

The background of the cover is a detailed landscape painting. It depicts a mountain pass with a large, dark green tree in the foreground. In the distance, there are jagged, snow-capped mountain peaks under a blue sky with light clouds. The overall style is that of a classic landscape painting.

The Mountain Pass

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by Colin John Holcombe

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1. A Wintry Country

It is a stern and wintry country, full
of elemental odours in regret,
where we in looking back should not forget
what abnegations made for honourable.

And you who look upon that further shore
and have the clarity that comes with age,
do not forgive the grievous errors, page
by page, that undid what we quested for:

the heart's alignments, which our own heart crossed,
the world's entitlements we wouldn't earn,
the year's abeyances at every turn
with consorts in our fashion gained and lost.

For what eternity? What now remains
are grey-haired biddies in retirement homes:
magnificence reduced to garden loams,
a wind that's empty of the favoured names.

Remember then the casual friendships made
across the world, so many of them, how
the smile of each continues even now
from those, the very few, we've not betrayed.

The deaths our over-simple words condemn
vast millions to, with shackled lives of pain.
From screen or article we do not gain
the least concern at what we've done to them.

We see, all occupants of Charon's boat,
how small the hopes, and self-disparaging.
It's not for us the morning skylarks sing
but owl at evening with its haunting note.

In fasts and prayers for us the sundials weep
as bitterly, how bitterly, we turn away,
and with remorse concluding our loud day
at length compose ourselves for endless sleep.

2. The Rich

The rich, the famous beauty and the plain
must go the same into the brimming night:
the place and standing that we hoped to gain
become poor shadows in the evening light.

But all our lives are to our failings wed,
a course we blunder on as through a maze,
not knowing this or that, or where it led:
the calcined body in the napalm blaze.

How much we grasp at them, how much they flare
in self-importances that we'd believe:
it's more recriminations we should wear
than commendations when we soon must leave

our homes, our bright occasions, all of them,
intentions plumed or shady, blessed or sad:
no shifting wilderness of tears can stem
the loss of happiness we one time had.

3. Home Start

We walk the shaded ground our parents walked,
and learn the parables that they too learned:
and know again, with them, how heart has yearned
for one magnificent and single-stalked.

All wild imaginings, created on
a transmigration to a fabled place;
some careless beauty of a sun-blessed race,
as gone as smiling interludes have gone

to aggregates of concrete, glass and chrome:
the county hospital, the latest thing
that council funds and gadgetry may bring

to wastes and meadowlands that were my home.

My only home, where white and short-tailed blue
would occupy the wind-filled drifts of flowers:
the camaraderie of sunlit hours
in fields of buttercups that clothed the view

that led to Harrow and the heavy clay,
which ploughs would labour at, original towns
that dull suburbia beautifies and drowns
in laws and taxes, when such treasures lay

beneath in Gault, and the Jurassic beds
of marls and limestone with their fossil wealth.
All gave an indistinct and buried health
as Berkshire Downs prove best for thoroughbreds.

And not Elysium, though there were farming men,
and lanes and country houses, fields of hay:
marooned in waist-high drifts, our senses stay
forever tethered to that world of then.

The sunlight, laughter, and the soft rain pass
as wayside sorrel and the thistle seed:
it's coming winter that we do not heed
in flowers frosting into window-glass.

4. Museums

Again the one who haunts the Underground,
the different one he is, who must conform
to school and serge decorum, make no sound
when merged and seamless with his uniform.

But more than that, by subterfuge, the same
appearing as more nondescript of boys,
who stoutly plays the mindless schoolyard game
and add his seriousness to background noise.

Yet one to read in Survey notes and map
of that strange world that lay beneath his feet,
millennia deep but not beyond the gap
of years and instruments, and one he'd meet

in strange adventures on the foreign crust.

What shells and crystals when the hard stones broke?

A solid world, reciprocal of trust:

in research papers then the future spoke.

5. My Best Friend

And so the days come back, and we remember
the journeys planned, the stops we both detrained
at, beckoning seaside towns before we gained
skies scattering leaves into a late December.

The long, unwanted, talked-of walking tours
through coloured interludes of Cotswold vales
towards a misted, slate-pressed, gritted Wales,
that left us mendicants on barren moors.

The blistering falling-outs, the brilliant nights
beneath the star-bright clusters: all around
was water listening to itself, a gathering sound
that led to workings and their mineral rights.

The women met, their warm, enchanting laugh
as verities with names, where each one leans
from strapped indulgencies in top and jeans
to shaped proprieties on our behalf.

