at last, and all, to manhood's state.

Above the Salt

A touch of fragrant coolness in the clothes,
the soft pale lipstick and the powder puff
applied quite sparingly and not enough
to glut the beauty of an English rose.

Who bloomed for one that clearly wasn't me,
with no credentials from a well-known school,
no wealth, no family, if no one's fool
nor aped in manners what he couldn't be.

How many years would pass, in embassy,
in cultural jaunts and British Council dos,
in simple hair-cut or in well-cut shoes
that spoke distinction in some quieter key,

as when we'd stop a moment, as we ought,
to say the meaningless, the small, trite thing
that friends in common or occasions bring,
where mine of course were more the other sort.

Singers, dancers, actresses, night-club girls,
who pose no better than they plan to be,
yet no less forthright than the modesty
of tailored twin-sets and the natural pearls.

The best will dignify each place they're at
as sought occasion and not passing through,
no doubt as lesser ones are loath to do
who not above the salt too often sat.

I think of you as wholly admirable,
in forthright modesty to never fall,
but carry looks before you I recall
will be much silvered now, but beautiful.

Manners

How long ago it seems, a doomed affair:
the summer sunlight on that rural France,
preserved in recollections everywhere
that time and differences did not advance.

Our loves are people only. No doubt are
imperfect, changeable, with troubled spells,
and what we make of them is one small star
that hangs there distantly, where nothing dwells

for all eternity. We fall in love,
associate, but still stay different:
there's precious little of the things above,
and blest companionship is briefly lent.

A country chateau in First Empire style
with lawns and library and assorted rooms:
but was I happy all that senseless while
with that identity a name assumes?

Time passes, passes, dearest, passes on,
and lost entitlements are neither here nor there,
and what is wholly ours is wholly gone
in wills and testaments and mouldering air.

And all we have and hold will come to harm,
and youth's fresh looks be gone as beauty will,
but not the breeding and patrician charm
when manners once remain good manners still.

The house is now in others' caring hands,
the grounds remodelled, new beds laid out,
and what belongs to those now haunted lands
has still entitlements we cannot doubt.

In this we're not chameleons, cannot
it seems consent to play all roles: some part
eludes us always, and that round small dot,
which ends the sentence, yet can break the heart.

Moorish Blood

She was, as I remember it, much
talked about, that year before the flood:
a full-blown English beauty with a touch
of more exotic, swarthy Moorish blood.

Not merely beautiful, bewitching too:
recall the centre of a sulphur rose,
a petalled loveliness, with all on view
in those full, frank and open clothes.

Come finals, graduation: we all leave
to go our scattered ways across the earth.
And her? I do not know but can believe
she won appointments that her looks were worth.

Years pass, long years, and I am much abroad,
but back for briefings, various conferences,
a personal life as shifting tours afford,
attenuated in its instances.

Well, there we are. I'm walking back
from some such talk I gave, though don't recall
that much about: in time's poor almanac
there's no impression left, no, none at all.

She gave the name and smiled, and then again.
I stared at this now plain and careworn face,
which held no trace of what was sovereign then,
or offices that it would surely grace.

I tried to turn the conversation on
to books she'd written, stated claim
to academic status, whereupon
of publishing with such a well-known name.

'We both know that's untrue, but vague concerns
arranged on chessboards of neglected rights.
You know what academic study earns:
a glass of claret and the early nights.'

What could I say? The best is always past:
the bloom of heart and body does not last,
and all our gaudy hopes and joys are fast
enrolled in vaudeville's more tawdry cast?

And so we parted, not to meet again,
and, like some Chekhov story, the rest is blank.
There would be other books and older men
in time's vicissitudes we have to thank

when what she said in fact was all too true,
the theories asinine, and what they meant,
but rationalising what we have to do
to pay for self-respect and food and rent.

But when I go there will be none because
of this small interlude to light the past.
You do not know how beautiful she was,
or wealth of goodness that her beauty cast.

The Mark of Cain

Relaxed and welcoming, the body gives
each earnest suppliant but little rest:
how brutally the satisfaction lives
in testament to each uncrumpled breast.

The mark of Cain is your flooding joints
that your sweet openness can only gain
a shuttered other-world, which then anoints
us still with purposes and untold pain.

And that gilt crucifix about the throat
which marks the small, hurt Stations of the Cross
in such complicities that must denote
tempestuous passion and its loss.

