

Evan Jones

and of mountains

The background of the cover is a dark, textured surface. It features several jagged, white and light blue shapes that resemble snow-capped mountain peaks or ice formations. These shapes are scattered across the cover, with some appearing as sharp points and others as broader, more rounded forms. The overall effect is one of a cold, mountainous landscape.

The prevailing mood of this,
Evan Jones's third collection of
poetry, is gently plangent, wry,
ruminative, and low key.
He writes, in a style that is plain,
transparent and conversational, and
tempered with a nicely ingenious
wit, poems that are beautifully
made and will delight discriminating
readers.

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Recognitions

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Evan Jones

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For the people

After the going out and coming back
nothing looks quite the same.

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Contents

I

To Margot	3
Leaving Again	4
All at Sea	6
To Catherine, aged 5 months	9
Snapshots for Margot	11
I.M. Kenneth Mackenzie: Cambridgeshire 1967	12
Early Autumn, Cambridgeshire	14
Oyster	15
Winter in France	16
January 3, 1968	18
In Memory of Yvor Winters	19

II

Night-pieces	23
Transfiguration and Death	25
A Summer Death	28
The Last of Sundays	29
'Half light, half light . . .'	31
At the MacKenzie Falls	33
Elegy for a City	34
Language, talk to me	42
On Packing my Books	43
Eight Weeks Old	44
Elegy for Kate Mackenzie	45
A Winding Song	47
On Growing a Beard	49
To the Painter, David Fitts	50
Gnomic Reflections	51

III

Separation	57
Death of a House	58
Song: Accessions of Love	62
Skimmering, Falling	63
Where is my wandering boy tonight?	64
Song: Wanderer	65
For Peter Steele, S.J.	66
The Point	67
Lullaby	68
Stacked Deck	69
Afterwards	70
The Long Love	71
An end to running	72
Coda	73

Recognition The act of recognizing. †1. Payment on the conclusion of a bargain. †2. *Sc. Law*. The resumption of lands by a feudal superior . . . †3. Revision, recension . . . 4. The action of acknowledging as true, valid, or entitled to consideration; formal acknowledgement as conveying approval or sanction of something; hence, notice of attention accorded to a thing or person 1597 . . . 5. The acknowledgement or admission of a kindness, service, obligation, or merit, or the expression of this in some way . . . 6. The action or fact of perceiving that some thing, person, etc., is the same as one previously known; the mental process of identifying what has been known before; the fact of being thus known or identified . . . The action or fact of apprehending a thing as having a certain character or belonging to a certain class. . . .

Shorter Oxford English Dictionary

To Margot

Surprised by joy indeed and glad
of everything both good and bad
that I have been and done and had,

how odd to think as I must do
that all my life is growing to
the loss of language, light, and you—

and then to think indifferently
that all is as it ought to be:
not even time can take from me
simplicity, serenity.

Leaving Again

(for Dinny O'Hearn)

Leaving again: leaving again
the city that I love,
not before time,
I ask myself, why am I glad to be going?
No answer snaps up in a rhyme
unless 'one has to move'
be thought an answer. Then
what am I going from? On any showing
it is a world, a way,
not every man's way, perhaps, but surely mine.
'Melbourne thou art of townes *a per se*'
was what I always meant to write,
but lacked the time, incentive, and the wit—
I would show it
spread hugely in its fine
grey autumn light,
the ugly suburbs and the leafy streets
dissolved to one green study
as much mine as my body:
so lacking definition as one's own body does.

Every night in dreams one's self retreats
into a world where everything is clear
because not blurred by usage, by the fuzz
of dull presumptions dully satisfied:
there,
familiar names wed unfamiliar faces
and black and white stand always side by side;
things seen and heard
and since forgotten change
the world of common places:
like Adam given the creating word
through a new world we range,
saying at each strange sight
'We call this river *Yarra*, and this garden
Botanical', knowing we own them as
we own our vision.

