



The Tudors

colin john holcombe

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And
Other Poems

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CONTENTS

The Tudors	1
Introduction	
Henry VII	
Henry VIII	
Edward VI	
Mary I	
Elizabeth I	
The Sinking of the Indianapolis	9
The Road to Leningrad	11
Still Lifes	19
Daybreak	
Midday	
Afternoon	
Rain	
Cafes	
Childhood Bodies	
Patagonia	
Tuscany	

THE TUDORS

Introduction

Abrupt and bitter trepidations of the rain
on battlements and limpid moats, the autumnal smoke
that pushed on slowly through the leaves, the bright red stain
that paints the cold cathedrals where our Saviour spoke.

A brittle coinage kept their glittering kings and queens
high-ruffed in festivals and plain unsanctioned laws:
England of heather steeps and woods and village greens,
with dynasties of hurtful and ill-buried wars.

Insolent is the rich magnificence, but still the smells
of plague-pits press on banners of high feudal names.
The monkish orders flare about communal wells,
dark-hooded is the unburned halo of the candle flames.

White-cuirassed, they stride about: the cold strikes up
from these hard lozenges of purpose and of battles lost
across the glittering seas to Saracens. None sup
with angels now, or speak the tongues of Pentecost.

After the Sabbath of their days, with confessions shed,
the poor enter the wheat-ears of the whispering dead,
all around are graveyards enumerating the incremental loss
as, distractedly at night, the large winds blunder across.

Henry VII

What is won by conquest must be countersigned in blood,
with imbricates of bone, of metal, and, from envious men,
beneath the rich fabric of chivalry, there is only mud
sanctifying the cold fields, stiff liveries ploughed in again.

Such is the inveterate fury that is never tamed, but sinks
into the fabric of their densely woven lives.

thin-lipped portraits, spandrels: whose depiction links
with sturdy governance in which no honour thrives.

So I have furthered an alliance with the white queen, thrust
myself into her private acquaintance, not with reverence, not
even with the self-importance of busy lust,
but with due diligence and gloom that the autumn days have got.

In gasps, hard ligaments, of one who yields her splendour
up from meek importuning with small breasts to one
who sprawls into her togetherness, but will concur,
as a knight concludes his tournament, with the favour won.

How many pieces of the thin, matted gold must I make?
Or of lapidary silver? What they drag from fields and rivers
is always of my patrimony, must at times awake
the men of a squint-eyed nature, who are not ready givers.

Henry VIII

The hours have no real recollection of themselves, but lapse
insistent as the rain falling into the sad grass
or onto the defencelessness of leaves generous
with evening's gloss, a cloth of gold held over us.

And incomparable the bodies with their Sunday face
swathed in close but scrupulous adorations of fine lace,
an intimate petit point about the murmurous sects
and the fine breeding of jewels hung on sparkling necks.

Which in the cloth that's opposite we loosely sense
the open trumpery of unruffled impertinence,
the inbred rhythms of the violent limbs as were
now settled in warmth as to only softly stir.

Pretty were the petticoats and plumped up breasts, each
being snugly for itself and for local thoughts:

all had the succulent yielding of the sectioned peach,
but were self-conspiring, bred for the southern courts.

How righteous is the black-laced deciphering on rainy days,
in rich, sonorous attachments when the church bells blaze
out in incendiary hosannas, a hoarse lamenting wind
sowing an incontinence of shadows where all have sinned.

Edward VI

It was a sickly boy who held with feeble hands
the patronage of office and the star-ribbed fates,
and from whose garnet-ringed and heavy orb expands
the forfeiture of abbey holdings and of rich estates.

He had a name complicit with these new-born realms,
as though the Holy Family were held in princely wraps.
The rich embroidery about him hardly overwhelms:
from needed, sane longevity hung a large perhaps.

The teeth of fine enamel in the slender jaw,
and bright the blood that pumps through pink capillaries.
In these the brutal attendances on fate there will be more
of cedar darkness that the thin-stretched sunset sees.

A thick-wooded and peaceful country with its long-maturing rows
of crops and apple orchards, hay-fields and of sheep,
the fleur de lys is woven with the English rose:
it is a mesh of fold- and cloud-recaptured centuries deep.

Yet the tree is barren: the much blessed fruitage falls
into the blunt repudiation of the soft-spread grass:
across the land the Counter-Reformation calls
on secular authorities to ponder on, rise and pass.

All are taxed here, and must be, a state
is a living entity, a self-perpetuating whole:
if all men wait upon the gilded notions of the great,
their justice being but outward prompting of the soul.