The hesitations in the leaves, the breath-held air,
the wood's fine denier against the sky,
a sense of life unending to deny
the sad mortality our bodies bear.

And then the falling out, the two ways cursed
by changing temperaments and not design.
Where are you now, that one-time friend of mine?
Through all discouragements you stayed the first.

How can that world we planned be lost, that what
we saved our hard-pressed extra earnings for,
the blonde, the heavy kiss and maybe more
our weekly B-film actor always got?

We'd build an aeroplane or take to trade,
would measure out the world in giant's ell,
but not for you to sense the deep-sea swell
or keep to promises you never made.

6. To Be Alive

The years fill up and fade away. We stare
at those embodiments of how we were,
the photograph, the boyish features, share
of ways now settled where no sleepers stir.

And curse compliance or the cowardice,
the sensible small steps we took instead,
the pursed, perfunctory and spouse's kiss,
when life's the entity that we should wed

with all our being, and in her steps reach out
across the continents we've yet to know,
as though that giving of ourselves should flout
the small-town verities as on we go

to that high summit where the sunlight shone
but briefly, errant on the childhood slopes,
with jobs and status, slowly climbing on
to vague and shifting, evanescent hopes.

7. Exeter

His blood was Devon blood, so back he went
to this most fabulous of forebear's lands.
The moors, cathedral front, the Dawlish sands:
his dreams and future were to one place lent

a time, a little time, but those three years
would set the purposes for years to come,
the over-sensitive he would become —
one stooped and listening through his strange careers.

The place where love has been the household guest
becomes the holy in us, all we see,

or let that tentative, odd passing be
another bar-bill issued as the rest.

Aloof, most beautiful, whose sombre eyes
were ever open to his dream-tossed sleep:
from grey to green would go those lash-rimmed skies
of summer weather that all bodies keep.

However far and fitfully we range
we would and gladly take those steps again,
where all the charities of love's long reign
become the articles we do not change.

It's in the living that we also live
and are companionable to soft-breathed days,
and ever one with her, in wheat-filled ways
become recipients who also give

our health and bodies to a transient thing
that was ourselves. Continually we look
as though some further entry in the book
would abrogate the heartaches we must bring

to this, our blood-filled consequence, this name
with which we flourish out our walk-on part:
those false entitlements the forward heart
still conjures out of every would-be flame.

8. You Are

You are my rising that will never set,
my manna hoped for in a far-off place.
You are the heart-felt, ever welcome guest,
the heart's own granary, replenished grace.

You are my hope and burden near or far,
intolerable, resisted, what is blest,
the stoop of loneliness is where you are,
my falling endlessly and place of rest.

You are the being stalwart in the bones,
my five-fold living in the senses bound.
You are the music in the wayside stones,
the silent holiness that fills the ground.

You are the toil in sweetness never done,
the day's release from which we cannot tire:
you are my work in progress where the sun
still flames in splendour when long days expire.

9. Birmingham

But there are other lands where we have laid
a vast amnesia on our primal guilt,
a world of mills and workshops, bricked and built
on raw-necked misery and pinchbeck trade.

And lives quite different from the prosperous south,
with feral cunning, hard-learned tooth for tooth:
No smiling courtesy or mincing truth
but clamp of jaws about the surly mouth.

There kindness softens, and all softness kills,
no sins can cost us, and no conscience sears.
There innocence means wet behind the ears
in late retirement to the Shropshire hills.

A world of sinewed effort, savvy won
from centuries of exploitation, flintiness
of purpose socialists did not address,
where man is grit and purpose, pledged and done.

And this his habitat, the needy streets
of ill-fired brickwork, sulphurous or charred
to deep thrombosis red, the disregard
for all things novel in the dull repeats

of doorstep, window-ledge and slate-hung roof,
small lawn, the privet hedge, the glossed relief
of front doors painted in some vague belief
it made the family more severance-proof.

But also leafy intervals, the overnights
in halls of residence whose women there
embodied watermarks of scented air
as though unclothing were to magic rites.

How soon that withheld wealth of body's shed
in fecklessness before we settle down,
when jobs and status in some smoke-grimed town
are truth embodied in each tooth-clenched head.

10. Bromley

With two careers then trained for, what to do
at all those sacrifices parents made?
To him those vague enchantments feel as true
as contracts signed and last instalment paid.

Is it the suddenness of sense beyond
the loud vernacular of daylight's fall
that makes us, reaching, fail to correspond
to things beyond the penny-pinched and small?