Waking up, alas,
the dressing-gown still hangs behind the door,
in the plain light
as much in need of washing as before;
the stubborn world of things
greeted with its stolid derision
our frail, unique identities.
It is our dreaming keeps us sane: not kings,
finally, of creation, which must harden
into a *thereness* not in our control,
but neither automata it commands:
to see the world steadily and whole
is not the gift of dreams; but without dreams
the final threat of these
blank objects that surround
it seems
is to see *us* as things with feet and hands
creeping, insomniac, around
a few determined miles of ground.

I see you as a monster: not much help
because dreams are too few to save you from
the good familiar friend you are: my scalp
won't prickle any more, as Housman said
it should at art, at life
lived in this sheer domestic way. My wife
says, as no doubt her mother did,
with more or less aplomb,
that what we need is a whole change of air.
'In dreams begin responsibilities'
began a famous poem of the 'thirties:
well, hardly that, but going in my turn
away, making a move,
shifting my own perspective on
the city and the people that I love
might be a way of showing that I care.

Leaving again, and almost gone,
but meaning to return,
not before time, not without cause,
I ask a world and life to pause.

All at Sea

Melbourne-Genoa

1

From worry and work to work and worry,
these long days between landing
see no-one in a hurry:
all day upon the decks
they lounge about, asleep
or drily sucking beer;
at night, with no-one near,
they swarm in pairs upon each other's necks:
the sea is wide and deep.

Safe in a deck-chair, over
the pages of a book,
I watch them rise and hover,
their histories in a look
unsure, almost betrayed—
they make me feel dismayed:
nobody much betrayed me,
but thirty years have made me
a connoisseur of blank misunderstanding.

2

Two weeks out, and the slow sway
has gone on day by day: the vibration
at ours, the stern and tourist end,
seems almost, now, a rhythm.

The shipboard friendships swell and fester:
casually undertaken and accepted,
they, in restricted space,
become as cramping as unlucky marriage.

I, a sly dodger, slide
between with a wink and a nod,
making no ties, already happily tied:
I never felt so free.

Under a crescent moon
 a Scot wails on his bagpipes at the stern
 of an Italian ship—
 the desert yawns away.
 Discords perfected, soon he will return
 to the blasé saloon
 where he is down to play
 in the sad concert that tops off the trip.

The crowds that lined the rail
 for every glimpse of shoreline are below:
 they saw and snapped the sand,
 the camels, huts and palms,
 then looked around for something else to do—
 the concert, cards, or mail.
 Nobody shares my qualms
 at being still at sea in so much land.

Under its crescent moon
 the land lies dead along the dull canal—
 pastoral country once
 but just look at it now,
 as worn and white and wasted as a skull.
 A skirling, marching tune
 is all the bagpipes know.
 The desert sands drift over ounce by ounce.

The coldest greyest sea, a heavy sky
 where vaguely I expected land-locked blue:
 the first rain of the trip goes swirling by;
 the deck-chairs are all stacked away from view.

Early on deck, I take a bracing air;
 two silver gulls huddled disconsolate
 upon the lee-side rail are all to share
 this wordy sea turned inarticulate.

The whole day passes wholly without change,
 the ship goes shuddering on into the night;
 by morning, on the starboard a vast range
 of stony mountains dominates the sight.

Upon the barren slopes the eye picks out
small scattered houses, here and there a town;
no sign of movement, nobody about:
only the winter rain still pouring down.

5

About to make landfall on
a worn-out continent,
I find myself all at sea.

Not sure that I like my work,
or even what it is,
I'll soon have to earn my pay:

I too in the last resort
have found it a relief
to be lost between sea and sky.

Whatever ungod has
tutelage of the roadsteads
is about to bid me goodbye.

