

spring in the Plaza
Lorena Cousiño
and other
poems

colin john holcombe

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SPRING IN THE PLAZA LORETO COUSIÑO, SANTIAGO DE CHILE

ONE

God of our forefathers, God of old,
our God of refuge, faith and strong resolve,
forgive the wasted years, the falsehoods told
that darkened all the hitherto and will dissolve
our lives to caricature that we again
renounce the gifts we had as fervent men.

When was it first we thoughtless ones began
to know the depths beneath ephemeral sense?
We stood by perorations: upright man
alone joins purposes to just events.
That proved a dark way nonetheless, the route
that faith proclaims as just and absolute.

We saw in youth itself sufficient end,
what steadfast pride could yet achieve.
That youth is gone. The darkening memories send
no happiness we clearly could believe.
But yet we push upon that inner door
until that clamouring is heard no more.

The sun floods out across uneven ground;
the wall of shadows here is thick and soft
Immense, dark conifers stand linked around
what seems a wealth of darkness thrown aloft.
An iridescence glitters in the needles knit,
that glower still as though they're inward lit.

Bright fusillades of pink are in the cherry trees,
for careless spring must clothe the deepest grief;
the distillates of white that winter sees
are cast as wild narcissi underneath.
Unseen the gardener's unaccounted toil
as roots must navigate the bouldery soil.

TWO

Youth's flouncing verities have proved a myth:
the world is dark, resentful, profoundly grieves.
In plumes of purple unconnected with
the sheen of rapiers tangled in the leaves,
a winter iris holds its lovely head
when all is dry, exhausted, mute and dead.

Once bloomed the ancient world in countries far
from our hard industries and practices.
In tangled histories the Chilean peons are
in bloodlines scattered but yet close to us.
Who could still query what such empires cost
in the fog-filled highlands and the bloodlines lost?

Interspersed throughout the fenced-in loam,
the pathways loop and scatter and digress.
With blood the Spanish brought their silver home,
but this was still a rooted country, nonetheless.
The cupulas swell with their incendiary powers;
a bell booms out the legendary, passing hours.

Time brings its harbinger for everything
however far it be our blessings range.
A local plaza in a far-off city bring
a strict exactitude that's blunt and strange.
We think of Inca gods whose wall-eyed stare
was yet unchanging and stood always there.

Aggregating green can have no sound
but a muffled stirring in the packed-in leaves.
The odour of a new mown earth around
both reassures us briefly, and retrieves
a christening, beginning, a new-made start again
for childlike, simple, ever-trusting men.

THREE

Improbably the rich, fresh springtime starts
as we remember from long-storied days.
Integral to our being, to thoughtful hearts
that had no need to variegate the ways

an intemperate gladdening filled the sight
before the overarching and concluding night.

The body yields and weakens: evening's chill
retires the form we shall not have again,
and in our orders be more strongly still
the governance on us plain mortal men.
The grave draws nearer, but how things will fare
is not for us alone to know or care.

That is community, the codes and rules
by which the numerous are made as one.
Where names remembered stay as heirloom jewels
beside what may be due or later done.
Though we are old, and have known much, nothing sends
so fierce repentance as the loss of friends.

God moves on His ultimatums: the crowning earth
puts forth its coarse-leafed dock and hyacinth.
Year after year they come: the cut-up turf
is laid out cleanly like an altar plinth.
What point in offerings, and what god is left
when offices of state prove blatant theft?

How niggardly came wealth from nitrate mines,
from the myriad branching out of copper veins.
Later were the olives and the laid-out vines,
and then the passage of the clouds that stains

the ordered townships that the Yankees built
as shades of plunder but with little guilt.

FOUR

We tread the heavy footsteps of the dead
that all around us take their passage out.
Strange, threatening apparitions fill the head
where names well known to us press thick about.
New districts, new streets, new shopping mall:
Santiago glints and rises to the mountain wall.

We longingly have sung the much-loved hymns
and in our hearts replied to each response,
obediently, of course, as if our limbs
escaping centuries of indolence,
were thus rejuvenated, through a course
where each submission will not blunt its force.

So speak the seeded harvests of the dead,
the dust-filled promises of the still-alive;
with oblivions of many hands, the wounded strive
to open the broken and sweating, porous head.
So was it given when they first set sail
for haunts of guanaco and nightingale.

They had as we had once: a fabled youth,
the breadth of shoulder and a manly glow.
Nothing was beyond us, and we would show
what gifts made up an unconquerable truth.
'We are a sinful people, sustained by grace
beneath His heavenly, most joyful place.'

Now far from us are easy-ankled lands,
the woodland walks, the dew on briar stems.
the orisons of heartache where no mouth condemns
the mollusk drifting in its tropic sands.
The blue-eyed Pacific rolls from shore to shore:
flotsam of a moment are men, no, nothing more.

FIVE

Happy the cremated dead, and I shall lie
as dust and cinders in the stoppered urn.
Nothing of me moving, none to sigh
how brief the world is here, how soon return
the old calamities in new concerns:
for some connection still each being yearns.

No words, no arguments will bring us down
among the flowers, the trees and sleeping earth.
No more in meaning than a wayside town
will have given to others their scattered birth.
The ways of advancement are thin and wild
and wandering forever goes the proverbial child.

We think of Christmases, renouncing toys
and, tired of playing, make our sisters pay
a surfeit of hope and hopeless joys.
We gaze in wonder at the gladdening day,
but the train is for leaving and the whistle goes:
for where, my pressed companions, no one knows.

So passage of a day well spent, come cold
or dull grey skies, or spreading hours of gloom:
like moody stirrings on the surface water mould,
the shadows fill and thicken round the room,
but comes the evening still where the glowing bars
proclaim His ministry, and fade to stars.

Which we would know the names of, pocket guides
set out intensities and miles away.
What light-years travelling on and out divides
us from the homely scene our lives portray.
We stand upon the threshold of another world
and to eternity are thinly whirled.

SIX

So went the misted, damp, deciduous years
with soliloquies of happiness reclaimed and lost.
In that scalpel-cold and fragrant winter frost
the tinsel of Christmases lies prinked with tears.

Despite the blood and salt we kiss the rod:
a world of suffering is the way to God.

Who knows what heart has made, or what it meant,
what provisions are abroad for the ruinous birds?
What derelictions are in wings, if words
be but duplicitous, thin-veiled intent?
Say the words carefully, enounce again:
to errors of utterance we drop as trap-doored men.

Our whole existences made mute and dumb
in weddings, christenings, in funerals:
the modest groupings make the usual sum.
A balance sheet of bland imponderables
will prove but wilting shadows of a past
where even bare-back beauty does not last.

Unknowable and incommensurate
with tales of childhood and the simple names
we knew at one time and enumerate
as one by one we feed the sullen flames:
With a heavy footfall and with steady beat
we enter on that path where all lives meet.

Each is a momentary passing, a fumigation
that leaves the soft sad soil as sweet again,
after the rain and ceaseless lamentation,
the new seed is planted in its narrow vein.

What seemed unending in its childhood grace
belongs to this particular, remembered place.

SEVEN

Of those who went before, whose lives amount
to matters we poor scribblers think about —
the bright conclusions that we can't discount:
this world is one of sorrow, pain, and doubt.
All may push forward yet in time will face
but grasses seeding in some quiet place.

