

Winter Poems

POEMS 2021-23

by colin j. holcombe

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Colin John Holcombe

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May-time Fields

I

Some intimation that we do not pass
alone, at random through the May-time fields,
that colours scattered on the sunlit grass
return with weighted and more supple yields.

Yet all we did was of ourselves, that small
and breathy entity that saunters on,
that hears his name as far-off summers call
across the hoopla stalls now packed and gone.

That in his life the small but rooted things,
his house, his school, the park, the built-on hills,
were not as only candid daylight brings
but pauses as some deeper spirit wills.

At first will dealers, fairs and catalogues
mark out the boyhood's breathless outings gone
to rain and grimy streets and winter's fogs:
but through them all the acquisitions shone.

Some silver sixpence of the Tudor queens,
some fine dupondius with purple hue,
an Umayyad copper fals – they all were means
to bring a more resplendent world to view.

II

The poet's brush but pauses in the air,
and frail the cherry blossom's clustered white,
yet through the codicils still hardly there,
the characters stand calm and bright.

The court, the emperor, threatening far Xiongnu:
so many battles foisted on the earth:
unchanged is what the thoughtless millions do:
how few of verses spell out lasting worth.

But still eternal is the sketched-out sky;
the mountains blur to blue, the rivers flow
forever eastward, lonely autumns sigh,
and moon illuminates the world below.

III

Who knows why some familiar, high-wrought phrase,
and in an ancient tongue that no one speaks,
draws blood in full immediacy, and stays
unforced and brilliant in our thoughts for weeks.

Or months, or far, far longer, in a book
last opened years ago, as someone else,

with different memories that doubtless took
our small-town views for regal common sense.

All imprecise memorials, no doubt
like tourist spots we viewed on childhood jaunts,
on coach-tour days, the family roundabout
of places, later, some great beauty haunts.

And so the vistas of the perished hopes,
the thousands lost to mishap and to war,
where each returning veteran copes
with soils more deeply limed than were before.

Ourselves we dress up in the pasts' bright shapes,
in aural splendour of some history read:
we look to distant, faint and shadowy capes
where rise the paths that only brave men tread.

IV

Toward the country that we know in part
from childhood holidays, some sun-splashed day
that saw a laughing beauty stab the heart,
and the long, fraught afterwards we'd have to pay.

Some hidden copse or field when all around
there rose embankments and the byelaws sign,

some flowering wilderness where still were found
the rich-dewed cowslip and the eglantine.

Where spring's first visiting left urban glade
ablaze with colour under the may-time white,
where burdocks threw out glossy shade
and dandelions a more astringent light.

And all through summer every tuft and blade
grew thick and folded into clustered fruit:
belladonna even, whose thick shade
threw up a poisonous odour from the root.

A world apart that had its steady laws
of fume and sunlight and the drenching rain,
and one with parables that knew no cause
in silver slow-worm caught and loosed again.

V

In no way individual is the spring
that ends in wood-smoke blue of summer days:
the soft, sweet bitterness that old love brings,
or linen's sanctity in dawn's first rays.

How thin and disconnected are the lives
of small enactments and of daily chores,
where each success must fade, no more survives
than hurried footsteps over marble floors.

The rest of us must strive to mark our passing on
in some small fable that we make or do.
This world of shadows is but swiftly gone
and only things reborn will mark what's true.

They should inform our ventures hitherto.
Each word, or stroke in wholesome piety,
becomes as when some pretty ingénue
finds in a naturalness her means to be.

VI

What subtle gossamers protect the lives
of those most dear to us. On bed or chair
the drape of thinnest lineament survives
time's depredations: yet still we care

for her, this body, laugh, this speaking voice
that seems but part of us, and intimate
in all we do or know, the prompting choice
whereby we join that fore-acknowledged state.

Though fashion's all but subtle tyranny
decides both what we can and cannot bear,
the fall from neckline to the break of knee
are surfaces those breathing bodies wear.

Which we embrace, for even painters know
few models look the better out of clothes;
the walking signatures are those that flow
as though an inmost nature they'd disclose.

VII

To live in breathy, calm sufficiency,
within her customs and her quiet laws,
it is the body's laughing agency
where mundane purposes a moment pause,

and, as it were, as functions iterate
continually but not converge, some space
remain forever in a nubile state,
a new becoming that we can't replace.

Life is a grievous business, and beneath
the breathy amplitudes of sun-tanned skin
there must be attitudes and firm belief
that what's awoken in us may begin

to live the yet more fully than we do
within our gifts and claims and families
for life is otherwise but passing through
with false authorities we have to please.