Love is fire, affliction, the lung's long breath:
how languidly the currents draw us down
to long forgetfulness announcing death:
in blunt complexities we smile and drown.

I say to you what any man will say
were not proprieties to beg us stop:
there's not a single compliment that I would pay
before — that's all of us — we fail and drop

into the obvious and sad banalities
that all are bodies only, flesh and blood,
and never apparitions, clear to see,
acclaimed and beautiful before the flood.

Street-Wise Smart

All-knowing, elemental, street-wise smart,
a trace of makeup: cautious, nothing more
than lends a feral lightness to the jaw:
the two ears poised and waiting, wide apart.

It's so I think of you across the dark
of time, and different continents: the slight
fey, feral creature that despite
the meetings' brevities must leave its mark:

and more than that, the sharp-eyed animal
within its half-revealing, bow-tied dress,
but understated, seeming amiable
within a well-bred air of carelessness.

I hope the years were kind to you, that each
of your great business hopes were realized,
that real success was won and warmly prized
for all that at the time seemed out of reach.

But for the rest I would be more discreet,
so not to praise what common sense intuits,
the small, hurt breasts that hung as poisonous fruits,
how cool the clasp would be in body heats.

We choose our habitats as well as clothes
on style, occasion or what good form dictate.
They're always with us, soon or late,
we come to occupy what thoughts disclose.

Which now go with you, adding cautious thanks
to umpteen dinner dates and nothing else,
that long, sweet conversation, which compels
us put some name upon the faceless blanks.

That if we met again, the long years flown,
at some good restaurant, still me and you:
what tales we'd tell each other I must own
that all my dallying was much ado

about what passes, ever passes on
through shipwreck, fires, to deaths at sea,
that, whether passionate or automaton,
we have at best but brief identity.

Then inclinations that we did not do
sufficient justice to, will come at last
to howl about our ears and beat anew
for those brief sentiments accounted past.

A Blaze of Purple

A blaze of purple iridescence in
the hair done up in that loose bun,
the warm, wet oriental breath and skin
betrotted before we'd half begun.

And afterwards the strange compassion, each
complicit with the other's needs,
the truths that common enterprises teach,
which we as children do not heed.

How self-absorbed and conscientiously,
you'd paint the nails or comb the hair,
and, on a bed unclothed, abundantly
portray the smiling empires of the air.

The solemn, round dark pupils of the eyes
that turn about the oval lids,
and a shy faint look of careless, half surprise
to find a farang in their midst.

If there be kingdoms of the waking dead
where we must pay for all we did,
there are no sins here, surely, but instead
a wonder that is briefly hid

in street and crowd and city shopping mall
where woman is as woman pays,
where this brief loveliness that's much on call
is fathomless and, like the gaze

of waters none can sully or disturb,
can spread beneath in hidden wealth,
and life's transaction is an active verb
that's best communing with itself.

Where now you are or went, I do not know,
or others that I cannot name:
the world that's restless in its sleep will go
down endless cul-de-sacs the same.

Be thereby blessed or disappointed: in their turn
be just occasions of their worth,
that in each breathing heritage will learn
how bountiful is this, our earth.

That Ferocious Air

What wise, old party-giver had you hold
that flowering body in the fabric so?
Adopt that wild, pugnacious look, and fold
such pouncing darkness in each stop and stare?
What proto-Eve advised you go
about with that ferocious air?

The haunt of evening and the cocktail hours
loose-buttoned in the overburdened blouse,
where nondisclosures swell the nascent powers
about the promises and far from blame,
that altogether keeping house
with knock-out looks we cannot tame?

I wouldn't say I knew you all that well,
or cut much ice among your smart-set friends
who were, like me, beneath that powerful spell,
accepting all was hazard, all was chance:
but fortune is as fortune sends,
and therefore netted in a glance.

You married, sort of, went on marrying,
the sons of well-known names and rich tycoons,
and, like the heavy kills that great cats bring
you left the settlements to take the sun,
when Providence, with doubtful tunes,
acknowledges effrontery has won.

Navy Day

A plain grey suit among the uniforms,
the gold, the swords and decorations worn.
For me the Chilean Navy Day conforms
to obligations that are yearly borne,

where none's too onerous. Indeed I'm met
by someone new to me: an honest gaze,
and to whose sister I am much in debt
for various kindnesses and weekend stays.