It was hard work always; the convent bells
would Sundays call to their mestizo folk,
that testament the Devil laid out in his spells
before the Bishop, and the Gospel spoke.
Forever remember that the flesh is weak:
soon comes the day when the dead will speak.

So sounds the bell that marks the hours. So sound
the myriad intercessions of the city round.
A bustling setting while only here is found
the silence seeping out of made-up ground.
What unseen gardeners in the generations past
left squared-off plots to please and last?

Only those who think and feel each bright
and shade are laid as thriving in the heart;
a view that's through and further on from sight:
impossibly our intimations start.

Life is a continuum where our small role
is to feel acutely what is once and whole.

We have become as our contemporaries are:
bewildered; sensing that some moment passed
without acknowledgement, no aide memoir
has circulated saying how well cast
are years accumulating: one by one
our arbitrary, unmeasured days are done.

EIGHT

But those loved fervently turn former staff
unfolding, stepping away, their long legs free.
Out of starched encumbrances they take their path,
from the unbound passions that are not to be.
Whatever here is seen of good rapport,
retains a little of that life before.

Again I see those calamitous and broken eyes
that look up, waiting for some words from me.
The treacheries hurt, they hurt abominably
but there were weekends away I recognize:
like a day from the country when all went past
with an impossibly golden and laughing cast.

I am an old man now, and old men know
that what was loved the most is quickly spent
on lands unending where we nowhere went.
Even tempestuous rivers have their craven flow,
forever sequentially lost, as all men are
who follow their impetuous and drifting star.

So the silences, liquid and evasive, that pout
from open doorways, fluffed up crinolines of light
that flounce before us, as a name or sight
in the shaven legs we cannot know about.
There is a smell of linen and of nights at home,
however the heart is, or how far it roam.

Officially it's winter still: this brief
warm spell brings thoughts of summer walks: the day
seems brighter, more intense, as though belief
fulfilled the interludes that didn't stay.
A fretful plume of branches fills the air:
immense, indifferent, but yet fully there.

NINE

I can think of girls more beautiful
than they had rights to, or we could know:
but even that immediacy served protocol
that blessed and far exceeded outward show,

but as the speckled daisies in the uncut grass
they had their seasons once and so must pass.

My father went as most would want to go:
He had his two mile walk, sat down, was gone.
abruptly, silently, with none to know
what hopes and promises he was thinking on.
So are our lives: we laugh, we flourish, then
there's nothing: such the lives of passing men.

The sun floods through the trees, the furrowed grass
in an instant is colder and darker, the children cease
from their ball-games, and their bright calls pass
from a rich day's frolicking to a somnolent peace.
Let the te deum sound, let the words be sung,
the serpent hissing with his deep-forked tongue.

Suburban births and nurseries, a school
to guide us in our thoughtful steps: above
in sheer magnificence the heavens rule
immeasurably as His most perfect love,
yet we are pilgrims, all of us, and sent
on purposes that none can circumvent.

The mornings' cold, reluctant trudge to school,
the chafe and rectitude of new-on uniform:
our life thereafter to be bound by rule
to which and speedily we will conform:

the summer-lands of week-end holidays
return in end of evening's golden blaze.

TEN

All manner living is beset by change:
life grows, it withers out, and on its stalks
that bear their ripe experiences there range
the ranks of promises to addled walks.
All these the earth remembers, if briefly: so
the spring winds wake us and the thin leaves grow.

The earth absorbs their shadow; one by one
the flowers in blossoming will be gone:
a bright oblivion, to short tales spun
on fraught appearances of furthering on:
life is an elixir, a bewilderment, but grows
the more apart in motives each one sows.

The early warm and peaceful summer days
will help to ease the hurtful cold away,
and in the greening prospect, the level rays
of sunlight thaw the memories of like today
when all was rich, munificent and still to come,
and far and deep in us the memories plumb.

The earthy soil luxuriates: it breathes
a warm sweet odour which the sun has bred,
and in the flowers and in unfolding leaves

there is a joyousness that fills the head
with giddiness, that from this simple time
long days in rural prospect rise and climb.

We pass the drifts of families, the kids
that pose an arch and accusatory stare,
their dark glance puckers and the startled lids
behold the livery that once was there
in forward streets on which our prospects shone,
and will the long years after we are gone.

WARWICKSHIRE TALES

In life's intransigence are put our parents' times
as reputations redolent of hills and vales,
of tillage and farmland; half-remembered rhymes
we count as heritage of country tales.

So were the Midland counties, where the clays and lime
gave up rough ironstones from the rust-soaked sand.
The locals worked them, or until such time
the shallow pits had turned recovered land.

In time good farmland. In their honeyed ease
stood Tudor mansions with their rats and damp.
Beneath the stateliness were roles on lease:
on house and heath the nation put its stamp.

Offa's central kingdom had returned to war,
to class-divisions in the stone-thick fields.
All this was known about long years before:
the surly labourers, declining yields.

A time for caution, for things well-built;
no flashy clothes or style beyond your means.
Life's thin moraines would make a patchwork quilt
from real improvidence behind the scenes.

Obediently the younger sons went overseas,
the girls to boarding schools. More languidly
extended elms of immemorial leas,
a worked-out Warwickshire as far as eye could see.

My mother's father predeceased my birth;
imparting no real sense of personal loss,
but his contemporaries saw a sullied worth,
and marked his prospects down to further loss.

The carpets and the piano were auctioned off,
even the porcelain collection his wife had made.
As something fatal starts with some slight cough
the consequences weren't that long delayed.

Depression, unemployment, the coming war
foreshadowed prospects and the papers showed
new strikes, mismanagement, an army corps
sedulously ill-funded on its pitted road

to more appeasement, that bleak despair
behind the class divides when Britain spoke.
Where was that upbeat, famous savoir faire
when outlook went from doubtful through to broke?

The news surveyed the hard-pressed lives up north,
how cheap lamb imports hurt the Yorkshire dales:
it seemed the very hardship called them forth:
strikes, the lockouts, the truncated sales.

By then his wife had left him, miles away
in Kent became a housekeeper. There she died,
by family unnoticed, enough to say:
reportedly but strangers at her side.

And then, they say, it hit him: the total loss
of life's first treasures set there on her own;
as though her tears had flooded miles across:
he turned his own lean-thinking to the stone.

A life like many others in the hardship years
that should not come again, but may do yet.
How simple and briefly occasioned are all our tears,
but more, beyond the obvious, do not forget.

Some men do well, most not, but overall
there's only sadness that the years bequeath:
and from the clouds: immensities, an endless fall
of things that should be otherwise, on house and heath.

ALONG THE WAY

So: do they think of us, and do they care
about the names they lost along the way;
life's pantomime is brief; leaves no one there:
a game of just supposes children play.

Perhaps these names have hidden roots and may
for all we know have several means of blame.
Unknown, unknowable, the flowerings stay
impenetrable, a cultivated, abstruse game

that Roman authors would ascribe to gods,
to fickle Venus most, that soft delay
of dance and dalliance: against the odds
was long surviving that most fraught affray.