The arts have deeper and much harder laws;
where word and well-read reader are the same,
and though quixotic, have no simple cause,
but pay their homage to an erstwhile flame.

VIII

Ornately splendid is the Kufic scroll
that slow parades across the lettered rim.
Brief and memorable, the words extol
the Merciful and the Compassionate: they call to Him.

Though other lives will read the tile or plate,
explore the characters in lusterware,
their better Arabic will not deflate
that tide of noonday wonders everywhere.

Each flaunted loop was formed of folded clay
with right consistency and wet-wrapped grace,
the long millennia pass to one today:
a wealth that's everywhere in this small place.

The old traditions and instinctive thought,
where aptitude becomes a breathing thing,
an echo on the air that's finely caught
in cities, as it were, where angels sing.

IX

These are the sights I shall not see again:
the mosques of Isfahan, their opulence
in faith that fills the swelling hearts of men
with brightened ornament and flowered sense.

Not now the Delhi Sultans, Mogul tombs,
their work of inlaid white lapidary,
as though our lives were lived in sumptuous rooms,
without the press of dust and poverty.

Nor tell the Seljuk from the Ottoman,
restraint in brickwork from the stamp of strength.
We all must look toward that fine iwan
and in our prayers pass through at length.

Each door is also that high Heaven's gate;
we smell the ordure and the springtime fields.
We go in humbleness of law and fate:
it is the fruitage that true learning yields.

X

And the voices, how the voices call to us
in well-known arias we know by heart:
the rich, full-throated and the timorous:
the roles we played where all such feelings start.

To be far other than our simple name,
to sense the violins cease and urge us on,
to hear the audience that with a wild acclaim
will launch us in the here and thereupon.

How the voice in soaring flutters and expires,
and how its choking syllables infuse the heart
with radiant, high and overarching fires
when old recordings play their ordered part.

XI

While summer deepens through the treeless plain,
the haunt of prayer and learning, inherent trust,
are home to fox and jackal: there remain
but piles of masonry and wind-blown dust.

A slowed dispersion into saddening age,
the loss of friends, and robust, tomboy health,
and all unwillingly when stage by stage
we lose delight in breath, and then our strength.

The outworn chit-chat of confederates,
received opinions that we duplicate,
ignore the faint reproving air that states
we should be larger than our common fate.

XII

And all around us tramp the soulless men
that we must live with in this hurtful place,
be led as cattle to this cramping pen:
the quest is money and not inward grace.

We read the history books, can date each piece
of lusterware or tattered Koran page;
admire the marbled strength of lucid Greece,
the Roman oratory in its golden age.

We've walked the length of plain antiquity
have stood where Alexander spent the night.
Here Cleopatra met her Anthony,
and year on year there sat some anchorite.

XIII

But time is as that levelling Mongol force
that out-stares darkness on the darkest day:
from blood and injury that murderous course
must falter, town by town, and fade away.

They were in retrospect but summer storms
that fill with sand and violence all the air:
an emptiness that makes our shifting norms:
and of that beauty once, there's nothing there.

All lost: the long-collected libraries sold,
our careful notes boxed out as household waste:
and with the end there goes a thousand-fold
the fine distinctions of an informed taste.

In which the body, long, long afterwards,
laid out and one with loving arms, recalls
the random carnival that life affords
in tenderness and then its breathy falls.

Those quiet absences lie all round
in how we smile or greet our friends,
for all is transient and the dropping sound
re-echoes only when that moving ends.

XIV

May those who read us, our contemporaries,
revisit those plain thoughts we left behind,
an earnest, laughing, lingering voice that carries:
it was an independent, probing mind.

A friend to kindness and to honest words,
but not against mere wit and dazzling play.
Who knows? This is the kingdom of the birds,
and one a single gunshot scares away.

For we are thin and most uncertain things
who have no port of leaving or of rest,
but only running from the tempest brings
the sense or commendation we were blest

with games of throw and catch we started with,
recalled as mad-cap voices through the head:
those journeys lapsing into far-off myth
are sad eternities when we are dead.

XV

The rank dishonesties, the stifled lies,
the bitterness that comes from wasted years,
that blithe vacuity where each hope dies
in hot, discomfoting and futile tears.

That time once stolen does not come again,
nor is there candour in the fresh-bloomed face:
and all that's beautiful and loved by men
is scattered by that tramping, grasping race

that takes no hostages, but in the glass
portrays us older, with a wilder look:
make do: conciliate and let it pass:
still time is scribbling in its pocket book.

Put down the book and listen: all around
the world is speaking to you: be awake
to echoes built on echoes, a murmured sound
that's intertextured in each path you take.