Mary

Only a land worshiping in its old communal faith,
of practiced purposes is acceptable to God.
What is this world of sense but some passing wraith,
always with an eternity of suffering His way is shod.

Believe me. At my orders I lie awake at night and feel
the torturer's brute relish for the sweating skin.
Instinctively I feel the relish of the notched steel,
the ferocious hosannas of blood as the blades go in.

Give thanks you do not suffer the thick-plucked scorch of flames,
the gridiron of the ribs burning and about the hair:
true faith is not the blaze of sorcery in new-stamped names
but an obedience to the lamenting and all-silent air.

God does not ask that we cease our carefree, happy ways,
not glory in the sunlight, not worship in piety.
All who love the jewels in fine fabrics must give Him praise:
for magnificence in riches and mercy there is none but He.

So we hear the hiss of cassock and the fragrant humilities,
the scholarly doctrines of incense, which, condensing, is
giving to the light falling from the oratory windows a faint
odour of hand-picked chastity and pursed restraint.

Here the silence is epistolary as the long-gnawed stone
continues through hallways of learning, which is by faith alone.
Christ's soft blood is in the firmament but in embryo,
as it were, in simple words obedient children know.

Elizabeth

Half measures are my policy, dissimulation
in a weak country, placed by God in a gilded sea
of unbounded intrigues and of Papal injunctions: a nation
with blustery mariners, loud in the fabric of being free.

And thus always beset by adulterous passions, by plots
not divulged by time's informer or the torturer's tong,
a citizenry of brawny men reduced to drunken sots:
the errors of commission or omission are a yard long.

Gloriana as the virgin but, alas, pock-marked, queen
who keeps her ministers about her in a taffeta state:
star-chambered politics where much is as it's always been,
the prerogative of nobles, wealth, the newly-strutting great.

There are days ringing with the past, with soaring clouds
close attendant, as over the cold cathedral cities the tall shrouds
merge into the spectral dissonance of traffic, the great mass
moving, drowsy at midday, but with the sharp hiss of glass.

And more so over the evenings in some Italianate
Renaissance city, where will come the dark bells, late
in their consolatory benediction, save for which we
are sinfulness of litany where Grace should be.

Yet still there is the inexplicable innocence of happiness, the unfolding naturalness to sense in the unlined fabric of the clothes, which breathe around their walking skeleton or shape they weave.

THE SINKING OF THE INDIANAPOLIS

A day of rest, of sun-washed loafing through the swell,
some played at cards, read books or wrote their letters home;
over the endless glittering of black Pacific waves
the sun spilled its liquid, red obituaries, and sank.

At just past midnight came the first attack, torpedoes
striking the two refuelling tanks. A second burst
the ship apart in iridescent metal, jagged flames,
when all those surviving took a header off the decks.

Hundreds in the glittering oily water thrashed
about amongst the debris and the coils of flames.
The fuel clung greedily and countless limbs and heads
diving further down, to cooler depths, were drowned.

The scene at dawn was pitiless, and showed dark groups
of sailors clung to life-rafts, masses of water-treading men,
alive but delirious and consumed by thirst,
while close around circled the dorsal packs of sharks.

It was the deep-bunkered explosions and the desperation that brought these quivering, blank-eyed creatures to the scene. Over the vastness of water they came, their snouts hungering down the blood trails that unzipped their teeth.

Men tell of swirls, of sudden gasps, of comrades gone on the instant, noiselessly, the blood in frothed lumps obliterated by the clean salt water rinsing mouth, and their legs beneath them bare, splayed out in fear.

Hours and hours into days on days pass: they fall to frenzies of salt poisonings, and to fierce hallucinations, two thirds have vanished when planes and boats arrive and, for those few surviving, fate has just begun.

Long decades afterwards they will taste the salt, and find their muscles bunched and hard as serrated teeth, envenomed with danger rise the great depths below, an eviscerating blue-filled aperture that fills their thought.

THE ROAD TO LENINGRAD

One

The whole town to see us off: long lines of people cheering till we sense that each of us is buoyed up with immense good will. Our fatherlands we leave, our lives set out and neat: our mission is a story book, a balanced credit sheet.

The equipment is as new, with no hint of storms ahead in dark-oiled armaments and brisk, stiff uniforms. All across the distances our lifting paths confer: the tanks press onward with a deep metallic purr.

Moreover, we are happy, and round us jubilation too; we tell each other jokes and stories as good soldiers do. Down mile on mile of roads, leafed-in avenues: unremarkable the long commissions which we didn't choose.