Success, a life well lived, when all around
are friends foretelling anecdotes: a man
assured of happiness: that muffled sound
that casts the future as it no way can.

SUMMER EVENINGS

Late summer evenings, where the trees are full
of intricate entitlements of sun-soaked leaves.
The warmth is loath to leave them, which is admirable,
but that earth is dry, exhausted and intensely grieves.

So pass the packs of long-legged girls, like Maenads cast
in violent celebrations that are not for us.
Limp-pawed in the heat, the dogs tread past
a world whirling on a pin-point and precarious.

Smells, contentment: like long-stored wine,
the fruit of soil and cultivation drifting out
of antiquities deep buried, intricately cased

in interminable stories we cannot read. So shine
the sunlit occasions as though the echoing shout
had a labial and blood-rimmed somber taste.

HARD REMAINS

Abrupt reversal was the word for of it,
the glories of their Reich reduced to broken shapes,
the bombed-out streets, deportations, stifled rapes:
and from this torment built back, brick by brick.

The women did the hard, backbreaking work: the streets
were cleared of rubble, saving what they could:
beside the many corpses stayed much useful wood
but hard to reach, like bulletins of men's release.

Ten million may have died in five appalling years,
of hardship, foreign labour, the women sleeping rough.
You would have thought these reparations were enough
but no, repatriation brought its fresh arrears.

Their men—how many of them!— were by then dispersed
to farms, to factories, America's illegal detainment camps,
deprived of everything. The mute disheartened ranks
marched off to places even the Soviets cursed.

How many perished in the foothills of eternal snow,
on irrigation schemes, vast dams to hold the rivers in
from camps, the hardship and the brutal guards therein:
each Barbarossa act replied to, blow by blow.

At least the English soldiers did their indifferent best
and in the Midland villages the German deportees
saw the basic rules complied with, a sort of peace,
but in America — who knows what happened to the rest?

So thank the military and the sycophantic press,
the newsreels, photographers, the victor's government,
and as for Christian charity, that was quickly spent
in pits where the quicklime left a blank address.

What's gained in agreements so much despised
that decencies are what plain men require?
But that is idle, speculation, and a nation's hopes retire
to unmarked armistices: be so advised.

A life that's only duty, effort, pain,
is but a picture book where ignorant children fill
out coloured shapes and interludes to stain
a world indifferent to us with some larger will

we're never conscious of, that still survives
beneath the taiga and the black earth plains:
man is a strange phenomenon, and those far lives
resume their agency in hard remains.

THE VIKINGS

So went the indomitable beating pulse of men,
their trysts in vying with a world in flood:
each spring the long-boats drove them forth again
across the far-off sunsets etched in gold and blood.

Receding rhythmically away were the Viking lands
jaw-rimmed with steel and chain-knit treacheries:
the fjords dropped precipitously to ice-
bound waters, recalcitrant, that scarcely stirred —

beyond the enmity of ice-hard winter's hold.
Teeth-clenched and deep-incensed, it could not fail.
Equally comfortless, in confining hills around
stood granite stocks in schist and thick-confiding slate.

From here they rowed or sailed: the men were lost,
boats themselves obliterated by the dark sea's glare.
In ice-free lands perhaps the seasons passed
in riotous feasting and in mead-filled boasts.

Across the seas were destinies, which a strong man
grasped
in fealty to the gods and how the blood-oaths spoke.
Irredeemably became the sea-fire's blaze, and bright
the cat-like pupils simmered in the midday heat.

But here in northern France were nutrients;
the leaf-mould smelt of goodness and of summers past.
A Chalk land, knotted thick with oak and beech,
with intercessions that the sea-breeze gave

to wealth and tillage, where the abbey stone
withstood the batter of strange-speaking folk,
Also the labials of rough humility, in gathered smocks
as sewn and woven out of peaceful threads.

Each was inconsiderable, the small steps made
by the clog-heeled oaf who couldn't dance.
Of course there were brief regressions, clergy trials
for heresy, for witches Sabbaths, the thousand cuts.

The coinages they borrowed, preferring the flat,
thick silver dirhams with their ornate script.
Allah was merciful and compassionate
in these long fastnesses of fur and slaves.

And, through them all, the old gods stared,
hovered thinly about them in council smoke.
Even in confabulations of cold stones
they stood unwinking at them, always there.

And so it continued when the Christian rite
was chipped laboriously from granite blocks.
Blue-eyed Odin was in the song-birds and bright
the water chattered among the furrowed rocks.

HARLESDEN HOSPITAL

We walk the darkening evenings of the dead,
where even these poor stunted lives were checked.
Outside, the sky floods sunlight, here instead
the indrawn sonic braille of trees collect

in flat vindictiveness; the heavy wind
colludes with headstones in their laid-out plots:
beneath the petticoats, how many sinned;
both good and bad are in the picked forget-me-nots.

The acres of desolation on the rainy days,
the separation when the numbing frost
defined the territories they still might gaze
on, in the pinched existences the fever cost.

The slow collapse into the pauper's grave,
the bouts of influenza, the hacking cough:
vast populations like a standing wave
that seasons, turning colder, carried off.

I have their keepsakes, grey-tinged locks of hair,
the things they treasured most, a billet-doux
that's written oddly, or a stain left there,
the place of correction they were committed to.

All gone, all dusted off, the threadbare streets
have been refurbished, the place names swept away.
There is a brand new pub, though nothing meets
that glint of medals on Remembrance Day.

My father's father was a wiry, self-made man
who stayed head gardener at the local park;
I've have the book he left, who yearned to scan
the prints in chalk-filled white before the dark

encompassed him in yearly, monthly tests
in the Harlesden hospital he wouldn't leave.
The burial ground outside in which he rests
has auguries that only the poorest weave.

Uncertainties the pitiful small pension gave,
the years of penury his wife then faced:
a whole half century brought her to the grave:
with hardinesses her silence interlaced.

'My son will go one further, dress and talk
as one accustomed to the high world's praise,
will make his friends where many pathways fork,
accomplished, literate in new-world ways.'

And so the prospect comes to me, where I
though one most blessed have failed most grievously;
I have no children, nor any reason why
the shining world should long remember me.

Undoubted failure, the mocking schoolyard bell
tolls after me: a fist of dust and I am gone.
What matter I know how Roman authors tell
how unregretted was their passing on.

Or that I've walked where none before have walked,
have sailed the spice lands, and have slept at night
where strange winds muttered, or have talked
with peasant and with governor, and spoke aright.

There is but stillness in the grave, and all
our fevered imprecations trail off short.
Sober morrows await us, and the shadows fall
on rich indulgencies we may have bought.

WAR

My wife away, I watch the films on war.
The wild extravagance, its fearful cost,
the gross stupidity in fighting for
a better world whose claims are always lost

in life's shenanigans, the very things
that make us human: mixed-up good and vile.
Somewhere deep inside, a small bell rings
and, orderly, the ranks march off in single file.

God be thanked, that curse has passed me by;
although I've worked with former army men,
Americans, Germans and the alumni
of martial institutions, happily, and would again.

But war we never talked about, not once,
the horrors that a sane man must confront:
we stare bewildered like the first-form dunce
at Tokyo, Dresden or the eastern front.