XVI

From youth's first hopes to rich expediency
in larger house or status, better job:
no simple heartedness can hold her plea
against the trampling madness of the mob.

Do this, buy that: the roaring crowd floods on,
particulars diminish, till out of sight
are first friend's promises, and wholly gone
the upheld categories of good and right.

How bitterly, how bitterly we see
the trust we squandered, all the kingdoms lost:
from roll of honours we're the absentee,
on love's first citadel there falls the frost.

And all that's best in our long-treasured books,
the soaring passage we know by heart,
are always there and keep their sovereign looks,
which is the long-repeated test of art.

XVII

The passage to that place is never clear,
nor can be ascertained that far ahead:
what tune it has falls faintly on the ear,
it is by accident we're often lead.

A happy accident, as when a boy
out grazing flocks will miss his hold,
and falling headlong find both hurt and joy
in hoard of manuscripts or ancient gold.

Each line or stanza must be fought for, must
be tested in the sinew of belief
in ways beyond our age-soiled sense of trust,
beyond the book and academic brief.

We find that truth by work. A thousand times,
the calligrapher will draw the character
until, abruptly, like our sudden rhymes,
new life emerges from the age-old blur.

And this is all around us, thin as air;
the practised craftsman learns to draw them forth:
though lines of force run here and everywhere
it is the compass needle senses north.

XVIII

It is the land we love, will always love,
that holds its citizens to larger things:
our circumstances perish, but above
us still the lark at morning rises, sings.

Some notes we hear, familiar phrase
however it may be, contained or wild,
at once is opened up the endless days
to first it came to us who were a child.

This chair, this beer-house drinking mug,
this bench that greased and smoothed by human sweat,
this corner house that seems so plain and snug,
retains a music that we can't neglect.

XIX

How variously our hopes go on in lives
of children, of their own children, others too,
and with their sweethearts, girlfriends, steadfast wives,
think back to what our own first longings drew.

In that our own true prospects gutter out
in family photographs, some anecdote
that they remember, will in ages hence,
that tedious letter we so carefully wrote.

In this our lives continuing into things
so very ordinary, not to curse or bless
but some odd jottings, half remembering
we yearly add to, but by less and less.

Then what we've lived is always something found
and loved: some hobby or remembered place
that was and always will be holy ground,
a state of innocence, perpetual grace.

XX

It is the sad denouement each must face:
most enterprises prove but idle breath.
In all things beautiful is that first trace
where some forgiveness survives our death.

And those we loved the most, say what of them,
beyond this world of censure, hurt and fret?
We hope when circumstances would condemn
they will recall our name but kindly yet.

What hearts have held the once will bloom again
in some far country, or an unknown name:
the autumn's avalanche of leaves has men
return as spring-born hopes revive the same.

A land we wake to as some invalid,
returned to health, then gazes on. The things
he knew return, refurbished, and now not hid
by dull acquaintanceship that habit brings.

The past rejuvenates, will find its way
through disappointments to a fragile trust,
to see the outlines of a perfect day
when all those figures have returned to dust.

A Hot Afternoon

Stilled the park this sultry afternoon
with trees and shaded walkways everywhere:
the shadows deepen in the grass and soon
the fragrant breath of evening fills the air.

What can I tell you? I have walked the heights
of windy mountain-tops where none before
have gone that way, and seen the sights
where only chamois trek and buzzards soar.

And why? Why does it matter what I've seen,
the who I've stayed with, how their sofas feel?
If one's reserved and one a good-time queen?
All sit at evening and must eat their meal.

Some left in pain as cancer rotted bone,
when others drank or whored themselves to death.
Some slowly went at length, some dropped as stone:
innumerable the ways that end our breath.

Some men are proud, indifferent of the end,
sit down and do not breathe again.
While some, with illnesses that do not mend,
must ask continually: O dear God, when?

The cool now deepens. Children play once more,
and dogs go foraging for earlier scents
And we are joined to that eternal lore
that takes and guides us to our going hence.

Café Coppelia

Here at this local coffee house I write
each day or other, unmolested, find
a place assigned to me as though by right
I still may use this over-furnished mind.

Where are they now, the café characters,
the wives and sweethearts in this business scene?
To them I must be ageless as each year inters
my case to shadow-lands, the scarcely been.

The blustering colonel in his well-pressed tweeds,
his stories, laughter and the listening court?
In that encroaching darkness memory seeds
the glimmering images that serve for thought.

I saw him yesterday, helped on by nurse,
now shambling through the rain-filled avenues,
the gout or heart condition growing worse
with pills and exercise he didn't choose.