We sleep out in the open, beneath the guns or where the engines hummed their breath out into warm June air. The countryside is peaceful, forgiving, and, in that trust, the men lie scattered in the fragrant wholeness of the just.

Then, washed, shaved and dressed in ready comradeship, indifferent to the day's indignities, and in the grip of the contemporary, the present all-compelling, we take up the radioed orders that are history on the make.

Two

From four to dusk we're marching, as the hard days do,
past empty settlements, torching the odd one or few
as punishment for ambush, or because we're bored;
the tanks are rolling onward on their own accord.

The road goes thin and twisting into swathes of heat,
past fields at intervals, where stands the ripening wheat
or kale in quiet beneficence, not asking why
in this vast dome round us there is only the sky.

With mosquitoes where there's water, then clouds of flies
that peel off like the thin unravelling skin that lies
so loosely on the steppe-lands here, an evening smell
of earth and rotting humus we've come to know so well.

Monotonous, a chain of interlocking links,
the days pound out, identical. Each soldier thinks
of drinks and bar girls in that distant Leningrad,
or of the long Sunday lie-ins in the life he had.

Some towns have people still. The women greet
us with a self-possessing air: each washed and neat.
The loafing, bearded oldsters give a brainless grin;
we smile, but no participant is ever taken in.

Three

With this we leave the Baltic lands behind and come to Soviet fields that seem indifferent to us, cold and glum. The road now dwindles into loose gravellings: everywhere a sense of hurtful, long-stewed malice fills the air.

Speed, aggression and the aircraft overhead supports our mission, though it's not for long. Instead a tank-trap bars the way; how threatening it grew until a hard bout of fighting boldly pushed us through.

The Soviets creep up stealthily, slow or fast, or they play dead and wait till our tanks roll past. But something there is always: flak from the Red air-force, or mines, ever waiting, and more artillery, of course.

A yellow tinge to fields. The first leaves fall. We think of wives and sweethearts, homesteads left behind: the thought contrives to keep us pushing ever onward to the end, whatever the Reds may do, or orders Berlin send.

September brings us colder nights. Puddles freeze. Bare metal burns the skin, each waking morning sees the frost on rifles, gun parts: the exposures grow an all-surrounding furriness that speaks of snow.

Four

A slow attrition, but effective; we lose good men,
and never know their planning of a place or when.
For days on end we hardly ever see our foe:
it is a cowardly and shameful way to go.

Ahead grows impossible, and, where were roads before,
we now have quagmires like a suppurating sore.
Nothing moves, but our men push on to the taut brink
of all possessing: then its flounder, stop, and sink.

We wait it out until the ground gets frozen hard
again, but even the progress now is battle-scarred.
We judder on but hear expiring engines clank,
eviscerating those who drive each truck and tank.

And worse, destructive: more and more break down:
the temperatures are plummeting: the snowed-on ground
consolidates; the roads are polished glass, and worse:
we gain no traction on them, forward or reverse.

With a loud, hard clatter, the last break down: the group
(we cannot call it Panzer) is now a wearied troupe
of entertainers programmed to the weather's will:
we do our sums, prevaricate, but walk on slowly still.

Five

Through gloves our hands can feel the icy winds that snap
at finger joints, or chill the netted veins that trap
our bodies into some now muscle-aching thing
though to our buttoned jackets the trembling bodies cling.

We hear of great losses for the patriots. Feel relief
and smile, but then new orders come: precise and brief.
Retreat in stages, last men out to torch the lot,
whatever lack of otherwise these Untermensch have got.

We are the last to go, and through the huts in flames
we see the villagers that this necessity now frames.
A day or two of hunger but worse is biting cold:
we count a fifty-two or -three of them, all told.

Now there's only tiredness and death by slow degrees,
the bandaged, wounded comrades the limping soldier sees,
death at all times, hideously, that time won't heal:
the hurt bleeds through, and any sense of guilt we feel.

Outwardly automatons, our footsteps crunch ahead
though we're lacking proper rations, sometimes even bread.
We go on marching, marching, as though the even tread
would keep out thinking and encroaching sense of dread.

Six

We think of home and those far comforts, well advised
to think of all that was, lest we be brutalized.

We tramp through worse events, or frozen aftermath
with figures strung up randomly along the path.

And all have blackened injuries which were not done
by normal combat or to people on the run:
interrogation: taking out an eye or tooth
or any way our operatives must gouge to get at truth.

The guilt is washed out by the rains, a drenching flood
that turns these endless steppe-lands to rapacious mud.
So once again we flounder and have to wait it out,
aware how easily retreat becomes a rout.