Does picnic torpor in the wasp-thick grass
belong to scrapbooks or to childhoods lost
in some such memory of some such class,
those once accomplishments that time has glossed?

What is the image then that haunts the mind
of heedless beauty for some heavenly hour
when heart's imaginings will only find
our daily sustenance is plain white flour?

11. Yugoslavia

And then that holiday where we, by chance,
encounter some frank beauty thrown our way,
whose heart's remittances are blessed and stay
the much-read pages of a teen romance.

There's nothing of you now, not even name
or place or family, or what you do.
Across the patchwork years do things stay true
if still persisting in us, called the same?

For do we choose the person, how we live?
Beyond the Soviet and Western lies
there were the Slav and startling blue-green eyes
and toss of head you always started with.

I see you in the factory-visit dress
whose cut of cloth was eloquence and twin
to healthy, sun-flushed, honest-breathing skin,
whose innate modesty we can't transgress.

Sometimes across that troubled continent,
its dreary cities, regimented lives,
the swelling fume of industry that hives
off hopes in five-year plans until they're spent,

I see the tattered cover of some paperback,
the plots as dutiful as marionettes.
How comes it that the tell-tale heart forgets
the temptress laughing on that inward track?

Like childhood holidays, and at a place
that we've revisited in grown-up days,
a blank monotony returns our gaze,
its paths of happiness we can't retrace.

All days have backdrop, which is gathering night,
some interval in which our first hopes shone:
the brilliant, all-enclosing light is gone
and there is only what we write and write.

12. Kissed Asleep

You were my constant comfort kissed asleep,
the brightness reaffirmed when we awoke,
in your possession was my drift to sleep,
in blunt insistences your being spoke.

You are my dallying, my east and west,
the radiant morning where no shadows weep,
must I in others now but have my rest
from coif-haired princess in the castle keep?

All dreams, all protestations, vain decrees:
how sad the world is with its varied charms.
What breathy artlessness the daylight sees
till lost to honesty in others' arms.

You are my arc of sorrow to the end,
the flight of happiness, the smiling face:
in all our fallings out you stayed the friend
throughout my exile to a distant place.

13. Iran

Those sharp intaglios of shade and heat,
the poor in crowds, the beggars, muezzin calls,
where even that uncoloured picture stalls
at women urinating in the street.

The blazing, unadulterated stench
of life in earnest, and of hard-pressed men
who grab and cozen as they can, and then
the pain the long years after cannot quench.

The decorations worn, the borrowed dress
that marks each awkward, bullied, tongue-tied guest,
the spot-lit, night-cool protocols that best
describes the unremitting hopelessness

of lives in parallel that never meet
except at parties where some playboy son
would flaunt tuxedo wealth his father won,
and I in jeans and tie-less must compete

for one supremely unobtainable,
the well-bred mannequin of wealth and class:
life's rich ambassador to laugh and pass:
how forward-fey you were, and beautiful.

And so in turn our aching arms hold tight
the warmth of bodies going elsewhere, all our words
are like soft breathing in the ibex herds
that go on locked and blundering through the night.

And time that marks our consciences will earn
the ticket out, some rain-lashed ferryboat
that takes us past disaster, there to dote
on rendezvous our wretched bodies spurn.

How long ago that was, and if you live
it will be elsewhere, bound by different rules,
where love's enrapturing fever spills and cools
to instances that sundry others give.

14. Back Home

The months thereafter put aside to write,
through terms and contacts that he hadn't got,
the small mementoes that he cannot fight
with least denominated, common lot.

The quiet, the self-demeaning, cautious soul
who scrimps and saves towards her pension rights,
and not that wind-suffused and fragrant whole
of life that turns into the dew-pressed nights.

The local girls and one great beauty too,
but all respectable, in modest hope
to save their pence, and make their hearts bid true
at shift and mend that serves in life's hard scope.

But also kindness there, the tendered hearts
towards the tentative and brave new starts.
How dark the dawn but still the train departs,
or fog-bound ship or flight to distant parts.

15. Australia

It was the bright-edged blur of nothing, bound
to no complicities of home or friends:
a world of absences, of barbed wire ends,
of daubs resettling on their ancient ground

of dream-time characters. The town observed
a strange oppressiveness when rains were due
as though vast clouds appeared of yellow hue,
but no, a nothing, and the hot earth curved

away to stainless blue, unbending sky,
not menacing, but somehow over-bright,
still infiltrating everything they might
imagine under it, not asking why

they put up with a bare, unfinished place
of airless shacks and always single men
who worked and sweated, swore and worked again
at drink that veined each clotted, angry face?