To Catherine, aged 5 months

Moved first from hospital to flat,
from flat to throbbing ship,
from ship to car, and after that
each stay brief, indeterminate,
until we settled here:
no wonder if you learned to ask,
as consciousness awoke
shyly and intermittently
between sleep and sleep,
that we should both be near.
And we were never far:
quick to interpret cry or look,
we watched and nursed and fed
the slow increase of light,
the way you held your head
erect precociously,
the movement of your hands
gathering certainty,
the first time you turned over—
it was not a task
but something that we did,
as father, as mother,
as freely and as wantonly
as lover with lover.
What will become of this?
For years you will demand
that we be close at hand
to minister to your wants:
and we will, willingly.
How will we tell when you
at last need to be free,
wanting no more of us,
your sole shelter once,
but room and board, no questions?
What shall we do,
who have no right to ask of you
more than already given in return?
What parents have to learn
is how to let their children go:

the learning might be hard and slow.
Meanwhile we have you, and
an unconcerned delight
prevails in all directions.
Live lightly, learn to stand,
grow in the ways you will:
always, somewhere, still
we stand between you and the darkest night.

Snapshots for Margot

One of those Carlton parties: beer or claret
(acid and cheap), three times as many people
as the two rooms could comfortably hold;
in tie and jacket, feeling rather old,
I sat there talking to a former pupil.
You moved across the threshold and stood near it.

Our conversations lingered over salad.
Married in May (with bridesmaid and best man:
dark-suited me, and you superb in white),
for seven days we watched the evening light
ebb from the Derwent valley; on the high plain
we drove through early winter pure and pallid.

In France, we took hot water in a bucket
up to the bidet where we bathed our baby,
put her to bed, and then went down to dine.
You crunched the bones of little birds; the wine
was cheap and sharp; our room was rough and shabby.
We loved it all and had seen nothing like it.

Pregnant again already, now you move
in and about the house (beneath the boughs,
over the stove); our daughter sits and babbles
or crawls like a crab under the chairs and tables
while I sit reading, brooding, seeing you as
my love, my bride, my wife, and still my love.

I.M. Kenneth Mackenzie: Cambridgeshire 1967

If I look up to watch the water stream
 down the plate-glass, and down among the trees
 the water of the moat a muddy gleam
cutting us off from the rich meadow-leas,
 I think of you, Mackenzie, twelve years dead:
 it seems unkind that none of this can please
the waking eye that in your late life read
 the play of light and leaves, the flight of birds,
 with such live comprehension. Now instead
I sit here huddled in my nest of words
 imagining how you would see it all:
 two acres that a shallow moat still guards
from the encroaching bungalows, a wall
 ruined between the lawn and rougher ground
 where in long grass cock pheasants strut and call—
lesser birds always fill the air with sound—
 and this old row of stables, now become
 a house as handsome as I ever found . . .

England and England's weather. Here the Cam
 flows calm and shallow between grassy banks,
 wandering to its city in a dream
of other Aprils; here the church-bell thanks
 all seasons for nine hundred years of stone;
 here a half-timbered and thatched village flanks
a winding side-road: here we are alone
 in country-side that Wordsworth might have scanned
 or Byron galloped through, or Milton known,
deep in the shire for men who understand,
 a shire of various weathers, where today
 a rainy stillness softens all the land
that golden stillness softened yesterday—
 all this to make you envious, and then
 London is less than fifty miles away,
the great heart of the language, the great wen
 that poets always flocked to to achieve
 the recognition that you have not won.

Jobless, romantic, how you wished to leave
Australia, where you drank too much, you said,
because your talent starved there: I believe
you must have half-believed it: but instead
you washed up broken on a mountain-side
where at long last earth, trees and water fed
an eye for innocence before you died,
bringing self-knowledge and serenity
that time can neither injure nor deride.
Now and in England, nothing that I see
can equal that: and having come to that
it is unthinkable that you might be
pleased or encouraged by the pit-a-pat
of literary London. And what else
could England offer that you had not got,
who had the language beating in your pulse,
the history in your bones, as strong and clear
as here the poets have them thin and false?