And all those laughing faces, one by one
removed to other tables, or no more came,
that brimming happiness but now undone,
both bon-viveur and tight-lipped each the same.

And some old buffer sat with charmers on the make:
how beautiful in that décolleté.
What commission did their agents take,
and did the parts they took then really pay?

Tell me where they're now. Can stage or screen
exhibit funding that was wisely spent?
Say why, you soft-touch there who's no more seen,
such hours as these are all so briefly sent.

Other People's Lives

The mourners mostly have gone home, but here
about these plots of other people's lives
I pick my steps, now noticing the trees
arrayed in canopies of sun-warmed leaves,
how sky beyond goes on diminishing
to placid but unbending blue,
beneath which lie the raw earth graves
and flowers large with messages:
'Much missed.' 'You were the best of mums.'
'Devoted to the family.'

All trite, and heart-felt, hurting those
who must not think of that soft body there,
with scars for eyes now wide asleep.
Nor let themselves feel older, sensing
that the dead are always travelling on,
beyond the body or its troubled nights.

Otherwise, our lives stay much the same:
we get up, go about our business, nightly
turn to sleep, as through a world
become more porous and intractable,
more filled with gaps as lights about the evening lands,
in farms and suburbs and apartment blocks,
go abruptly into darkened rooms,
to after-images that wake us with their sudden
falls to emptiness and numbing pains.

And so it's quietly, one by one,
the living take their leave of us
and go out into instances,
adrift and tangled as the sunlight is
about these wind-touched trails of leaves:
beautiful and impenitent
of time's evasions and regret.

Still Life with María Jesús

Outside it is raining and I am writing.
Distant from the table but waiting on
is the unaccountable María Jesús —
she whom the menu cards eye warily,
alert and condescending as they are.

The aloof, full beauty with the tossed-back looks
has stopped her prowling and with hand
folded into hip supports like a caryatid
the washed-clean counter where two coffee cups
froth with excitement at what I'm writing.

For the few customers today the chairs
have agreed not to look so rent-a-crowd.
Each back bends smoothly to a wide seat
and goes on to extend a half-curved lip
above the steel-chrome splendid legs.

Outside a cavalcade of bodhisattvas
with bright umbrellas is in progress. Each
is tented and maternal, as though filled
with the divine radiance of a thousand
companionable María Jesúsés.

Like the days themselves, the cars press
nose to tail, and sometimes bark at
traffic lights or rain-drenched trees. María
Jesús pockets the tip, and with one damp
wipe returns the place to what it was.

But in another far-off but forever
world they'll all arrive at happiness —
table, chairs, rain, me writing — as
the beautiful María Jesús floats
down in full-enabled, bodied mode.

Janusz's Letter

Loosely Based on Peter Weir's The Way Back (2010)

1. Betrayal

When shall I see again our street and house,
the gate, the window with its pot of flowers;
each look unvarnished as my loving spouse
whose pent-up silences were always ours.

It's to the war I would apportion blame,
when men are animals. I know your fears.
My dear and ever dearest, all the same,
your testimony that gave me twenty years.

To be apart from you that are my all,
my dutiful and sweet, most loving wife:
across the snow-filled lands the voices call
in strange miscellanies that make a life

of hurt and robbery. For all men here
perforce are animals, and what is theirs
is gained by graft and violence: year on year
will grow innumerable those numbing cares.

Remember still, my love, however crude
and criminal be inmates here, who knife
each other for their clothes or scraps of food,
you stay my inward-regulated life.

Guards and watchtowers, wire perimeters,
all mark the limits of our dangerous lot:
outside, the endless realms of conifers
confine us to this cold and wind-soiled spot.

We cut high timber on the forest slopes
through drifts of misery and flurried snow.
I hold you still the same, and all my hopes
are that you always think of me and know

that I will serve this fearful sentence out,
although the day be hard and cold the night.
Picture me, believe me, do not doubt
that you are ever of my inmost sight.

It's thought of that which picks me up again
and sets me going. Yesterday I fought
for common sense among snow-blinded men
and made the refuge in the woods they sought.

And for this independence punished. All
six of us now work this tortuous mine
among half-naked brutes. The frequent fall
of rocks and old machinery combine

to make it more than hazardous. None last,
I think, too many months in these hard straits.
Remember, dearest, that your husband passed
his last days thinking of you, that the fates

will give me back to you when we have crossed
the utmost limits given us as men.

However senseless be our lives, not all is lost
if I can see you in my thoughts again.