The neon 'rooms to let', the weekly hop
where women lusted after brought the fights
in smoke-filled, broken-bottle, bar-room nights,
that red-necked manliness would never stop

while men were men beneath their cork-hung hats
who bragged each month of yet more rugged lives:
evading debts, court orders, begging wives,
the flight then ending on those bull-dust flats.

That month of suicides before the rain,
where all could feel through thin, perspiring skin
the thwarted gentleness, and, deep within
the burnt-out skeleton, what might remain.

And then relief, the landscape just the same,
the eucalyptids drenched in sudden green,
an air that's elemental, washing clean
the roads to homestead, bar and mineral claim.

16. The Rain

The lights go out. It's midnight. On the pane
the unconscionable and ever splintery rain:
in words of those we loved, still love, again
comes all the vomited and bitter pain.

Do those we loved the most now lie awake
to hear the reminiscing wind's complaint:
will they take stock again or need to make
the past commendable though small and faint?

Where is the larger world, where varied lives
are not impoverished by constant heat,
a world of once with gardens, children, wives,
where hours can divvy up some special treat?

A world that's ever fuller, further on
than we'd conceive in any childhood tale,
the one remembered when all else is gone
and we walk quietly in life's evening vale.

17. Indonesia

From arid emptiness to tropic heat
in Asia's forests where our efforts win
more films of moisture on perspiring skin,
more squelch and mushiness beneath the feet.

The generator through the jungle nights,
the stink of greenery, and all around,
the plop of florid raindrops on the ground,
the fume and hiss as insects rush the lights.

And what is that to us? Are we too sent
about our business sweated day by day?
Through forest canopies the filtered ray
but barely adumbrates the way we went.

In pits and river samples we fulfil
our quotas constantly, but no one knows
the men who forage here: the thick leaf grows
but back to what it was, and clearings fill

with suffocating dark again. One day
sees millions find their nature, flower and seed
where, unconcerned at us, by what we need,
a blind and tranquil nature goes her way.

In forests here the Srivijaya kings
made warfare, council, treaties, dance and feast
and in their sovereignty of spice-filled east
enjoyed the sumptuousness such trading brings.

And now there's nothing but the stupa's blaze,
a small depression, blocks of masonry,
some frieze of commentary for us to see
the body's hunger for the splendid days.

And we who later sketch our own lives out
are shadow puppets thrown upon a screen
of things in prospect, that have never been
but drudgery in mineral stopes and drought.

18. On Leave

The dysentery, the never feeling well,
where youth, so promising, is yet mislaid
into a cramping unreported spell
we must awake from while we still are paid

with feckless, footloose lives in distant lands
that bear the imprint of a regal past
that's all about us as the one-night stands
but only mercenary, a faithful cast

of Asian dynasties we can't possess;
we read the books, but every new girl's name
is ours to conquer in the daily press
of things as otherwise but still the same.

That what we hunger for in each soft smile
or in their eyelids as they fall asleep
is some encountering with the mile on mile
of self-enchancement that their bodies keep.

19. Thailand

The damp, thick smell of smouldering cigarettes
in mouths that we have loved, the outward ache
of longing that perspiring bodies make
towards the tenderness that none forgets.

And more the nights, of course, the gaudy blue
and airy nights, the rain on palm leaf roofs,
with bodies, hammock-slung in long reproofs,
but arms recalling what they can't undo.

The starlight falling on the bristled pores,
each held there tensed and cat-like, nerves alight
to a vast enveloping that is the night,
both cool and beautiful, beyond all cause

to be so beautiful, that floods the mind
with certain elemental, star-lit things:
the flood of giving that affection brings
to full abandonment we hope to find

throughout the disappointments, grievous hells
that follow on such hardy womanhood,
where body is as only body could
in brief indignities at cheap hotels,

when we are with them in each languid pose,
at each imposture and each practice sought:
how much more dangerous than the license taught
are those rich territories that giving owes.

The lives that we imagine all our days,
the thin-clothed essences with closet scents,
the lustrous darkness after brief events
become the focus of those glowing rays

that we are only in some larger sense
of outlines echoed in a far-off bell,
that still, full listening that the trees know well
between their turning and our going hence.

20. Travel Blues

At length, beyond the grubby lodging house
we watch the rain beat steadily, and through
the lack of purpose in a home or spouse.
there comes the darkening of that inner view:

that all has been a senseless husbandry,
a spread of mulch above a sterile loam,
that, soul unsaturated, all must be
bereft of life's commitments, friends and home.