England and England's weather. Everywhere
the post-card scenery is giving way,
the fabric crumbling, unless special care
is being taken that will make it pay:
here every second cottage sells 'Antiques'.
One slashes through it on the motor-way
living between the throttle and the brakes,
registering the blank submissiveness
of all that's old to all that's new and fake,
creating a pervasive ugliness
which, unbelievable though it might seem,
flatters our own suburban wilderness—
from here I hear the bulldozer's gruff scream
faintly across the moat and through the trees;
the council houses swell up in a dream.
I sit here in my nest of words at ease,
knowing that I shall not be here for long
and perfectly secure of my own peace.

It must have been like this at Kurrajong.

Early Autumn, Cambridgeshire

Slight mist among the unfamiliar trees
(strange after months) in the late afternoon—
green, green: green fading into grey
with height and distance, imperceptibly.

Still months of dwindling till the year runs out
in rain and fog; and now a perfect hush
but for the steady whisper of small rain
and, half an hour ago, a sudden train

across the moat, beyond the wood and fields.
Hard to imagine any violent change here:
but like the hosts of cataclysmic war
the myriad leaves just wait to fall and die.

A few already drift across the window:
still early autumn, winter still to come.

Oyster

Aha, lugubrious one,
hiding in your shell
as tides drift over:
under that chalky cover,
are you spitting out pearls
from irritation?

Soft, tender-footed
soul of discretion,
reticence won't save you:
the oyster-knife will leave you
without possession,
raped and looted.

Nor will sinking deeper
forestall the time
when fresh, wet and white
you lie bare to the light,
as naked as you came
but for the clouts of pepper.

Still under running water
upon shifting sands
you balance, dumb, inert,
taking the world to heart:
but nobody understands,
sooner or later.

Winter in France

1. In Mimizan

Early to bed, and lying
briefly awake, the wind
and fierce rain crying
through Mimizan, in the south of France.

Spain behind, before
England and our language:
tonight, good food and something like great wine.
Cast on a lucky shore,

I murmur drowsily,
and among friendly natives.
The wind roars like the sea.
I drift through into sleep.

2. Leaving Crocq

Every rise and curve
revealed fresh fields of snow:
sans chains and sans experience
the travelling was slow.

At twenty miles an hour
we dropped down foot by foot,
till patches of the road
showed through as black as soot.

Goodbye to Crocq: the way
lay open to Sancerre,
as good a place as any
to welcome a new year.

3. A Child in Paris

To us, a dark-haired daughter
two months before her time,
fragile, inopportune, weighing barely three pounds.
Mute in her incubator

she knew no father or mother,
while Paris all around
offered its study in shades,
pale colours smeared across dark winter weather.

A frail and foreign child,
she struggled towards health
alone: we waited somewhere else,
knowing no more of her than we were told.

January 3, 1968

While in France an early stork
had us worried, had us harried,
elsewhere in the world, good news:
Alan Davies, Helen Hughes
in New York
were getting married.

Absent from that bright occasion,
ignorant indeed,
we were not enabled to
give the day its ritual due:
no celebration,
no sympathetic special feed.

Looking backward, we can say
that what then seemed a mess,
a cold and inauspicious day,
was lit with happiness:
impossible at last to tell
what means work to what ends,
what, in the end, will be well—
but this day saw at once
the birth of our dark princess,
the marriage of our friends.

In Memory of Yvor Winters

Slow, almost lugubrious, of speech,
with every year a narrowing reach,
he had that which is hard to teach,

uncompromising disregard
of fashion, faction, and reward.
His judgement was both clear and hard.

Who runs may read. Illegibly,
husband, father, gardener, he
lived out a plenitude of days.
He had my love: he has my praise.

II

Night-pieces

1. Wedding song

Empty goblets stand upon
a linen stained since it was spread;
the claret and the lamb are done,
the bridegroom and the bride are gone.

All the rest is silence till
light gather at the window-sill
and the first birds start to sing,
drowsily awakening.