We stay and face a hero's death: so broadcasts say,
for Germany, the fatherland, where wide-eyed children pray
that our great Fuhrer's vision find a peopled land
with smiling wealth and goodness heaped at every hand.

For us, who know the truth, we do at last get leave
and walk among our countrymen, who cannot grieve
for comrades maimed, dismembered, unnamed in earth:
nor know what madness gave this enterprise its birth.

STILL LIFES

Daybreak

A thick white tablecloth of scorching sanctity,
on which the carafe glisters in its icy chill:
a long distension into silver where the spoon
is laid out reverently for prompt and heartless use.

The fresh-pressed orange juice that's over-rich,
the blood-thick colour presses on refracted glass
with such intensity the bowed and swelling walls
are poor receptacles with which to curb its force.

Here the hotel coffee cup is of standard fare —
it's squat, octagonal, unyielding — has stoutly kept
an air of clinical indifference, where the china clay
is gleaming white and clear of filmy body heats.

Which in the cloth that's opposite are loosely held,
an open trumpery of unruffled impertinence,
the inbred rhythms of the violent limbs as were
now settled in some warm and quietly breathing thing.

The nights of rapture where the soiling body's zests
inflate to white magnificence and florid breasts,
that famed indulgence of the limpet body needs
retire to tied-back scrutiny that the waiter heeds.

Midday

Midday in these hot lands of perpetual feast
of rich liveries and fructifying idleness
sees the colours fallen from the trees, and, above,
amorphous porcelain in an over-arching tent of sky.

But also happiness, satiety, and in the shade
a dog lies with belly up and its four legs sprawled.
On sandy grass the mote-filled light precipitately
floods, and shadows seem the footfalls of a god.

The children play, a bike or two is laid aside,
chattering, they run in coloured groups across the grass:
the mothers congregate, discuss the childhood ailments,
when hers was speaking, took their first unaided steps.

The garden beds seem scrofulous with untamed weeds;
with flowers at ease and sharp, tangled stems: through all
are set the green park benches, one with off-white panama
denoting the balding pensioner, here fast asleep.

And slowly, tint by tint, the evening's shade creeps on,
and swings, the trees and playground lose their satin gloss.
There is a coolness in the air and that damp, mouldering smell
of petals closing, and airy sprites now scattered in the grass.

Afternoon

The air of afternoons hangs heavily beneath the trees,
and there's the ailing silver spread on table-tops,
an expectation, of something shy but all-important
that lurks around chrome-steel stilts of spindly legs.

A sense of relocation in the passing cars, their lights
illuminated as they prowl the wintry street.
Silently their forward-pressing bonnets devour and press
the air before them into pregnant non-events.

In this quite ordinary apartment-packed suburb
in Santiago, on this flu-hemmed winter's day, the leaves
crystallize in the grey-encoded sky, a sweet, off-grey
of nothingness above us in the hardly touched-in sky.

Another day to go on repeatedly the same while
the juke-box plays its golden oldie numbers, each
precipitant with memories and long remembering, kind
enough to quell the stifled idleness of strange requests.

And all will no doubt feel the brimming essences,
that what is draped before us with a hang-dog air
opening into larger reservations, as though
a life made sequestered for us somewhere else.

Rain

At which we feel renewed. On leaves the rain-drops bring
a silvered happiness in tightly pendant wholes:
each seems a tiny Eden born again in breath-held air,
the old familiars opened on a new-found earth.

The scholar once again will reach for dusty books,
the old maid find the recipes she'd put away,
the loose and beautiful review their party lines,
and dumpy good-time girls will make a splendid match.

But of the past, the abstract substrate, what is that?
Whence comes the long, proud indolence of fluted vase,
the flowers the changing seasons scatter on the earth,
the pluvial lemming generations with their trivial talk?

All things have their preferred anointments, their hour of faith
when all that's latent in their essence blooms again,
the painter finds his talent in a final stroke,
the grand costumier in his latest flash-lit show.

Beyond the pain, the athlete's body finds its health,
the skating prima donna's triple-axle leap,
the wandering wartime journalist his greatest scoop,
and the adventuring climber stumbles on the final route.

Cafes

And there are cafes that with a commendable dull air
of homeliness assault the senses all at once:
the smells of vinegar and rancid cooking oil
combine with red-check tablecloths beneath thin plastic sheets

that are flexible and oleaginous, like the flat
damp hands we do not want to clasp again,
but these are tough, glossy and repellent only
in as much as they are disinfected daily with damp-dry rags.