2. Siberia

Escape seems possible: we have a plan
to flood the generator, cut the wires,
and from that fall to hopelessness began
afresh a taste for freedom that inspires

us push on past the hunger and disease,
or death from comrades all too probably,
and, in the sudden snow, confusion sees
a rush of dogs and shots, yet seven run free.

Perpetual stillness. Forests packed with snow,
which in continuing with its silent fall
accumulates in drifts: an inward glow
makes not so innocent that numbing pall.

We find our night-blind Kazik yards from camp,
who going out for firewood lost his way.

On face the ice has put its alabaster stamp:
how fast till springtime waits that potter's clay.

We enter limestone caverns, carved by rain
or onetime rivers, open to the sky,
when we, exhausted, suddenly are lain
on soft dry leaves, when all then rushes by.

At length, and long days later, fortified
by having slept at last a thankful while,
I go off on my own to act as guide
for our long journey forward. Mile on mile

through hills and forest, through the dense ravines.
I sleep in forests or in freezing rains.
My mind absorbs these variegated scenes
but patterns them with effort, rest and pains.

Till distantly I glimpse that far-off goal,
enough to know and mark the passage back.
I go and get the others, and enrol
them on our newfound but uncertain track.

3. Lake Baikal

We reach those ice-rimmed Baikal shores,
but stayed as watchful as we'd ever been
of small communities with every cause
to claim the bounty and to turn us in.

Good sense said that: for every convict lost
from that great gulag archipelago
must come some retribution, fearful cost
that they, or us if caught, must undergo.

We saw their livestock in the spring-fresh field.
We watched them take to market local goods,
and yet we kept our distance, stayed concealed
by lakeside coppices or stone-strewn woods.

Beside the lake there ran that guarded rail
that offered speedy if not sure escape.
What papers did we have, what likely tale
for people in their care-won, present shape?

In some distress, therefore, reluctantly,
we traipsed long months together round the lake.
Secluded bays give washing places, see
us sleep the day in shade, long nights awake.

4. The Temperate Forests

The summer comes. We quit these arduous lands
for upland meadows where wild flowers grow
in great profusion: in their open stands
the trees become deciduous and show

the handiwork of villagers in logging camps,
or hunters' lean-tos, looking woebegone.
Sky grows warm above us, twinkling lamps
of stars seem welcoming and draw us on.

The rivers glut with silver depths of fish,
the wary fox and rodent fall to snare.
All is welcoming, and every wish
seems granted with a undeserving air.

We climb the hills and high bluffs cautiously,
and blaze our trail on trees or show in force
as lines of milky quartz stones what we see
to steer our perilous and dogged course.

Drier grows our passage: clouds appear
less frequently and bring no rain.
We press the meat to pemmican, and steer
toward that billowing and haze-filled plain.

At water holes we can refresh ourselves,
and drench the clothes for what lies still ahead:
then lands of mirages where dry hand delves
for hint of wet beneath the riverbed.

5. The Gobi Desert

Perpetual are the absences are these vast lands:
of cratered distances beneath the sunlight's fall.

A snake is blistered gold on blazing sands,
and the heat-frayed lizard is not heard at all.

Confecting outlines shimmer in the peaks:
scree falls with a chasmed quietness the moon has.
Muffled assignments as the winds speaks
with endless authority, or as good as.

Stretched bones and sinews knit to painful use,
then set again by what they've undergone.
We climb: half settling footprints in the loose
dune sands: mere husks of effort, pushing on.

And there are rivers, or there onetime were;
and aromatic smells fill out the arid air.
Among dry sticks, winds whisper and confer.
Rain falls, black dots that shrink to never there.

And then one living. Long, luxurious hours
we steep out bodies in it as it swirls on past.
At night we cook some fish, restored in powers
and in the morning find land rises fast

to dizzy altitudes, and scrub appears
patchily. We idle sometimes, take our ease.
From surrounding cliffs cloud slowly clears,
the autumn is already dense in trees.

6. The Himalayas

At last the foothills, and clear-water streams
with peaks of Himalayan snows beyond:
each one ethereal: its image gleams
both faint and distantly, but makes a bond

with things achieved. We crossed the Asian wastes
of taiga and the Gobi heats, on through
our lives' vicissitudes. The prospect tastes
commensurate with effort: bitter too.

We lost two comrades and a simple Polish girl.
Poor Kaniz first through numbing winter chill,
two more were lost to suffocating swirl
of heat and sands. They quietly lost the will

to be forever striving, stumbling on
towards what vanishes before our eyes:
a place of rest, that soon as glimpsed is gone
as those great glittering icefalls mount the skies.

High walls, precipitous, with no way through:
incisor teeth of rock-falls capped with white:
serrated, the far-off ranges fade to blue:
a beautiful but fear-inducing sight.