2. Flu

Remembering wanly
the moon-faced teacher
who once predicted
'Jones, you will go far',
I wonder if
I have already
come far enough—
one of our twenty
best-known poets
under forty
in some views,
I lie awake
with a sore throat,
I cough and sweat
in a dark room.
Outside, the moon
pours brightness on
leaf and stone.

3. Claire de lune

After I close my eyes
the pale sky stays with me,
clear, wide and high;
I lie tranquilly,
drifting away in moonlight.

4. In the rain (for Andrew Taylor)

Wrapped in a sodden coat, standing under sodden trees,
watching a dark house, and one dark window particularly,

taking at each half-hour a short, sharp swill
of rum, to keep him warm, he keeps a vigil

unpaid, unasked, unwanted, even hostile.
He might be there still.

But that was years ago: awake at four
I lie and stare out at the steady down-pour

across the vacant lawn, out and across the empty street.
No-one is standing under the single street-light,

there are no trees. Nobody is watching—
but me, that is: I watch, I listen to the rain.

Transfiguration and Death

(for Leonard French)

I

Small, birdlike, brisk, industrious and mean,
towards the end she couldn't keep things clean:
thirsty, we couldn't bring ourselves to drink
without first washing glasses, but the sink
itself was covered with a film of grease,
the tea-towels smeary; everything of a piece—
outside her door, the half-wild cats had mange . . .
apart from that, she hardly seemed to change.

The twice-cooked meat, the cake in which the currants
sank to a soggy bottom, the apparent
chill in her greeting: in thirty-five years
that's all we knew of her, and it appears
that no-one knew her better, or not much,
except her husband, once: under her touch
he took to keeping bottles in the wood-shed.
Retired, he died for years till he was dead.

So buttoned-up so long. . . At ninety-one
fever undid her: when she was undone
things tumbled out, the jumbled stock of years
in utter disarray. Mainly, her fears
become apparent: such-and-such a person
assumed the rigid figure of a policeman,
another the grim visage of a teacher—
she shrank away, and nobody could reach her

but those her dimmed wits seized upon as kind.
To everybody else, out of her mind
she was dismaying. Waking, sleeping were
indifferently terrible to her,
her worst delusion a display of light
with flowers and music, laughter in the night
about her house—shivering with fright
she turned on lights against a dream of light—

while company and daylight brought a dread
that she would be discarded. Propped in bed
utterly at the mercy of her state,
she wished not so much to propitiate
people around as simply to belong
within a family's love, and now, though wrong
about the time of day, the lapse of years,
she showed real care for other people's cares—

although precise relationships and names
sometimes escaped her, much as at some times
a mild aphasia blocked her eager rambling,
leaving her frowning, puzzled, tense and trembling.
So for ten days she hovered on the brink
of light and darkness, taking meat and drink
in miniscule amounts, unapt to keep
awake when waking, or asleep, asleep.

II

Transferred to hospital, she lost her place.
When we first went to see her, the first face
we saw on finding the old women's ward
was a crude death-mask, yellow, waxen, hard,
fixed in a kind of toothless, mindless yawn,
snoring out life that seemed already gone:
her bandaged gossips, querulous, hard to stop,
were talking, talking, talking at their top.

Clumping around that antiseptic space,
it seemed each dying woman had been placed
where nobody was dying but herself,
neighbouring by younger women whose ill-health
kept dignity, like death, as far away
as chatter could. *How are you love?* Today?
The inoperable cheer of sixty years
whose legs are bad (*They won't stand up my dears*)

shadowed and cheapened what it might be like
to be dying, dying of old age, all ache
of time, but neither of today nor of tomorrow
nor yesterday, and neither joy nor sorrow

but blind confusion, absolute confusion
gathering ninety years to this occasion:
being alone, bereft, witless, insulted,
lying there waxen-faced, eyes closed, exhausted.