Vienna I know about: the student pranks
at Heidelberg, Paris, at Budapest:
the riotous celebration that outranks
anything that's common in our sober west.

But wars, no. The Nazis never. That deep,
enduring stain upon our better selves,
the many millions dead, no, that we keep
well out of childhood's reach on upper shelves.

The pitiless and dreaded state police,
the SS Waffen units, the killing squads,
surveillance everywhere that couldn't cease;
though freedom lived, it boxed against the odds.

I know these matters far too well, how each
too often by careless, unregarded steps goes bad.
No bestial nature is beyond our reach:
always there's Babi Yar or Stalingrad.

We lost an empire, and our course through life
not only antiquated, but plain unfair:
a class with snobbishness not only rife
but celebrated, empire-boasted there.

War that counts on those same characters
and in many ways, they say, brings out the best.
Unflinching loyalty or steadfastness confers
platoon obedience and all the rest.

Most noticeably fanaticism, a praised resolve
so strong that imperfections fuse as one,
that wild dominions of the heart evolve
to blooded encounters planned and done.

Perhaps it's best, belatedly, we do not dwell
on horror's plagues, or would, like thoughtful men,
say life's imposed, goes neither ill nor well
for us barbarians when born again.

PERSIA

And then I went abroad, to desert lands,
the empty wastes of Persia, to towns
like old celebrities, whose office stands
a trifle faded in old golds and browns.

In minarets whose bright blue-turquoise tiles
are set in sun-dried, warm brown, earthy brick,
the silk-road's destiny of pock-marked miles
was ever shining in the far-off politic

of khan and local sheikdom, shifting tribes
that still observe our much-blessed Prophet's word.
In the world of martyrdom, a host of scribes
will set the facts as plainly what occurred.

So, as I say, it wasn't an open choice.
In time you learned to mix both trust and fears
and were forever wandering where an inner voice
whispered, 'Only Midas's, the ass's ears?'

You think your life is like a map unrolled
where you can navigate the path you take?
There is no certitude in buried gold,
of all things changing at the service break.

I knew the local rulers, wars they fought,
at times successfully, more often not,
the towns they ransomed and the fealties bought,
the Friday prayers and tiny plot they got.

In the depths of peace I've stood at Babur's tomb
and with the worshippers have folded hands.
God knows and He disposes: one small room
alone gives shelter from the burning sands

of fired ambition, urge to make a name
that's hence remembered through all ages since.
How brief and vanishing the pomp of fame,
be one the saint or sinner, slave or prince.

Not for me the being seen and preening,
with wife opinion-maker, beauty-queen:
the first in argument, and all-believing
in seeing everyone and being seen.

But that's before I met the other sex,
our helpmate given us in Paradise,
the bombshell prancing round on slender legs
that paragon of virtue, fire and ice.

These things are like the dawn's thin mist
that rise and curdle into various shapes.
The day brings splendours and each spectator kissed
occasions longings but in turn escapes.

So go the great exemplars of our gifts,
our constant scribbling, sifting line from line
what thoughts have lustre, which by ceaseless shifts
may rise, if distantly and inward shine.

It is the empty lands that call you back,
of bare rock mountains, the extended sight
of seared hard surfaces; the shadows track
on through a scattered litany of the dark and bright.

The lands the Prophet rules, the call to prayer,
our God is merciful, and sees our hearts:
regret and circumspection in the thin, dry air,
and the wraiths of empire and the slow hard starts.

Each day a dawn departure, moving out
to what is dimly given us, an empty place
that is our home henceforward, some redoubt
of peace perpetual in a state of grace.

A TIME FOR SOWING

The small memorials set in gilded brass
or clean-cut marble that was much the same.
The Lord had walked among them, and the grass,
that felt His visiting, restored the name.

There was a reverence in the hill-top trees
in knotted apple and inbred churchyard yew:
it seemed the village bent their servile knees
as ill-dressed itinerants for interview.

And so the generations from their birth
to matrimones, offspring, laid to rest,
were but a testament to this raw earth
that far surrounded them, assured and blest.

The fields sloped westwards and each hard wall
was made by mud-caked hands and many days.
A sovereignty, an acceptance, the homely call
of fire at evening's long accustomed ways.

The pomp of evening fell on the narrow fields;
the seasons fled on further, and His holy word
was resurrected as each cottage yields
their harvest home as custom had preferred.

Through the winter lay a counterpane of snow
but not haphazardly but to mark some streets:
a strip of white, another; the small steps show
how such the soul was in these white retreats.

That pulse still pours out from these small white plaques,
a warm blood speaking of a family church: the proud
inheritances are names, the genealogical facts
where an old world order is not parsed out loud.

But mutely, as it were, reflected on,
where social relations are like some hackneyed rhyme,
forever repeated, where a whole sun shone
on a life forever shining in some far-off time.

POST WAR BRITAIN

It was, I think, the dull exclusiveness
of lives inhabiting a well-marked groove,
along which you went forever, more or less,
from which, most snobbishly, you didn't move.

Why would you want to? You were middle class,
ingrained and fixed in the endless rows
of mid-range properties, the well-mown grass,
wisteria, the lupines, the fragrant climbing-rose.

You knew the names of neighbours, could maybe nod
and say 'good morning' to, but that was all.
The rest were foreign lands no free man trod,
but stigmatized much later as suburban sprawl.

No doubt their lives were very much like ours:
restrained, respectable, benignly clothed
in what is done, or not done, insightful hours
of urban etiquette and firmly closed.

Of course much later when I knew the homes
of miners, millionaires, the diplomatic corps,
it was all preposterous, like garden gnomes
set in white-walled streets of Queens or Baltimore.

But what we are, or were, is what we make
of thin existences, of settling down
where no contrivances can overtake
the city chosen or the sea-side town.

Each place made its requirement, the face
it shows to others who do not care that much,
unless you would outsmart them, move to place
your reputation flitting in or out of touch.

In time we boys grew up, got part-time jobs
in shops and factories, the usual motor-bike:
blue collar workers were the full-time slobs,
when the girls we knew at school grew duty-like,

and more estranged from us, their homely name
belonging somewhere else, in film or book
we've read but can't remember now but blame
the incidence of hazard in each road we took.

Local, contented lives: how far they seem
the house and garden, both diminishingly small:
in range after range the slow-climbed summits gleam
and dark the steps thereafter in their soundless fall.

Our empire, our British rule, has long gone out,
and only in seedy colonial retirement homes,
far-scattered and plagued by age and gout
are readers of Agatha Christie and Sherlock Homes.

Readers who knew their distance and accorded place
to respectabilities they had to learn:
things not untarnished, but, at headlong pace,
knew well allegiances did not return.

THE CARRY ON PARADE

Across the years, the rain-soaked, gauche and hopeless
years
of making out a bit though in a worked at part,
the smothered wittering of laughter and the withheld tears
still spoke of truth in the wild infractions of the heart.

Anarchic characters wild-pitched against the odds,
the mother-in-law jokes, seamy sea-side bold,
in the drawer of life they were the chirpy odds and sods
each with oddball destinies that no one told.

Strange deformities we recognised
each day in distant, hard-as-nails, pressed instances
of being up against it, institutionalised
by life's strict conformities in speech and dress.