Condemned to strange vacuity, to lives
that, like some brute, effective abacus,
we cannot grasp but clearly works and thrives
in some continuum that isn't us,

we know in urgencies of limbs and bust
our brief entanglements of days are spun,
but ask no more in these of bedrock trust
nor look for family or final one.

21. Old Timers

Dead, the half of them, and maybe more
from rock-falls, drink, the carelessness and sheer
monotony of lives that, dropping year
by year, would leave the travelled heart foot-sore.

Where are you now, companions of the long
nights talking? Where are the tales denied belief
in barefaced molls, the great shafts sunk, the grief
that came from enterprises plain got wrong?

Garrulous, loud-checked, high booted men
all gone into their long graves talking, each
still dreaming of the gulch or windy reach,
and smell of gold when they were young again.

Where are you now, where do your strong bones rot?
Where is that first, adventuring, bewildering spring,
fresh youth's companionship we all must bring
to hope's stigmata in this wayside spot?

To you, my comrades of the mining lease,
the raw-trenched earth, the clearing, frontier town:
in bars and cheap bordellos where we drown
our loneliness in liquor's fierce caprice:

those met at riverside or in the steep-walled pass,
the month's companion or of a few brief hours;
the plain and ordinary that the day devours,
each undemonstrative as wayside grass:

I pray you rest in quietness, the sun
and rain to etch no furrows on your head:
so may the spring in prospect sow your bed
with hopes and enterprises not begun —

when you will never know what we must know,
that friends deceive us and our true-hearts lie.
Assurances are blown across the windy sky:
how sobering quiet and solitary we grow.

22. Breathing Bodies

The rooms our warm and breathing bodies fill
with last year's prospects and the make of car
that's not decided on, where our sweet will
must add new tokens to the cookie jar.

The spine-cracked novel, yellowing page on page
that once intoxicated in our far-off youth,
those fierce elixirs of another age,
or intimations of more buxom truth.

For we are various, porous, made no doubt
of occupations that we can't deny,
days boarded up to keep the hard world out,
the spent alternatives we try and try

until, long overlooked, we come at last
to blessed companionship, someone for whom,
with all our errors and our wanderings passed,
we are and furnish out a modest room.

23. Surrey

Some past divinity we recognise,
a rooted inwardness and holding through
life's deep vicissitudes, of being true
to some-such name or body. Otherwise

how could we know of any sheltering strength,
of broad-leaf certainties that go their way
in quiet pilgrimages but also stay
within their purposes and tenured length?

Each day is more becoming. Each one shows
the more accomplishments that still are hers,
the hopes then settling as the light wind errs
into the certainties the morning knows:

that we will fight for, worship, forge a way
towards the majesty that woman is,
composed and intimately ever his
as dawn's faint intimations fill with day.

And him? The storm-tossed petrel ever lost
on azimuths of error, to the wild heart lent,
unplumaged, profitless, so much misspent
on fruitless calculations, at the cost

of things that bring no harvest, never done
to real completion, fitted stone on stone
in thinking always, therefore much alone,
provisional, work in progress, never won

by rural Surry with its gated drives,
thick-shading chestnuts, lawns and lilled pool –
each man his castle and made free to rule
his regulated, self-regarding lives

in one half given him, a fine estate
in womanhood and what the bond entails

of public schools, exclusive golf-club tales,
in flowers, the point-to-points and local fete.

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24. Established

When well advanced upon our fruitless quest
for wealth, advancement or some late renown
we're pledged to know before our final rest,
it is that silent, distant, fabled town

we strive to reach but also know we can't,
the state of elsewhere in some bedside book,
the self-conceit within the sunburnt look,
and one our preferences cannot supplant.

The arduous journey that we never take
to archipelagos of once perhaps,
to wind-scorched badlands that are off the maps,
the fabled odyssey we'll never make.

That famous novel that we didn't write,
the scholarship which put the world in debt,
the charm, the learning and the deft insight
that nod, forgotten in that thick-rheumed head.

25. Old Friends

And so the laughing reprobates turn wives
and comrades good for any escapade
across the continents will slowly trade
themselves for customs in more careful lives.

We each grow narrower and more obsess
on finishing that self-directed task;
we take our places in that solemn masque
among contemporaries we don't impress.

For they have known us in each step we take
and hold us to that image just the same:
not for them the creature we became
by dint of efforts that they need not make:

the sense that life will guide them safely on
across the pitfalls and perplexities
beyond identities reflection sees,
which from the cold, hard wind is never gone.