And yet, she managed mainly to look spry
for visitors. Once, yes, we passed her by,
arriving early, seeing in that bed
only a shrivelled face we took for dead,
but hearing foot-steps, knowing we were there,
she struggled to sit up and comb her hair.
Now at the last, at last she seemed intent
to share life: shaken with merriment

she tangled and untangled simple words,
and when we took her walking through the wards,
arm-in-arm-in-arm, she faintly sang
and skipped in feeble dance-steps to her song—
lapsing absurdly to a grave decorum
when we met cheerful strangers: for *them*
she was the Lady Mayoress in her pride.
She thought they had been drinking on the side.

Loving and holding court in her last bed
she only knew the times that she was fed
(all she would eat was ice-cream) and the times
when visitors with nothing in their arms
came to hear what her memory could disgorge,
never avid enough quite to assuage
a sense of being old and sick and dying
with too much truth to tell after too much lying.

A Summer Death

(The speaker is a young mother who has taken an overdose of sleeping tablets)

Sorry the windows aren't too clean: I never managed to keep things as I like them—funny that after living so messily so long I should become as tidy as my mother, or almost, or want to be. But lying here on the unmade double bed, the sun comes streaming in pretty much the same—an odd time to be dying. Am I dying? Very relaxed, more relaxed than for weeks, for months, for years, I can't remember quite being so absorbed in the mere play of light across things, colours, shadows, the clear run of weather that's so mild and yet so sunny. Hard to remember now the constant bother of marriage, the accusations and the lame denials, the sour talk of love forever, the quarrels about bills, deposits, cheques, because it's all so clear now, and so soon: watching the curtains stream and blow apart, I know that there's an end and a new start now, about now, a lightness of the heart.

Something is terribly wrong, terribly wrong—I can't now even hear the children crying, drowsily sinking in the summer afternoon.

The Last of Sundays

Planing away at blank, submissive pine,
the last hour and the next as free of thought
as ritual allows, a shore-bound sailor
hopelessly in love with ships and colour,
he's making a grey pelmet, filling out
the details of his wife's quite broad design.

The poodle's neurotic, skulking
under the couch, it's better
to put him out of doors to skip and run:
she leaves him on a long leash on the lawn
(shaven, rolled and watered). Later
the captain will take him walking.

The last and best of the late autumn sun
is left for pottering at the back—west—wall,
patching the fabric. When the shadows climb
over his hands he stops, looks at the time:
a sundowner, a walk. Nothing at all
darkens his mind, nothing is left undone.

Artistic but not lazy—
months since she touched a painting,
though not for want of wanting—
between 'phone-calls she's busy
altering hem-lines, getting
ready for prayer-meeting.

After a supper out of *Woman's Day*,
a glass of muscat and a small cigar
then bed with Dickens or Jane Austen: *Pride*
or *Prejudice*? He still can't quite decide
just which it is that holds them as they are,
but knows that he's committed either way.

Audience gone, she chatters
briskly to herself,
noticing uncomfortably
how little, now, it matters.
Deftly, ably,
she re-arranges bric-à-brac on the shelf.

A quiet man, God knows what rioting
voices go chattering on inside his head.
Their grown-up children, loving mother, hover
on hysteria's brink, take to drugs or drink.

'Half light, half light . . .'

(Kenneth Mackenzie, 'Sick men waking')

Waking uneasily, wondering
just where I am, which is
exactly where I might expect to be,
at home in bed beside my wife,
I wonder at my wonderment. *My life
Lacks, after all, simplicity
So much for so much pondering.*
I give her a half-hearted kiss

somewhere about the forehead; she
turns over in her sleep. *Now what—
what was I dreaming of?*
Was it that she or I had fallen in love
elsewhere; or was it that
more simply she no longer cared for me
nor I for her; or were
the images my censor cut off sheer—

waking me to this dull uncertain light—
more horrible and stark
figments of darkness?—I can still
remember dreams that left a lasting mark—
But no, this wasn't terror, this was dull
disquietude: I woke because once more
treading the threadless labyrinth of night
nothing was not as it had been before . . .