The middle class who governed all things on this rainy isle,
retired battalions of what, improbably, had won the war.
Louche in old school uniforms they marched on, one long file:
dutiful but, top to bottom, threadbare poor.

Yes, indubitably, certain things were pointedly not done.
Off-colour jokes, a jauntiness out of place
with raunchy bust or hemline hitched-up out of fun,
threatening, the Censor clearly thought, our human race.

And so we must remember them, who brought
a grin or flash of laughter to our patched-up lives:
things that were true, and odd, and in this caught
the fag-end world of burly, hair-net working wives.

Cheap digs, thin meals, the stifled hope the last
audition still might occasion something after all,
that year by year they're older, youth's soft bloom was past;
and so respectability, life's wailing wall.

And so we see them: irreverent, impossible
but not of our life's true kinship quite bereft.
Part of would-be lives and more unconscionable
was a world still thinner they had left.

THE SANA SALUD CLINICA: SANTIAGO

The cheerful heartlessness, the clean-wiped tiles,
pervasive neon lighting that is steely-clean:
in a world of flossed, professional smiles,
your body's health is as it's always been:

intermittent, stuttering on from test to test
in long, clean print-outs that cannot lie.
The various conditions that are here addressed
proceed quite logically, and then you die.

At which the world goes on quite monstrously;
the same in trees, hot sunlight, bright blue sky.
A world indifferent to us, with a blame
attached to a body somewhat mute on why.

There is a density to health, and care,
though well intended, can be incomplete.
Here it is not: the pitilessly revealing air
holds wings of legions and they always meet.

Give up new thoughts of going further on
in practised gifts or placed entitlement:
here love's awakening by the pool is gone,
with hours of those tired words be now content.

No apotheosis or hopes made final good
steadily and implacably the earth turns round.
No joys of placement or of parenthood:
your surroundings will lose their familiar sound.

That far off, further world will never come
for all you go about, equipped and dressed
in things made fully yours, that tidy sum
of life's that's soon to leave you dispossessed.

THE BOAT RACE

We went because we always went, to catch
a glimpse of higher beings stretched at oars
that seemed too hard for them: an awkward match
that bowed receptively to social laws.

In time an antiquated necessity, a stunt
that spelt out plainly who our betters were.
The TV programmes showed a water-front
with crowds dissolving into noisy blur.

But that was sixty years ago; those few friends
lie scattered, aged across the uneven earth.
And if they think of life, and how it ends,
they'll see a tired and lapsing sense of worth.

A strength in family, a civic pride
in institutions, what the papers say.
Though public figures no doubt erred and lied
when other governments had need to pay.

But clean of speech, where each one strove
to be upstanding of our island race,
ensuring individual effort wove
their long insignia into pride of place.

But that was lifetimes past, and long before
the loss of territories, or immigration laws
had turned our ancient rights to almost war:
all crimes so rooted in colonial wars.

That yesterday, which I remember now
as wind-patched figures in the accusatory glass:
not getting on so much as learning how
to make due deference to wealth and class.

Where are they now? The internet portrays
a rash of tacky buildings, dirty streets,
of shop-fronts boarded up, the concrete greys
beyond graffiti and the cheaper eats.

There is no grace in living now, nor was
perhaps in those times lost a lifetime back.
Things simply stood as were, and not 'because
of manners the lower orders might attack'.

Compared to them, as parents often said,
we had much cause for gratitude, though none
would guess what inequalities had bred
in class derivatives they counted on.

A BRIGHT NEW BRITAIN

Our friends, our home and family, our forced
entitlement to lives we didn't like,
conscripted environments of work and play,
were in the essences we answered to.

Our deepest feelings overborn, our lives
more quietly mortgaged to an unseen power
we had no hold on, never met, except
in strange, harsh sentences that made no sense.

The enemy was everywhere, in things
we read and took for granted: no, not so.
The thought police controlled the internet,
and truthful narratives were strictly banned.

Incipient terrorists they called them, those
who had the jumped-up nerve to question men
who were the government, where every word
required not deference but action now.

Our leaders grew uneasy, moved their troops
by night, positions censored, had to be.
A whole new slew of laws was handed down,
when grim-faced grew the new judiciary.

There were rumours then of gathering wars
in the far-off latitudes, whole divisions lost
to cold and hunger, to the endless snow,
that every principle must come at cost.

Who knew the facts or otherwise? But true
that those so fated disappeared. No trace
remained. Electoral rolls were digitized,
and claimed performances brought up to date.

Relax, make good of God's new shining earth,
which all right-thinking men must soon enjoy.
Abundantly, it is the state's own cradle, birth
to death, the state will measure and employ.

Due diligence was needed. It applied to all.
Each trait was noted as a merit earned.
The life before was dead, beyond recall
the dangerous world of would-be privacy.

Which made the New World easier. They bred
as time required them to, and, smiling, lied
on tax returns. The truly certified
retired at once and took no curtain calls.

REMORSE

Eight trillion dollars these Israeli wars have cost,
with millions killed or mutilated, suffering,
and yet for all the untold misery they bring
there comes but vague opprobrium at issues lost.

Thus, in the morning sometimes, only half awake,
but going over things I have to do that day,
such wild astonishments have seized me that I stay
bewildered at the views my online sources take.

And worse, it's not success of empires or of truth
that we demolish, make satires of, or flat traduce,
but more the purgatory of own short selves, abuse
that batters down the spring-time of our wished-for youth.

To be more frank, it is the pettiness of men,
unhindered glee with which they take each other down;
election foolishness become the talk of town,
the cheap points made that win, and will again.

And overtopping all is pride, the unchecked pride
that kept us marching proudly on but never back.
Each lie or jealousy along that spiteful track
brings just that harm to others we denied.

The Bible in its turn has much to say on sin.
Great men, Carlyle declared, were always bad.
If the short, hard lives of Hobbes are not that virtue-clad,
let's praise the gross stupidities we gloried in.

CHURCH MUSIC

I think of him more often now, though not
with any consciousness of aftercare.
His seriousness in life I've also got
but not the vocal literacy he couldn't share.

We must respect the explorations made
by others though we like cheap operas best.
Puccini for Gluck is not an equal trade
but church and organ music I detest.

Otherwise, his tastes are mine, or maybe he,
if inadvertently, has passed some preference on.
Who knows? In both there's self-sufficiency,
an urge to be ourselves that's never gone.

But not, alas, a gift for rank or wealth,
the best practitioner in all we do.
No: it was as if his very health
stayed with the fair and honest, things still true.

I do not have so scrupulous a sense
of life's degeneracy, of moral depths,
that we must navigate for far days hence:
in me there's more of independent steps.

For which, of course, I've paid. He never would
have thrown away that staid accountancy.
Throughout the years he gained a livelihood
hard-won by penny-counting common-sense.

So for the rest, I frankly do not know.
On love's sweet urgency he never spoke;
no thoughts on how life's raptures flow;
to life's immediacy he never woke.

Nothing but decencies, though I could hear
a lost soul beating in its inwrought cell.
Or perhaps I didn't. It was all too clear
that what he'd gained of life he wouldn't tell.