You kept the faith, and willed a path as free
from heart's entrapments, held no friend
or fact accountable, and to the end
at life's absurdities stayed absentee:

the men, packed lorries or the single horse;
the bearded traveller and hill's recluse,
the bruised but laughing bar-girl on the loose,
all you who doggedly still keep your course,

and more the solitary, as quiet as stone,
as silently will fall the summer rain,
the things still potent in us, and remain
reserved and steadfast, ever on their own

throughout our journeyings, where rough-hewn men
will lift the billycan, and damp down fire,
to ruminate as glowing coals expire
how shadowed round us is that world of then.

26. Routines

But not for them the put-on working guy
with schools and mortgages and bills to pay,
remotely functioning, still getting by,
the rough irregulars of day to day,

but not oblivious of what life is:
the call within and then the stifled cry,
who skirt from day to day the precipice,
the lightning striking from a cloudless sky.

The always-staring-at-them, fearful deeps
around the boss's party, that affair
in lives of failure that were theirs for keeps,
the policy that gave no aftercare.

True hopes lived elsewhere, where their evening hours
are filled with friends and hobbies, working to
a world invigorating, all those powers
untried, but latent in us, one day true.

27. Prospects

At porticoes and arch of entrance hall
we stood and idly chattered, drifted, walked
where their inhabitants have also talked
of coming marriages and county balls.

What elegance was theirs: the ruling class
in de rigueur of tedious social calls:
how quietly echoing the conscience falls
to God's own purposes in chapel glass.

And all we gather from the gracious lawns,
the lakes and fountains and compendious trees,
the ripening cornfields and the summer's leas,
are in that prospect when it slowly dawns

that marriage is to put our lives in pawn
to other's prospects and identities,
that empires fall to small delinquencies,
that what they occupy they may suborn.

And bodies in their fragrant summer frocks
have both their premises and lives on loan,
the wealth and beauty that are not their own
but hitched together as are trading stocks,

that what we hold in breathless giving arms
is ours for asking, but it will not stay,
that mouths have moistness but those mouths decay
into a hostelry of faded charms

who were as sunlight on the harvest land.
Possess and wed me now, do not delay,
for those who dither are condemned to stay
the seedless ones and scattered out of hand.

There is a moment that is always past
before our knowing it, when all our heart
is gathered in that giving, whence we start
upon that journey with our eyes shut fast.

28. Settled

So we return from errors of the past
where body's empery of dreams condense
to smiling certitude and home at last,
to profligate and loving common sense.

When what we have and owe is what we keep,
and all her purposes are also ours;
those wars and argosies where furies weep
become appendages of trivial powers.

Where what we gain, awoken each new day,
is her complicity and smiling trust,
the wealth of having that we can't gainsay.
The heart's obedience simply, as it must

retrieve the scattered through a friendless land,
that brings no harvests from the seedtimes past,
or goodness gathered from the sower's hand
but clay the potter's field redeems at last.

29. City Life

Good suits, short lunches, dapper secretaries
with figures folding neatly at the knees
of humid other lives, whose ABCs
are assets, risk and liabilities.

That regulated world he knew so well,
its self-imposed and thermostatic hours,
arcane arithmetic and abstract powers
that tots up salaries, and that faint smell

of apprehension, fear of some mistake,
which bares the canines, calmly, as the stoat,
the smile like razor-wire that ruffs the throat
in tired excuses that he must not make.

Another company: that's two today.
the spreadsheet columns, blinking, turn and run:
a keystroke only and a name's undone:
the staff, their contracts and their rates of pay.

He sees the smart receptionist, the mile
on mile of carpeting through corridors
that lead to nothing but more nameless doors
and hint of malice in each tooth-picked smile.

Beyond the first appraisal, boardroom brief,
inferred reserves and all too likely cost,
or change of government, when all is lost,
there are the best-laid plans that come to grief.

And more than that: he lays the careful figures out,
return on capital, the market state,
the wealth to them at now the discount rate,
the bounds of confidence, the coming doubt

he still persists with under covering fire
of reputation, well-known city name
that bears him on and upward just the same
till youth be done with us, and plans retire.

30. Aspirations

The social circle widens: weekend jaunts
to friends of friends, the county families:
about them, all the same, the cuckoo haunts
with hints of marriages and titled ease.

Those fancied springboards of the middle class
if we can call it that, at least aspiring to,
where well-bred manners bring their special pass,
and time's accomplices must tell what's true.