So passed our weeks on wind-blown frosty trails,
with stopping places: hovels, monasteries.

Immense the towering walls, the numbing scales
us down to what defies analysis.

But in every hardship there is hope.
We go where many have so gone before.
Herdsmen, monks and villagers, who cope
with endless emptiness, where eagles soar

above the ice-split pinnacles of rock,
the long and eye-benumbing falls of snow:
the slow-ascending tracks where we take stock
of wide and green-hazed valleys far below.

7. Home

Brief halts at hazards but we stumble through,
walk down through misty tea-fields, meet
the many marvelling at our journey, who
return us to a world that's small and neat.

Long meetings with officialdom, the whys
and wherefores of the months and routes we took.
We state the facts as not to dramatize
the costs and mishaps none should overlook.

How long the journey back: whole lifetimes pass
before belligerents admit their faults,
where even scattered petals on the grass,
will gather interest in their pinch-beck vaults.

I see again the little street and house,
and just as then the earthen pot of flowers,
and, though now aged is my loving spouse,
those pent-up silences are ours again.

That memory remains if we will look for it:
in job we do, a hobby, book we write,
a journeying through homelands barely lit,
as is a world portrayed in candlelight,

which steadies as it were with facts, with screen
on screen of memories: all things there —
alive and passing — which we know have been
unfelt, but close and needful as the air.

Whole lives are strivings to some inward shore,
where what we've borne the once we can again,
Where surely hardships we have felt before
will make us larger and more thankful men.

Not Yet Winter

It's not yet winter, and the leaves that fall
are pale but still preserve their pristine shape.
The streets are littered with their outstretched hands
as though a deluge from the summer lands
returns the things from which there's no escape:
we are the instances our lives recall.

And so they lie there with their fingers pointed down
as though to clutch the earth they cannot leave,
or gently float down with palms outspread,
still filled with chatter that the wind has said
is passing always, not to misconceive
these matted, leached-out shades of red and brown.

As with ourselves in age, the veins stand out,
and in between is more discoloured, apt
to turn a tessellated mix of darks and brights,
like river systems seen from satellites,
their breathing bit by bit unwrapped
to tributaries immured in ache and doubt.

Those archipelagos of longing out in space
look nebulous, bizarre, companionable.
Long mountain crests become serrated spikes
of white and shadow, troubled look-alikes
of things much closer home, the almost dull
dimensions that a butterfly will grace

with iridescence as it opens wings
and lets the air flow through its tiny scales:
beautiful and frangible, alert to all
the brutal destinies it can't forestall:
in that long reckoning which never fails
to call immutable such fragile things.

Forebears

I know their offspring and the maiden names of wives,
the surly fields they came from and were laid to rest
the blotched and rainy days that were their working lives,
the churches they paraded through in Sunday best —

from which they worked the fields or went to hiring fairs,
survived the childhood ailments and in time were wed,
throughout the hunger, sickness and habitual cares
which larger, thought-on purposes were left unsaid.

There were the lambing seasons, and the fresh green wheat;
the clouds across broad acres and the ripening sun,
complexions and the orchards reddening in the heat,
short rests and alehouse chatter when the work was done.

The dawning clouds that in their sun-rimmed majesty
imposed their swelling amplitudes of light and depth;
below are dusky hues of beech and alder tree
that fill with iridescent greens throughout their breadth.

So lands with rooted temperament of trees that turn
forever restless where their leaves and branches meet
in airy graciousness, where early spring days yearn
for sultry sun-drenched heaviness in midday heat.

My Dear Friend

In Memoriam RCT 1956-2019

My dear friend, you drank not deep enough
of that fierce brew that makes the stuff of life:
You met the wanted expectations, wife
and kids, the varied mix of smooth and rough.

But what you sought for really, no one knew,
nor you yourself, I think: the football club,
that zany sense of humour, things that do
not seem too threatening, and which make the nub

of all who mark your passing here, these small,
hard-working folk of sense and decency,
a modesty that binds a close-knit family
that had no great or grander hopes on call.

I can't think now you ever read a book.
You scanned the sporting pages not that much,
nor were the headlines worth another look.
Two TV flat-screens kept your world in touch.

We learn the art of largely getting by,
that doesn't make our friends too pleased or sore.
What else is there? We cannot simply die
without the family provided for.

To be content, to have life's river run
on chattering pebbles that allay its power:
your life was one continued happy hour
that sends us homeward when that hour is done.

In Memoriam RWH

The thick-bound copies of The Gramophone,
the brief reviews together with the month's best buys:
a world of elsewhere you were blessed to own
if only briefly till the music dies.