The end was sudden. Came in from a walk,
surveyed his life, sat down, and was promptly gone.
No illnesses to take the measure of, or baulk
at passage of his soul to some place on.

So, as I say: silence, mysteries.
I doubt my mother knew the man she wed.
It's only reservations, absences that says
you cannot share the heartaches life has bred.

BOOKS

I do not like to read how characters
are cast so casually in the stone-rimmed earth,
nor read 'the end' that's set out plain
as graves look desolate beneath the rain.
'For all eternity': the phrase confers
an end to all those traipsing steps from birth.

In fact I often close the book before, profess
the thing unneeded, as is hurt and blame.
But still the word spills inward. Every blow
weakens if not obliterates our faith below:
the seasons conjurations and their happiness
expunged as brutally as altar flame.

And then a cold, hard horror grasps the heart
and all my brave achievements are as naught.
Conceived in idleness, or worse, ill-meant,
a still small voice I hear. Remorse. Repent.
Grief in idleness is then my part.
and all my battles there are left unfought.

Perplexed, stopped short, I know not what to say.
That bright and breathing azures round are lost.
How full it was with laughter, how bright it was,
but gone in its entreaties too because. . .
Because? Who knows, except that flowering May
with all its trappings comes to searing frost.

That death is all around us, still on cue,
nor are our lives consistent with its power,
observant of its wishes, one day hence
for all our frequent prayers and penitence,
we shall be called, and nothing we can do
can mute or mitigate that final hour.

Our rich pursuits and hobbies are as toys,
the names we memorized will not be called.
We are as all men are, at heart afraid,
that great adventure we have overstayed.
The world's great fanfares are as noise;
bereft everything, we stand appalled.

Books are good companions for the while
we make the journey into pilgrimage.
But friends are friends in name at best, who learn
how brief this bright world is, and turn
to other narratives, in single file
allow those voices hold us to that final page.

REMEMBRANCE

In the morning, early, half awake,
not always, certainly, but oftentimes,
there comes so thick a press of petty crimes,
dragged down by every crass, unforced mistake.

Whence comes this schadenfreude, this delight
in other's hopelessness and rancid pain,
of all their open virtues these remain,
rewards of hurtfulness and needless spite.

This is the world. Be not so over-wise
that you are free of blame or so escape:
foul misfortunes come in every shape,
and leery promises in every guise.

But most of all it is the press of lies,
our supposition that they do not count.
That we are special here, and no amount
of argument will prove it otherwise.

But more than that the daily pettiness,
the brisk one-upmanship, the subtle jibes,
we're camped with strangers, and on stranger's tribes
we are commensurate, with that and idleness.

Dear God: how do we walk with self,
with such assurance and a winning smile?
How do we go that extra, sinning mile:
that rash assurance rests on doubtful wealth.

There is no limit, bound or natural ban,
how far and happily our folly roves;
like an old man walking out in young man's clothes
we overflow the natural will of man.

So there we are. We learn to hurry on,
or make a point of what we cannot hide,
at last retirement comes, but still with pride
we list inanities at which we shone.

I WAS A YOUNG MAN THEN

Two withered posies and an old maid's tale,
the new life forward that was rich and still:
the day is fragrant, full and does not fail
to flood the apple flowers, the farm and hill.

It is a world away, though all these stones
remember the laughter, and the forward hearts.
Old age is weariness and withheld groans:
here is the path of sorrow; it departs

for self-concern, self-hurt, the put aside:
how brief is beauty and how fierce the pain,
recriminations and the undone pride,
the affections inward turn, and hurt and stain.

How long ago is that: the evening light
gathers on the steeple, the green and cricket ground:
here is the immemorial, nor fresh to sight
is the church-yard crosses and each sleeping mound

of figures uncountable but with hopes like yours,
warm to the morning and the middling light:
defeat and sorrow are the age-old saws:
the dawn is abundant with sudden golden light

When all that is past is but a word away
the short, fierce embrace and a fervent kiss:
a life of regrets and foreboding fills the day,
but it was never unchallenged nor constant bliss.

No, life was hard and cornered, an animal
that must test its thin steps down a trap-lain path.
Sure, each family was simple and cordial,
but clouds above were filled with holy wrath.

What was said is then as always said:
too much, too candid and not blunt enough:
a life torn in two that has inward bled
is redolent with fears and with trivial stuff.

How ephemeral are our lives. The spring comes on
prolix and bountiful, the tall chestnut flowers
stain the air with crimson and then are gone
immediately with the tumult of passing showers.

We can only tell what we've been told,
again and again as the evening's pealing bell.
I was a young man then, and now I'm old
with the gossips, graveyard, and the wishing well.

SILENTLY

The visiting is someone I have never known.
So silently she comes at night it seems
some breath of fevered imagination blown
about the silences that make our dreams.

She never speaks or, at least, is never heard,
but still is living presence, one that lends
an aching actuality preferred
to full day's tenderness our life attends.

Indeed remembers all our long lives through,
beyond what wives or lovers may have said.
Unreal, of course, but also elemental, true,
beyond whatever we may have thought or read.

Is that our soulmate, one that hopes and waits
on autumn evenings or the brash spring day?
Our alter ego, as it were, that alternates
between one being close to us and far away?

That heart's companion, nonetheless, the one
we always hoped for, doubtless ever will
beyond our present happiness, till world be done,
that, wholly self-enclosing, glimmers still

in days we know too well will never come
assuredly in this hard world that is our home:
where pain, reversal and sorrow make its sum
before our companionship with the dull poor loam.

That one who knows and smiles at all our faults,
who lets our wild imaginations bloom.
What did you think, that like the opening waltz,
there would be only music in the smiling room?

This life is a sorry journey, the thoughtless things,
the sheer idiocy of our actions, the spiteful thoughts,
but in it all, yet, a small bird sings
and we draw closer, somehow, to those far-off courts.

The fellowship we've always wanted, wandering far
from sense and propriety, that ever lingering smile
that hangs in glittering splendour, the evening star
above us and beyond us in our homeward mile.

DEAR AUTHORS

With this I bid a long farewell to walls of books
my length of years inform me I'll not read again.
Dear, long-departed friends, whose dates and looks
I do not know but still regard as honest men.

Brief, principled and skilled, whose every word
was weighed and pondered on, whose plain thoughts led
to things that mattered or had so occurred,
the truths informative and needed said.

And may I add that as we children learn
from how and what our good parents led
to these such pages I would often turn
when importuning filled my vacant head.

Style is personality, a character in words
when all excrescences are stripped away.
Our homes have baubles like the bowerbirds:
our lives should stick to what plain issues say.

They now are mostly dead, have long been so,
willingly or unwillingly, with that great breath
stirs all who like me here are poised to go
on that last adventure we must call our death.

I do not ask for promises or late respect
my own quaint frailties are all too clear:
but only that the emptying silences reflect
the plain-clad honesty of those once passing near.

NOCTURNE

The air absorbs the buildings, and, beyond,
the sky looks blue but with a pinkish tint.
The clouds, motionless, hang in pastel blonde,
and from the hillside suburbs, specks of windows glint.

So ends a rich and peaceful, hot spring day.
The cars pass noiselessly, their tail-lights roll
out threads of glistening ribbons, where foldings stay
a distant stacked-up concertinaed whole.

