



Some Other Person, Year or Street

Poems by Colin John Holcombe

Ocaso Press 2011

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POEMS

Home Town

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

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

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

Wiltshire Downs

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

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

Deptford

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

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

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

Norfolk Broads

Wide fens, once splashed with windmills, now with pumps
to staunch or regulate the wavering water levels:
the sky-flecked miles of tidy inlets, screens of sedge,
and cry of bittern echoing over the hung reflections.

Licentiously, as in a children's picture book
flap out the bright occasions of the waterfowl,
and flowers open to a studious self-absorption
on sun-strewn banks. Beyond the swallow-tails that flit
in coupled vapour-trails, and through the bumped confusion
of passing places, for all the scattered wealth of clouds
that prick the brilliant darkness on the water's surface,
there comes the appropriating breath of pleasure craft,
with thoughts of serfs below, rough-clothed,
who hack and hack
in the waterlogged, interminable, thick layers of peat.

Ely Cathedral

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

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

Surrey Heights

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

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

The Black Country

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

No loud hosannas sounded through this land of Cain
when blood-red cauldrons emptied out their glistening steel
and worked it into viaduct and railway track.

Past the pink-red sandstones rimming the chilly vales,
the streets of back-to-backs and blank Victorian villas,
impenetrable brickwork, factories and dank canals,
a sullen, hard-nosed people served a hard world's needs,
and were not paid in charity or preacher's word,
but wholesale penury that took them, heedless, on
past Sunday bouts and lie-ins to their lands of rest.

Henley on Thames

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

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

The West Country

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

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

Lincolnshire Wolds

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

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

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

Bournemouth

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

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

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

Kew Gardens

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

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

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

London Suburbs

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

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

Aberdeen

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

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

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

Cotswold Estates

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

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

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

Linlithgow

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

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

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

The Peak District

There are streams rich in their industrial past,
if now assiduous of neglect, where water spouts
from stacks of thick, micaceous flags, and after pools
in hollows scooped out from the mountain limestone,
weathered

white with bryozoa, ossicles, sometimes
the crinoid cup itself, its long and feathery
arms trailing after some forgotten reef-side current —
as flail the wheels in long-abandoned cotton mills,
the haunt of mouse and ferret or small butterflies,
whose consort of the wind and careless chequered shade,
and sound of water falling through the steep defile
combines with women's lives gone through these walls,
as though their tied-back, sweated penury could be
effaced by benefice of water pouring through.

Inner Temple

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

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

Housman Country

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

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

The Midlands

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

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

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

The Shire Counties

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

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

Midland Canals

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

Belgrave Hall, Leicester

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

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

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

Chiltern Hills

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

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

West Riding Towns

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

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

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

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

Dover

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

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

Dartmoor

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

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

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

King's Lynn

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

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

The Windrush

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

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

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

Merseyside

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

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

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

Wastelands

That first inheritance beyond our given name,
where troops of shirt-sleeved followers would urge us on
from safe suburban thoroughfares to ruffian streets
that were forbidden us, abandoned factory sites
where sunlight falling gave an oriental splendour
to wire, to slag and shattered window glass:
and then to toadstool-studded fields and murky woods
across the duckweed kingdoms of the water flags.

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

The Potteries

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

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

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

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

The Vale of Beavoir

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

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

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

Botallack, Cornwall

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

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

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

Bath

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

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

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

The Mendip Hills

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

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

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

The Pentland Hills

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

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

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

Hatfield House

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

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

Mercia

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

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

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

Cambridge

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

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

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

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

The Welsh Borders

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

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

and the black crow stabbed.

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

Bickling Hall, Norfolk

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

Burford House, Shropshire

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

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

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

Broadstairs, Kent

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

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

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

Tottenham

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

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

Highgate Cemetery

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

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

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

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

London WC1

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

If now I'm comfortably contained by forty years
of trade and industry across the high and odd
ways of the world, and walk recessed, I see
a small boy with Christmas vouchers looking past
the books he'd buy but hardly read, the great career
mapped out for him he didn't want, that awkward mind
at odds with school and friends and all his parent's hopes —

to be revealed, insatiably, by lives he missed,
in faces gone and words he could not say, the hard
and bustling world of what he sowed but would not reap.

Hadrian's Wall

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

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

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

Wookey Hole, Somerset

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

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

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

Some Other Person, Year or Street

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

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

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