And so the raw-boned world of tramps, the out-of-work,
the long-time solitaires who read alone at night,
apprentices and bills-of-lading clerks, all
who occupy interstices of a would-be life

that is otherwise going past in logo-painted vans,
in self-important figures with dash and well-shined shoes,
each with an interminable rhythm of matter-of-factness
impatience of being somewhere else and in no time at all.

So in these residues, as it were, of lives laid out
on the slow lane, with a sort of glacial creep
to a not-togetherness that is not disreputable
but brings a smell of death in the well-laid paving stones.

Childhood Bodies

It all comes back, the smell of childhood bodies scrubbed into an upright, conscience-stricken louche identity: soon, how soon, the tops and school-girl tunics turn to airy fripperies on which even strong men dream.

And knowing also that the most convivial things will separate the quiet acceptance from most searing lust. Brute is the body, and a thick insistence pounds against the frail capillaries that filling, swell the whole.

Most urgent, apt, compelling and most humbling is prepubescent body's perfume in the air. And thin as rain is also formed the might-have-been the long-ago of those first, slug-like languid scents.

And also therefore the deluges of summer sweat, the unaccepted, lip-curved recriminations: there is something repugnant in the limpet flesh, the unforced appetite for Eden in the one-time fix.

Even pet animals are much more sensitive than us to subtle appetites constructed from repulsive acts, and surely there are immeasurable hinterlands beneath the cat here lapping at its plate of milk.

Landscape

Professional, painted bold-brush 1930s style
of good clean living where the bracing seaside air
pours across the waters, where the breakers, triple rowed,
still pause to thunder down on a southerly Sunday calm.

The sea is a heavy, dull thick cobalt blue, a tone
to match the woodlands carpeting the white-gashed hills behind:
they open to a soft, low valley in a light sap green
with a touch of pink – Permian sands if not the painter's licence.

Which it needs to be. The falls of sand-topped Chalk connecting
to the bay beyond, mistier, a neat burnt umber mixed with white
that picks up wind-breaks, the sun-shade and a woman
promenading in off-shade white, but in the shadows pink and buff.

She's painted boldly in a Singer Sergeant way,
the tonal blocks ungraded, but with a fluffy brush,
a vivid immediacy that is exact and wholesome like
the open manners, frank, the clothes uncreased when packed.

The ethos that two world wars would at last extinguish
outmoded protocols, the colonies one by one sold off:
society thereafter diversified, fairer but mocked
by a sterling honesty the painter caught and matched.

Patagonia

Like a disobedient child dandled and pleaded with,
the day goes forward beneath a fusillade of clouds.
Night is a passage over many waters, the vast,
shimmering Pacific being littered with their chain-hung bones.

Inhabiting the broken shoreline are the silent, native peoples,
or were before the homestead makers and the army came.
Dusk on the eyelids resembles butterfly scales, brilliant
and colourful are the daubs and streaks of body paint.

The clouds above are drawn out into glittering threads,
the icy interiors are saturated with a bright blue weather.
The waters accumulate and are miracles of sinuous channels:
like fish they leap and flap to get to sands of birth.

There are also the sombre reflections where the mountain snows,
the stocky fjord valleys and the unconscionable water films
breathe, as it were, in unmelodious containment, a thin
membrane that wavers in the briny rheum of tears.

The cold snaps at the rocks: the cliffs of ice-cracked molars
exhibiting the mica schists thick-spotted with feldspar lathes.
This is a hard world, always, but along the sea-smoothed wall
relaxed and companionable are the flowing-inward shapes.

Tuscany

A land long cultivated, in which the centuries bring down
their inscrutable floods of nutrients, where household gods
look out approvingly on the tonsured hills, and where
the whole becomes a tapestry of dancing men and beasts.

And one, moreover, of practised, intricate control
beneath the continual encouragement of bright blue skies:
the cypresses stand proudly rising in an indolence
as candles that light some long-remembered birthday cake.

No nights of van Gough's skies. Ploughs shake off the rust;
the tractor throws up gobbets of black smoke; the lime
is freely scattered as a saint's beneficence
and has for centuries while the fierce, hard freeholds lapse

Into that long communion of the sun with soil, the growth
of vines that maculate the towering rival's walls,
which, dressed in cold grey stone with warmer limestone blocks,
seem sunk beneath molasses of the summer heat.

Among the olive trees the internecine wars are past:
and in the coronas of sunlight-tangled leaves,
appear madrigals to the labial summer air, and there,
all around, the earth has patterns of a first beholding.