Even the dogs look sleepy, padding past
with not a wary but more just woken air
of breathing elsewhere, or as extras cast
into another life and thus not fully there.

Dreaming pubescent girls, their long legs bare
parade themselves as though some rendezvous
was theirs to have, or should be; loosened hair
all ways flowing out, as stage-struck starlets do.

All is slow release; the hastening spring
indoctrinates the air with summer's scent.
Everyone has prospects, and all futures bring
the long-announced but vivid, bright event.

And for the old there comes contentment, a past
without recriminations, the far shores fade
into an entry offering rest at last:
where all our debts and honours are repaid.

And which, in retrospect, seems hardly strange:
we are as once proposed, each childhood trait
magnified by mishap and by sudden change:
the role from which we cannot abdicate.

The things we did and would not do again,
the acts of cowardice and common spite:
in hurtful secrecy we are but men
and stand as so in darkly gleaming light.

I'm not religious, and when I soon must go
they'll be no anthems or great crowds of friends:
life has been a pastime and few will know
what purposes this final passing ends.

But more, I hope, as this spring evening was,
a warm contentment, with more things to do:
the world won't wait for ever or because:
so is the thought annexed we onetime knew.

CEMETERIO DE LOS POBRES

They had their jobs, the cause and families:
a life well buttoned down, at least in check:
today the flowering jacaranda trees
across the cemetery look trimmed to spec.

Each livelihood has contours of its own
we do not grasp until we're nine-tenths gone,
and consequences that are quietly sown
gives even less in turn to act upon.

So in the strikes, the lockouts, new decrees
they found themselves abominated, cursed
by masses whom they sought to please:
damned: indubitably among the worst.

They wanted salaries enshrined by law,
dispute procedures, well-paid holiday.
Provisions none today need argue for
but then incendiary, as was severance pay.

Beware of truth and each plain good we seek,
for justice always comes, but very late.
Our course of life is fitted round the facts,
beside the self-love, lies, and grasping fate.

But it was odd, surely, well-intentioned folk,
unchanged from how their folk remembered them
should be degenerates of which the papers spoke,
those treacherous communists that all condemn.

That business venture that was most unwise,
the girl that all spoke ill of, whom we wed:
the self-promotion and the webs of lies
that brought no happiness but grief instead.

No, it all goes past us, and we do not hear
the wind bent double and the howling wave:
beware the springtime, walking all too near
the promises that shine beyond the grave.

SANTIAGO FUNERAL

Irene's friends are here, the tough grey heads
have packed the seats and spill into the aisle.
So many of them, the syntax threads
itself to proper purposes and personal style.

True: all the women here look past their best
but kept by routines they have learned off pat.
In each a gracious togetherness, a blest
by circumstances, smiling Cheshire cat.

Each gesture, pause in jewelled hand or glance,
evokes the fragrances of summers past,
the boating rides and dances, held-to chance
of peace perpetual that is called our last.

It is the present world they fear, the loss
of title, position and their rightful place.
Being the first of many is a fearful cross
to carry if not fortified by His true grace.

Prayers and responses, the usual thing
these days of cuts and new world circumstance.
A flute and violin, a female voice to sing
the hymns: how thin it seems, as if by chance

the sounds they heard throughout their youth,
their swelling bodies and the yearning praise
were in those days false, a strident truth
it's not now politic to note or raise.

And so it ends: a little short but dignified,
as some new other place is neatly filed.
Both doors are opened and a little blurry-eyed,
we follow others out, not reconciled

to frequent hardships in the life down here,
its hurtful pains and errors, repeated fall;
so comes a distant music on the ear:
perhaps, recalcitrant, but after all.

WORK IN PROGRESS

What's forged of childhood's chains we don't forget,
although later consciousness be otherwise,
where still the slow unwind of years advise
of other mechanisms working yet.

Some skill in argument we always had,
some gift for illustration, careful way
we found the new-compelling words to say
that made recipients surprised and glad.

Small things instinctive to us, what would be
some part and earnest of our working lives,
innate to resolution, which survives
the stratagems we'd call complacency.

And more than that: the hopes our thought enrols
in piles of manuscripts and book-packed shelves,
asseverations of adventurous selves
as rapt fraternities of kindred souls.

The last substratum as it were, as walls
of homesteads ever ventured to disclose:
the briar stock beneath the branching rose,
the music echoing in storied halls.

As though in all of us an inner ghost
picked out our purposes, not conscious choice
as rumours on the wind, a half-heard voice
that, still repeating, said what counted most.

Fieldwork

Each day is challenging, the muscles ache
and breath comes shorter, the climb more steep:
and yet, there's no alternative: we keep
on past the stops our weariness would take.

It's always observations, that switchback route
of thought and discipline that must display
the whole succession which, for one short day,
are truths for which there's never substitute.

The mapping slips record what rocks have said
each annotating there the obvious facts.
Each note is relevant, and each enacts
the love of each in each as a newly wed

will look upon a world that's newly hers,
unwound for both more fully every day:
beyond is just imagining where they
must play the role of constant amateurs.

And hope, above all fully make that hope
the star at sunset that we never find
for all the years of wandering, as, out of mind
and staggering, we lurch from rope to rope.

But still we carry on, to the foremost height
as some-such seam or outcrop falls away:
when shifts of scene or altitudes display
an inner sense of what is mapped aright.

The Natural World

Who knows what thoughtless days will bring, how long
the heart perform unthinkingly? The bind
of form with well-trained muscles has to find
us, mind- and body- dependable and strong?

Why fulminate on life's most natural course,
that fresh green leaves are stripped by autumn's gale?
The radiance of spring must sometime fail;
to each and everything comes settling force.

That oddly vexed and haunted enterprise,
the cold departures and that daily press
of hope and hopelessness, that readiness
to be constructive and not so otherwise.

We see the small communities they also saw,
the shops, wet streets, the new-built council towers,
some street or local car-park also ours
as are the distant hopes most striven for.

To build a home and marriage, family
that may remember us when we are gone,
to make that quiet street we settle on
a place of pilgrimage, a guarantee

that we the rootless ones, who in this place
have no more purpose than the spring-time flood
brings down its swollen mass of trees and mud,
which has itself a needful, awkward grace.

To Be Alive

To be alive and take the sunlight in,
to smell of seasons and the sweet-dewed air:
the world is infinite and everywhere
some deep integrity is surely writ within.

It's needed work, and that alone, deserves
our confidence: objectives still exist.
Kouchke Mine is on the Ediacaran list
and proven Kalimantan's coal reserves.

That on these tried procedures roads are built,
raw schools and offices: the distant mine
turns city's life-blood, as will water wine,
and false accounting brings much more than guilt.

We stand upon a landscape of the past,
in rocks encompassing vast coral reefs
or shallow inlets, deeps: it is those beliefs
that proven methods give the true that last.

Which so remain and will remember us:
the wind-thinned prospects in the bull-dust flats
of rusted mainframe and the faded stats,
though school be but a patched up minibus?

Disastrous incidents and threadbare lives,
disease and hardship: we have seen all these.
The spinifex and stunted eucalyptus trees,
the roaring emptiness where nothing thrives.