Or if not them, at least their children might.
Not wealth, not ostentation: what they chose
was theirs unasked for, and their copyright
extends to covenants and what that owes.

But good and worthy folk who face their end
with sense and fortitude, as like as not:
at all those grievances that lives can send
have paid already for their graveside plot.

31. Consulting

We're not participants: although we roam
the camp, the working, forest, mountain waste,
we are detached, remain so, somehow chaste
while in our wallet stays the passage home.

These strange itineraries in foreign lands
are kept apart, and will not effloresce
in nerveless empathy, when numberless
must stay existences as desert sands.

The bitterness of men, their staunch belief
that they are first, that any betterment
is theirs, uniquely so, with nothing lent
towards our homelessness or debt relief.

That what men owe they always owe. It mounts
to vast vacuities they can't forgive,
that we are only as our bodies give
remains untallied in our life accounts.

A life in such consulting never delves
into the incidence of passing by.
Men work, hope, love, suffer, die:
eradicated from our business selves.

Another month, another country. Here we drive
from five at airport to the bar at four:
an unrelieved, dry tableland become the more
unnerving, uninviting: we arrive

at what sustains our stellar rates of pay.
We make our tour and sample, check the maps,
at each enquiring smile we say 'perhaps':
another memorandum filed away

in lives that aren't negotiable, no rights

to bargain, or ameliorate what's due.
We go on forward, neither straight nor true,
but vaguely threatened in our sleepless nights.

32. Santiago

Fluent and absorbent, the day blooms bright
and what's companionable is how we are,
beyond the moment that might dim the light,
at home with someone now, and never far

from that first moment, always, so is life,
inconsequential as thin soles across the floor:
this is his home, his children and his wife,
though crouched and listening, in the heart's still core.

So all he ever hoped for in this hour
is strict obedience to little things,
at one with her, at home and in her power:
the night-flame steadies and the kettle sings.

An adorable scruple is in the tenderness,
the which she talks of, and the words are true,
that thinking then become an infinite regress:
that he is her, she him, in all they do.

33. Retirement

We put our old shoes on, walk pavements where
we walked as previous beings, sentient
of nothing but that earnest living went
past library quiet and shelves and winding stair

to wealth and dignity, to titles, head
of this or that commission, what is meant
by fame's remuneration, one that's lent
its brief authority to all we said.

Or be anonymous, to have our work
outrun our modest character, the small
and all-too timid way the cards will fall
to safe acceptance, where no dragons lurk.

The quiet, the uneventful, studious life
of lab and gown in college friends we know,
degrees and honours as their simple due
on turf occasioned by the critic's knife.

The quiet soul in that, who keeps to rules,
his name and status in one being pent,
assuming rightfully whatever lent
itself to mottos in more famous schools.

A life of simple fortitude that meets its end
in friends and colleagues at the farewell toast
the rector leads, the all that life may boast
in cards the children and their children send.

No doubt the path that branches, branches on
to bear but few, small blossoms at the end,
and immaterial things that life may send
become the blaze with which the sunlight shone

and must so keep us, always, diligent
to hold that utterance in steady sight,
lest all our afterwards be some such night
of toss and turning till the darkness went.

34. The Past

The past's a kingdom where we cannot go,
but looks at us, and laughs, and has its way:
there is a taint of dust in all we sow,
and what was rapture once we cannot say.

We grace the table with an extra plate,
recall the anniversaries and pause,
as though obituaries were clean-washed slate
where we could re-adopt life's erstwhile cause.

Yet what we think of most is how we end,
accept the obdurate, the things that last,
the sturdy helpmate that is more than friend,
where loving re-embodies from the past

some name we're pledged to in the smallest thing,
the strange discipleship it's undergone,
the fierce elation that the strong winds bring,
and welling loneliness when they are gone.

35. Looking Back

The querulous old head that, nodding at its desk,
recalls the books and papers proofed and read,
the aspirations that these small claims fed
what now seems small to him, a sad burlesque.

How affable we are in mordant spite
to undermine a threatening colleague's name:
that humble cleverness to earn the fame
of first authority in all we write.

The arduous journeys that he'll not now make,
the dynasties he knew, the sovereign claims
in Arabic he once could read, the Chinese names,
tell crude contemporary from clever fake.

And all that knowledge which once filled the mind
and gave a depth to life, that every day
became a journey where fresh treasures lay
reside in summer lands he'll now not find.