To fridge door fastened things you had to do:
the homely kettle with its whistling spout,
a coffee cup unwashed, a spoon or two,
the future much the same and not in doubt.

I crossed the wild parts of this world, again
to those small homilies and scenes we miss:
the down-at-heel, suburban homes of then,
that had an air of chores and kindness.

My books, so many of them, all are dead,
the quiet authorities that graced their post.
Perhaps in some hereafter they may read,
accredited for what they loved the most.

Some haunting phrase that held the spell-bound heart,
some painter's flourish as he caught the light,
things we do not know of, where spent days impart
a lingering splendour to our common sight.

And so I think of you tonight, and hear
your favourite waltz or Haydn symphony:
the most reserved of men, and never near
the city figure that you maybe hoped to be.

Maybe. I do not know. I never knew
what thoughts were passing in that knuckled look,
hard and not accommodating, maybe true
to some unwritten, impish, inner book.

You brought no presence, nor were served
by waiting quietly in some line or bar.
You had the small town honesty deserved
by friends who simply stood there as they are.

Or were. The empty sockets of the skull
are filled with earth now, and so hold an air
of being unaccountable, just full
of what is here or there or everywhere.

Perhaps. Who knows? There may be some day hence
a golden land where we are heard again,
some ledger sheet in which the last few pence
may balance up the total owing then —

in that far state when we were all too young,
and earnestness was in unseeing eyes,
when we were self-absorbed and lost among
the truths that sadness tells us recognise.

Let Me Praise

Let me praise those who were sensible, who knew
the spouse they needed and were quickly wed,
good, upright folk who when a kid was due
produced at once or got a dog instead.

They had their dose of folly early, aimed
for concert pianist, scientist, football ace.
A year of growing effort had them tamed
and led into a less demanding race.

Which was, as I repeat, a fulfilling one.
It gave them money, status, a loving wife:
all things achievable and carefully won
from that dark maelstrom of now different lives.

To which, with darker prospects, I belong.
I see the college photos, sports teams, row
on row of quietly ruminating, strong
but personable, of faces, where I show

as strangely absent, though I knew the world
accepts the status you yourself profess
in looks and attitude: the lip is curled
against true honesty or gross excess.

And so they all did well, as you'd expect,
were doctors, lawyers, company V.P.s
Even my roommate's itineraries reflect
the scantiest of many honorary degrees.

So then, what happened? Whence came the view,
where good men stood and quietly took their place,
who valued decency and what was true,
but also something we might term 'good grace'.

To know, to understand, to feel the best
that man has written, crafted or has sung,
to feel a kinship with the honoured guest,
discern the aptness in a foreign tongue?

To see a greatness in poor, abject things,
in tree, or landfill, or some council plot,
not graves and statuary of fallen kings,
but what coheres within our common lot.

Windfall Destinies

I've known great beauties, none of whom
fulfilled their dewed and windfall destinies;
I think it's wearily they came to tomb
in surfeit of their unearned wealth and ease.

And one I think of now, whose green-grey eyes
would cloud the student weatherglass for weeks,
has gained accountants and unwanted lies
of married luxury where new wealth speaks.

Another who had the all-containing loveliness
of speech and figure and of apt response,
knew only depth on depth of loneliness,
for all her charm and smiling nonchalance.

And one who many years had lived abroad
in warmer climates where the flower achieves
a sovereign richness, but could not afford
the spruced-up drabness in her English leaves.

And one who kept a county on its toes
as who she'd wed or take to legal bed:
how odd that after all the offers chose
a sly and gender-challenged crook instead.

And one who was the very talk of town,
again, most publicly, became a wife,
then with her former husband settled down
to lead a gossip-columned wandering life.

We earn our kinship with the turning earth
by deed: it's not bequeathed in infancy.
And not from upstart, plain suburban birth
will come that celebration of the trees.

That tiny diamond-patterned darkness there,
not grain of soft winds whispering through,
but more as the larger, pendent raindrops do
to murmuring immortality our bodies bear.

Let's Meet Again

Could all those intervals come back again
and, like some birthday party with convivial friends,
return to how it was, the where and when,
and, most particularly, the how it ends.

Then all those modest hopes of enterprise
at school or move to some now larger house,
a better job, at least a decent rise,
to show our former partner, burdened spouse,

it's not unlikely what we hope to get
for children, and their later children too,
a better start in life, an even bet
in what they choose to do, or not to do.

So I, who've seen so many lives cut short,
the poor as herdsmen in the Kerman hills,
impoverished, debilitated, not as sought:
there must be more than justice Allah wills.