And so, obligingly, in overt mime
I make the introductions for our guest,
and I, who've known some beauties in my time,
am first intrigued, enchanted, then impressed.

So charming, quiet and modest, each reply
to my conventional words, not only good
but kind and thoughtful, as if wondering why
I took such care of other's sisterhood.

What doors would open to her, embassies
requiring poise and breeding, plain good sense:
indeed my picture of her future sees
the galas, dinner parties, grand events.

But no, she went back home, and years go past.
In courtesy I called one day: the kindness
and looks, they still were there, but overcast
by modest smiling at her own distress.

And this most beautiful a mortal sees
at forty died of Huntington's disease.

Sightless

What's given us is not by choice,
it's not for gift or feature we can vote.
What happened to that mezzo voice
and all the rage that fed its darkened note?

There was your father's Latin blood,
and brusque impatience with this world of lies,
an olive caste, and sudden flood
of colour to the large, cantankerous eyes.

You had scant love for common man,
nor looked too kindly on the fool or lout:
that row with ill-bred publican
until the poor man rose and threw us out.

That rough-tongued temper guiding you
from snarling job to job and fight to fight.
I never knew what next you'd do
to flare up wildly or to douse the light.

I'd quietly follow your career
the odd recordings made, Italian tour:
the restless one, the buccaneer,
and by that forcefulness made insecure.

What companies and singing troupes
you were the queen of once, but were expelled,
but never one to jump through hoops,
you had each problem met and promptly felled.

I'd go on quietly fashioning words,
but you the star that flared and guttered out:
improvident as are the birds,
you took to New Age pottering about.

Where I could follow not at all,
but, strangely, at a dinner party met
a rich acquaintance much on call
as you to her performing art. And yet

like you she had her wildness, threw
a large inheritance and life away
on some odd man she hardly knew,
a therapist she simply had to pay.

With caution, guile and stratagem
we go on working quietly if we're wise:
I think of how it did for them,
and you with beautiful but sightless eyes.

An Earthy Sign

At night, occasionally, you come to me,
and seem half-willing, and as much half-not.
'What a strange fastidiousness we now have got,
who were more amiable in company.'

And then you turn away, and in a frown
I see those topaz and embittered eyes,
a mood thick-smothered, as it were, that lies
as body's warmth beneath the eiderdown.

'Oh, you still dream of some far festive day,
of something Pentecostal, some fierce force,
where I am incremental, one stilled course,
no stratagems to take your breath away.'

'You know the most of me, what I can do,
the how I eat and sleep and wash myself,
my richer harmonies and body's wealth,
the what's not good about me, or is true.'

'My friend: this is the world, and what you see
is neither good nor ill, but as we are,
our destiny, at best, is always far,
if not a vain, quixotic idiocy.'

'All comes with pain and effort, at some cost:
you know me through and through, each trait of mine:
each day and daybreak is an earthy sign,
as is the evening when the day is lost.'

Heavy Drench of Dew

Like bodies we have loved that even now
bring scents of bitterness that, in a kiss,
disclose but disapproval, and avow
no remedy but only hurt in this.

It's then, occasionally, that breath comes back
in full-blown stasis of a franker scene:
how wretchedly, distractedly, we track
the heavy haulage up to what has been.

Like bodies blundering on, that pass at night,
unconcerned or unaware of what they do,
so do our shadowed lives sail out of sight
with never compliments to what's on view.

And so at intervals I think of you,
perplexed as I was, half struck dumb
to think of evening's heavy drench of dew
and all the coolness of the nights to come.

Odourless

It was a match that surely should have been,
the well-bred family, each welcoming:
to neither was it just the passing fling,
or casual novelties that intervene.

Your father too, that kindly history don:
what untold seminars we could have had:
each day more quietly and more wisely clad
in apt considerations of the hereupon.

More self-contained and competent than I
in undertaking tedious and daily chores,
you also had the looks that open doors
that I would need too clearly, by and by.

So what then happened to cut short your part?
Why did that ultimatum touch me so?
You probed and sympathised, but could not know
how deep the haunts of this unlicensed heart

that never wants for passion, only shows,
belatedly, some independent state,
and will at this late hour prevaricate
as week by week the golden future goes

to strange commitments that the body needs,
to principles in which we must believe,
a sense beyond mere social getting on
as odourless as light and air we breathe.