The strangely curious one whose questioning went
beyond the ordinary: where children stay
upon the borders of the cloud-rimmed bay,
he would be wading out, in each event

the more detached, bewildered at the loss
when yet more differently the journey ends
for those contemporaries that were his friends:
it is the mind that's tethered gathers moss,

but also happiness, a full return
on that vast enterprise we call a life:
the sons, the grandsons, wealth, the caring wife,
regret diminishing as far astern

retreat excursions never ventured on,
unknown, unwanted, long ago dismissed:

the laughing entity remains unkissed
and, unaccountably, the gift is gone.

36. Reminiscence

The long day wanes and in the reddened glass
we see the image of a once-loved face,
across the meadow-lands the footsteps pass
in days of gladness or of sudden grace.

Some brief epiphany where all our lives
hang on the instant in some gluttoned blaze,
some fastening insight where the body strives
for all its purposes in coming days.

But from that busy world he's set aside:
the tedious anecdote that's twice retold,
a mix of foolishness and errant pride
to make the faith and foible of the old.

And all his yesterdays of sparkling wit
that set the table at a roar again:
the zest, the love of banter, the undoubted hit,
are marked accomplishments in younger men.

37. Age

Age is an indifferent, but still angry smell,
a thing unwholesome, an unwanted stage
in life's occasions that we still engage
with all our being in a last farewell.

Things long companionable like worn-down shoes;
the tools and scuffed concessions of our trade,
habit's subscriptions that are always paid,
that page-loose dictionary we still must use.

The modest stay-at-home, the kindly soul
that each of us inherits as we earn
a modicum of what we can't discern
in life that's given daily, sane and whole.

That all who know such truth, however far
we press our intermittent talents on,
will sense that waking gift of tongues is gone,
not benediction as the evening star

will trail its quietness over us, but cost
of time or accident or our own acts,
or even negligence that slow enacts
its penalties for each of boundaries crossed.

In this the heart grows colder, stiller, more
withdrawn into itself, that one small room
that we, the ageing ones, in time assume
our one necessity and silent core.

Yet if we stop a moment from our fretful lives
and watch each busy moment smile and pass
a silvered, transient instant in the glass,
a glint, no more than that, yet it contrives

to show us where our larger treasure lie,
in full possession of our threadbare things,
our shared beliefs and where confession brings
the quiet embodiments of evening sky.

38. Where Are

Where are the laughing faces seen no more,
unuttered syllables that made a name
that all our body would be living for,
the passage onward now that's flat and tame?

Unknown to us, unknowable, the source
of all our loneliness and restlessness,

the short-lived camps upon life's upward course
we can't elaborate or much confess

that we are only knitted bones and skin
that hold our stratagems to live awhile,
the mere concessions that we hid within
a functioning become a spring-based file

with which we hold, close-pressed, the instances
of this or that beneath the rain-drenched sky,
immutable, intractable, straight witnesses
of life that was and which we can't deny.

39. Requiem

How vain and transitory we are, a dream
which even as we turn to it retreats
to fumes and mirages of body heats,
that adumbrates each stifled scream.

Then veins and shadows on a sun-lit view,
or blustering sunsets after violent rains,
like carcinomas filled with coming pains
we can't enunciate or much undo.

Were we, the cautious ones, too negligent
of that great happiness the body has,
with all our loving unbecoming as
the selfishness that left our gifts unspent?

And what we want or will is always lost
to happenings, surreal imaginings:
which may be gladness that the new day brings
or still the stormy petrel, ocean-tossed.

Then what we are is what we leave behind,
some word of friendship, or the path we took,
some earnest, questioning and baffled look
at final settlements we never find.

But from those recollections we may keep
some card or postscript to a perfect day
when we were happy, wholly so, as may
yet come again perhaps when we're asleep.

But he has stood where no man stood before
upon the upland countries of the mind
in notes for others that he leaves behind
in all he thought or ventured on and saw.

In that the land is quiet, its ancient floors
beneath the clays and glistening, flint-filled Chalk

persist, continue through the fitful talk
that keeps or sets us on our final chores.

40. Envoi

At last the torrent of our lives is lost
into the flotsam of yet larger things:
no more in summer-lands will drought or frost
undo the gladness that the new day brings.

We still are travelling, though, still hastening on
to leave but sudden rain-drops on the stone:
our homes, our friends, our wives — they all are gone,
and we not noticing how late it's grown.

Though what we gave is never given back
but in some others' lives, in memories
they may or may not have of mountain track
that climbs so far from home or hostelries

to one brief halt in which our pains are eased,
one star-bright night among the thick-dewed grass,
where expectations can be half appeased
if life press onward from the mountain pass.