And girls more beautiful than you'd believe
I've met in kampong, jungle and the market stall,
as though oblivious that those looks would leave
a flare of sunlight as our evenings fall.

I call to mind that long-remembered walk
with some close friend when all we should have said
was then as simple as a cordial talk
and by that blessing, as it were, was sped

to that fond day we hold and lock away
within the stilled recesses of the heart.
It is the seed or root of that regendered day
from which our blest beginnings fondly start.

That Mythic Childhood

That mythic childhood where I see again
plain streets, the shopping precincts, lines of trees:
these are the haunts of happiness for other men:
for me but nothing as the heart decrees

but ever on the far side, out of reach
for those like me with somehow added years,
are what the comradeship of boys should teach:
a fair division of the spoils and fears.

The local railways ran in network blue,
with lives of schoolmates much the same:
a life filled up with needed things to do,
suburban lives, in short, secure and tame.

And there were things, of course, you did not do,
like cheat or lie, or pass on tales of others.
The grown-ups told you flatly what was true,
your troop of boy-scouts was a band of brothers.

You had not dealings with the cops or law,
nor took on debts you couldn't promptly pay.
You never asked what savings could be for,
but hoped in time you'd have your say.

Which could be late, of course, fulfilling tale
of goals to navigate, or girls, careers:
whole areas of life we'd never fail
in marriages or children: long happy years.

A life in small instalments, making do:
You had a job, a pension, various perks.
At great injustices you might even sue,
see OBE or knighthood in the works.

Life is what you make it, more or less;
but nonetheless goes always fleeting on,
mysterious, intangible and fathomless,
until the most remembered is but wholly gone.

One Day

And suddenly one day we won't be there.
The world around will go on much the same,
or so he thinks, and so whatever name
he has, the quiet gringo with the kindly air,

he goes on writing. Why? What did he write?
Who knows? Abstruse, unwanted, like as not,
in this, his much frequented café spot
he's not much talked about, kept from sight.

Ignored and unmolested, with a book or two
and if not frail was certainly now getting on.
His time is up when surely he'll be gone
to nursing homes, or what the aged do.

The well-known names and beauties came and went,
the girls turned wives and brought their children in,
while that accrediting we all must win
was in the passing seasons, briefly lent.

By all he's unremembered, that plain name
on all the pages, millions of them read
across the world each year, he one time said,
and smiled. It was a rather distant fame,

if fame it was. Or mattered. His one fight
was for the work he loved, the chosen word
where thought and insight had concurred
to make a sentence true or somehow right.

At Hardy's cottage, from an upstairs room,
cramped and nondescript, were pages sent
across the world and in that passage lent
a sense of other places that regardless bloom

on past our self-regarding lives, that spread
like paper flowers in water, that go
on opening always, like some afterglow
from simple pages that we onetime read.

Repentences

The smudged repentances that come too late,
the kindly words we left unsaid,
the half-dressed state
of being first and for and not for bed,
the chances that with half a mind
we could have saved that sunlit day
from recompense we never pay,
that spring of pure forgiveness we cannot find.

So comes the settled desolation after rain,
the shrapnel leaves on sodden ground,
and muttering trains
uncompanionably go round and round
as though through badly-printed almanacs
of this and that where all go hence
days travelling overhead on silver-hissing tracks.

We lay new places on the choice, starched cloth
where gleams the cutlery, the polished glass,
on which the moth-
like sunlight settles, tufted, sparse,
illuminating those who are not here;
but shadows only, needing space
to show again that youthful face:
when those unthought-of spinster lands were nowhere near.

So many laughed and sat on our small sofa there
vivacious, vivid with in looks
who now but wear
out quietly into library books
there packed with life and our delight
that go out promptly with the light
though blessed with agency and more than winning looks.

The presences that fill a room and so confer
vague scents and various instances
of how we were.

Then evening comes with many absences
that, calling, hurt us to the core,
dark ghosts that to our ears
will summon up our howling fears,
the sense of lives that were to be, but are no more.

Poor Shuffling Folk

Of those we knew the greater part are dead,
the friends, acquaintances: they all are gone
and what were voiceless shadows in the head
return as interludes where the sunlight shone.

Yet those we loved with our full being, those
whose very ambience we'd also love,
their streets, their laughter and their varied clothes:
we cannot even sketch an outline of.

And you who look at us poor, shuffling folk,
would help us on our nodding way, profess
to hear how plainly inward yearnings spoke,
know nothing of our grief and loneliness.

I shall go into a glad land, where all
is now prepared for me, where those I love,
still love as memories' dark shadows fall,
will look about and know it was enough.