The Latch Gate

I thought there was a kingdom of the wise
in which the beautiful have made their home,
where quiet humility and thoughtful eyes
were won as husbandry of honest loam.

Where sunlight, laughter, and the far-off pain
were what we paid for fragrant gain,
where storms of winter on the frosted pane
would fade to intricate soft wind and rain.

So all have said, repeatedly, a smile
that turned and dropped the latch gate shut,
and so we do not see them, ever, mile
on mile diminishing as the past years glut

our years with kingdoms where we cannot go.
Each path looks sadly at us, goes its way.
There is a tinctured dust in all we sow,
and what was rapture once is not to stay.

Language Lessons

Perhaps it was beneath some fatal star
that you and I should meet.
And also with the family backgrounds far
removed that we should stay discreet.

And then the county-county girls
the language lessons there,
the tailored bodices and natural curls,
their masterful and modest air.

Above all you, and different with that chic,
good sense of dress and hair:
very French, of course, with that mystique
of being friends but not a pair.

I still and will remember how we went
round bed and breakfast place,
across all Wales like guilty children sent
in sullen rapture and disgrace.

Yet nothing happened: town and country house,
in long walks by the sea.

You told me of your scheming former spouse
and I, well I was only me.

Who waited, waited for some sign from you,
some hint that you'd be free,
who waited in her turn, as girls must do,
for approbation out of me.

And when I would you had the flying Scot,
that strange, faltering affair.
And when you would at last then I could not,
when someone else had claim and care.

Of course you married in the end, and well,
the third it must have been.
And life is very much a sail or sell,
with not much pickings in between.

And do I think of you? Not very much,
or of the Paris thrown away.
Or even of that careful, light, soft touch
in words we'd neither of us say.

I hope your father's millions earned their keep,
the husband, whom I met,
will prove the right one when you turn to sleep,
and I not thinking of you yet.

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Persian Miniatures

There came the odd, short letter I recall
when you were working for the next degree:
the rest is strangely missing, doesn't fall
to telling what the rest should be.

Why did we write then? What did we say
of happenings in the student life we shared?
The things that, unimportant, didn't stay
in prospects, too, when neither cared.

They mark the boundaries of our earnest gaze,
where you are softly present there as well:
a miniature where mythic creatures graze,
as Persians painted them, a shy gazelle.

At this remove I hardly know now what
to think as that faint trail now peters out.
You must have qualified, and married, got
some recompense for what you stayed throughout.

The Indonesians have a Bambi deer,
light-stepping, shy, intelligent,
and for that reason never coming near
the other animals, for all it went

on curious, unhesitating, keen
to find out what its scentings indicate.
It is their best-loved creature, and has so been
indicative, I think, of that quiet state

of hopeless consciousness, where motion speaks
of rites of passage over broken ground:
simple and monogamous for weeks,
it's cautious, attentive, makes no sound.

And so I send to you across the years
this faltering, short, poor token of respect
as, now the future darkens and extinction nears,
we have some time to pause and then reflect.

Indeed our lives consist of what occurs
as much as what we tried or didn't try,
like sediment the slackening current stirs
but leaves no clarity in reasons why.

Good Connections

I walk these paths where we two paused
a moment, no doubt for some trivial thing.
Whatever's said is not unsaid, and brings
a sense of satiety, unduly caused.

And so there's quiet indifference in the wind
that neither drifts or idles, only has
a soft persistence in its flowing as
the two of us who neither strayed nor sinned.

There's little here but church and churchyard stone,
odd broken rows of them, the slumbering dead
with names now lichened over, scarcely read
in hopes and hopelessness their lives once had.

With short bright memories through the shadow lands,
the brief effulgences the very air
is still resisting: there is no one there
but soft attrition of the countless hands

that here have clasped each other, warm
or brief as charity, where we dispense
with some regard for simple common sense,
for safe civility, accepted form.

That I, come back from feckless wanderings
of the rich, hard world and of the wild,
would choose one here presenting as a child,
and naturalness the passing seasons bring.

You had no need for labels, high-heeled shoes,
access to status and to good connections,
but, unaffected in the heart's affections,
were discount stores that you preferred to use.

Must life be ever aimless, passing through
and never mouldering over? What is past
is always past, or passing, does not last,
nor trusting innocence receive its due.