There Remains

We work as others work, by certain rules.
To err is human, certainly, but not
to err by idiocy that time begot:
where ignorance will make us haunted fools.

So these remain when all the rest is gone.
The books and papers that we still reread.
The gifts for self-projection intercede
and we are walking in that place anon:

a land of crag and crumbling river cliffs
where the torrent washes the pebbles clean:
yet here are first-class rubies in between
the schists and marbles born of Burma's gifts.

Or Kalimantan's frieze of trees and mist,
where ancient diatremes have brought up gold:
along the creeks the lazy currents fold
where fish and mine prospection coexist.

And then eternities of bull-dust red
that cover rocks. Beneath a cobalt sky
odd groups of gum-tree groves and wattles lie:
the heat's unending and our feet as lead.

Beneath this ancient one-time greenstone ground
are pods of gold and copper, small but rich;
as earth more generally has nuggets, which,
occasionally at least are conscience-bound.

From Day to Day

Dreams but not delusions: prospection asks
for so much photo-mapping, chip or trench,

plus trust that assay values never quench
the streak of hope beneath the muddled tasks.

Or north of Kabul you will pitch your tent;
among the forested Sumatran heights;
embrace Australia with its moonlit nights;
feel how little Saudi's evening suns relent.

Between the claim and final assay sheet:
reserves computed, neatly written up,
the end of mission is a final cup
of trails abandoned under midday heat.

You'll supplement the Survey notes, will weigh
their observations carefully. Their aim
is facts and clarity, a modest claim
that's salutary and hardly workaday

in this wide world of politics and lies,
of towering falsehoods and of rush to war.
What is it you thought you glimpsed or saw
in wise obedience in fuller guise?

Of men who go about their work from day
to day, mild-mannered men, reserved of speech,
who look on backward from that shimmering reach
of causes deepened more along the way.

Retirement

The thing we are when work is gone, the fame,
the money, the all-too conscious picture show:
what will we leave when all the flash-bulbs go:
an indefinable, small, personal name

that speaks for truth. We gaze at faces gone
to weight, retirement and to florid age:
so what remains when after death's slow rage
the body peters slowly out or blindly on.

We filled our childhood scrapbook with, that breath
of woodlands or the saturated earth
long after rain has greened the summer's turf,
as things more fundamental: life and death.

Those great imponderables that, sat up late,
we'd surely grasp and master, find the source
of life-enriching happiness, completing force
that simple honesties conciliate.

How far that hope is now, beyond the years
that make up this small circuit of our thought.
Journals proliferate, and out of court
become the rank pronouncements of our peers.

That workplace grows more distant every year
and half a lifetime pass until we take our place:
the trudge is arduous, endless, leaves no trace
upon that ever-growing, distant fear

Redeployment

that ends the brilliant hurdy-gurdy show
we fabricate to make our scattered lives
have consequence and meaning: still there thrives
a fundamental in the things we know.

That even map-less in some jungle stream,
in towering gulfs or winding river creeks
in desert heats or craggy ice-bound peaks,
we would survive and, as a team,

would skirt about and sample, fast assess
the likelihood of prospects close to hand;
that costs of everything be carefully planned,
those checks on spreadsheet must address.

Across the world, from ancient Asian hills,
Australia's threads of gold that interlink
in greenstone belts and in the specks of zinc,
or platinum thickening up in mafic sills.

How hard the work is, how the years go by
in mapping, trenching, repeated assay work.
These are the double-checks we cannot shirk,
the simple facts we cannot falsify.

From work that's badly done there always bleeds
uncertainties within the assumptions made;
whole towns and cities in the head-frame's shade
depend on what that long investment needs.

On Reflection

And more to understanding: in the air
we'll read the colour coding, rock types, map,
the great successions folding out to nappe:
the crustal shortening the Alpine mountains bear

as process more: the earth is never still,
but all a tremor: from the molten core
to crust the vast upwelling currents pour
on imperturbably, an iron will

that we who read the thin-laid layers of time
will find dimensions through their fossil wealth
see sediments deformed by heat and stealth:
an everywhere and slow, remorseless mime

beyond this world of subterfuge and lies,
the wrapped-in propaganda national powers
exert on journalists, a small truth flowers:
some things are steadfast, though to other eyes.

Our lives and anecdotes are never gone
without an entry somewhere, some poor soul,
at office party, recollection, watering hole,
is for a moment still a thinking on.

Small lives in plain vanilla sheets, quiet folk
who leave no dynasty or house behind,
few friends, perhaps, but of one mind
regarding honesty, of which they spoke.

High Chalk Hills

In layered quiet accumulates the silt,
as tiny shells encompass high Chalk hills:
the tropic sea of empty whiteness fills
with tiny coccoliths of which they're built.

A vast substratum as it were, a base
of time itself as will the fossils spell
out echinoderm, shark tooth, patterned shell
as still inheritance in time and place

of childhood rambles, flowers and butterflies,
of winds through harebells, and the soft warm scent:
an earth and dried-out grass which often lent
a breathy ambiance to evening skies.

And like the memories that happy childhoods spend
in wealth of blue and picture post-card scenes:
familiar to us as our old scuffed jeans
that stay companionable until the end.

We force our dispositions into work
across the continents, in far-off lands,
where something in us dimly understands
that in those preferences our futures lurk.

Immutably the unaccounted days
review the semblances that we have lost:
what umpteen roads and pathways we have crossed
in that continuum that was our ways.

AT LAST

We go at last into that evening light
of prospects drawing to their steady close,
a phosphorescing stillness steadies sight
as lingering perfume will the damask rose.

The secrets we have whispered, intemperate hopes
we take to earth unspoken of, the daily loss
in love worked out of now but barren stopes:
the world we carry is a heavy cross.

And those we loved now taken from our sight,
appearing only in an inward view.
Old friends that made our daily footfall light
are gone from us, and all our follow through

is but a long commemoration: these
we knew: the air of dawn on distant hills,
the wind's commotion in the standing trees,
the light's soft radiance as it slowly fills

the cities, the peoples and the crowded wharfs
where continually their agents reform and pay.
What is lost is regathered and slowly dwarfs
the burst of sunlight in returning day.

We are as now we shall not further be,
nor daisies speckled in the uncut grass:
a breath unfeifs eternity and we
to that long radiance must yield and pass.

ONE DEAR SPOT

Bound indelibly to one dear spot
to which experiences at length pertain:
these are our faculties, that one small plot
where trees and flowers in season will remain.

A constant heart of England, that hard core
of rocks exposed in cliff-falls further west,
that storm-tormented, indurated, rocky shore
that pounds the Atlantic billows with a thunderous zest.

But far inland from any storms like these,
or only rains that fall delinquent on the earth,
a world of sunlight and of summer breeze,
but still tenacious, with a deepened worth

that is our patrimony, parent's blood
that give our livelihoods their sense of worth,
where all is possible; no folded bud
can hesitate to open on the fathering earth.

The FA Cup and our annual Wimbledon,
the tithes of industry and past manorial rolls,
were always attributes and never gone
from what's perpetual in our common souls.

Where each of us will find the time to join
the comradeship of those both wise and strong,
where all our stories stay in local coin
like bells that far-off ring for evensong.