Sell-By Date

It may be voices we remember long
past homage or their sell-by date,
the snatches of a wind-borne song
that carry with them some estate

of first-time happiness that now is lost
as is the sun behind a distant cloud
we only notice when the path is crossed
with something other heard aloud.

The careful circuit of those probing eyes,
their touch of blue at times, and more
their sudden blossoming as in surprise
they added some full, deeper store.

It's come to this, I think, this café scene,
and in another country, far from you
by forty years and what has been
quite other than the life we knew.

I rather think that you are dead
what with the illnesses, uncertain health:
yes, quite certainly, and left unsaid
the haplessness of larger self.

And like that wave that travels on from times
when we were slow or played a sorry part,
it rises up before me, softly climbs
to strike and fell me at the heart.

Bar Bill

So is it true? They say that you are gone,
and all that memory is make-believe.
Your predecease in this still faring on,
though you were never 'by your leave'.

But if I go there now one April day,
that's frail with spring and blue days smiling,
there will be nothing that those streets obey
or chatter in your long beguiling?

And always laughing where the least occasion
brought out your wild, brash, hooting merriment.
No halting measures in it, no evasion,
but declarations in each moment sent.

Which now are pointless even, though they spoke
with that slight lisp, which I still recognise,
like childhood summers before the weather broke
and the days thereafter otherwise.

How could that be? How could you truly go
without the bar-bill settled, fully paid?
Your inner workings I would always know
the while you idled, smiled, delayed.

But you in going now have stopped my breath
and made me homeless, restless, wandering so
that on me now there is the scent of death
and irremediably, that where I go

is always an evacuated desert place,
beset by darkness and by howling jinns,
where even now that long-remembered face
is scattered into nameless country inns.

Bereft of all it was, a vacant screen
depicting what I will not understand,
but saying life that was has always been
a distant and some other land.

Native Powers

There must be somewhere that our small hopes save
from endless turmoil of the years,
with soft sweet rain that falls as tears
as we go quietly dreaming to our grave.

Some plot of land that always stood as ours,
through which our names in footnotes run,
where spring's rejuvenation had begun
to make perennial our native powers.

Playmates, high-school sweethearts, co-eds wed
when springtime fills the air with vernal scent,
and all the loves about when day has lent
ephemeral glory to that onetime head.

And you are walking in that springtime air,
and will remember, surely, how we went
by church and parish record sent
where all the country signposts said beware!

How breathlessly you showed that cottage lair,
four-posted pinewood and conjugal bed,
the soft entreaties that were left unsaid
of two short lives that should be kindled there.

Now you are elsewhere, having married well
again the gossips tell me: I
do not doubt it, no, nor would deny
that you could make the very treetops sigh,

a crowded room fall quiet, and white-haired men
in restaurants dribble soup on tie,
where even their stout spouses turned their eye
and, not religious, said 'amen'.

'Write no words for me when I am gone,
but conjure me as once I was,
in all the heartache of the once because
of splendour when that spring-time shone.'

Two Lives

Two lives now intertwined and woven close,
both quiet, and more, appropriate
to that full love which day by day
approximates to what the thoughtful say
about the hidden workings of our fate,
its transmigrations and its outward shows.

Below are depths where only wild souls go,
above are distances of scorching blue:
this in-between is all we claimed to be
within a scattered, brief eternity
that holds its hands out, when the few things true
collect, if distantly, to hopes we sow

in this vast kingdom we have always known
if only brokenly, in instances
of childhood rapture that are born again
into this busy world of thoughtless men.
Composed of dreams and brief existences,
they are the lives we hold but cannot own.

Except for one to show us what we lack,
those small compassions that will make the day
a halting caravan of brief delight.
Our days are numbered, all too soon the night
will whisper to us: time, be on your way,
with life's imponderables now go and pack.

It is by sharing each accumulates
the shadow presences of depths beneath.
And, year by year, encroaching seasons lay
their humus over what the wild springs say.
New words, old languages, they still bequeath
the gifts that every word abbreviates.

So let us be as we were then, who recognise
how irredentist are the outward charms.
Togetherness is hazard, hope and chance
in life's unstoppable but hurtful dance,
but yet how willingly in our fond arms
comes back acknowledgement in laughing eyes.

So I will say what soon you must forget
of how I was, and that too absently
in that great mirage we shall call a life.
My love, my constant neighbour, friend and wife:
this prating thing of words will ever be
in love and admiration with you yet.