Something like that. Images, scraps of talk
come floating back.
They have a life-like look, and at that rate
I woke up with a good day's fretting done.
But I keep fretting on: *now what—
what was I thinking of?*
Is she? am I? are we? in love (and query love);
what compromises are we living on?

Turning again, she throws
an arm across, her thigh over my thighs;
we settle close. Outside
the rain has started really pelting down;
sleep washes up around me like a tide—
dear heart stay with me while I drown. . .
Life seems a whole life later,
light rising slowly through the falling water.

At the MacKenzie Falls

Drenched in the fine spray
flung by falling water
wearing stone away
on a cold clear windy day,
I think before and after:

millennia of water
running over stone,
rock wearing, crumbling down,
wind blowing on and on—
neither sooner nor later,

neither true nor untrue.
All around me, rock
rises sheer and stark:
and over that, there arcs
illimitable blue.

Elegy for a City

(for Frank Sanguinetti)

City, dear city, famous for
your thoughtful ugliness, farewell

I Carlton Party

That night there was a party (we weren't there),
young academics at a house in Carlton
with students, sometime students and odd friends
crowding the old tenement, lots of beer,
claret and other grog that guests had brought,
smoke (cigarettes, cigars, perhaps somebody
puffing a pipe, or in a high back room
passing a joint around), the record-player
going full blast with rock and roll, the people
huddled intensely into knots (the knots
enough to crowd the rooms) with everybody
talking just loud enough to be half-heard
by his own knot above the music and
the sad, harsh music of humanity—
in short, a Carlton party just like one
I walked in late to once, and asking if
I had the right address, found that at first
nobody knew precisely whom the house
belonged to, or quite whose the party was. . .
Well, there they were, speaking of F.R. Leavis,
John Lennon, Che Guevara and Marcuse—
the heroes of our culture—no-one knowing
whom they were talking to, or whom about,
except a few sad squares (the party-goers
of yester-year, taking the whole scene in),
but getting on just fine, till gradually
things started to go sour in crowded corners:
a wrong lot had come in, just drifted in.

You couldn't pick them
by their long hair, black leather, pointed shoes,
they talked alright about Bob Dylan and

Mick Jagger (if not Leavis and Marcuse),
but this lot turned out slowly to be out
for girls and fights. *And fights*—it was traumatic.
At first the girls had gone along, excited
by the 'real life', the brashness and the raw
sexual proposals; then they started
to realise it wasn't all a game
and started to get scared and look for shelter
under the wings of blokes they knew. It ended
in the back-yard with broken bottles. No-one
really got hurt, the wrong lot drifted off
looking for other parties to break up.

In next to no time—
a week or two—the people who had been there
were blustering about it. Nothing changed.

II Dinner at Eight

Scarlatti playing softly, just as once
he might have played in grander private places,
predicates almost all there is to say
about this little enclave. Now as always
emphasis falls on order—everywhere
music is raining lightly, but they hear

none of the showering notes, they only hear
a soft accompaniment to what they say,
audible perfect pattern; in their places
pictures and books suggest an everywhere
which only can have happened here and once,
looking as if they must have been there always.

Not, of course, that they are fixed for always:
neither the people who are meeting once
to say what now they say, hear what they hear,
nor yet the things in those peculiar places
in which they seem so settled as to say
that this is where—having been everywhere—

they'd like to stop; for here, as everywhere,
just as the falling music sounds new always
although the melody is played again and once,
so what is said is still again to say
until those listening can begin to hear
a true note ringing through the commonplaces

which they must say again in other places.
At least a sense of ringing-true is here
something expected, as not everywhere,
even in things which can chime only once—
the meat, the wine, the cheese, not things for always,
about which almost all there is to say

is 'That was good', and 'Thank you' . . . One might say
with such vast blank disorder everywhere
that such a quiet enclave must seem always
pampered and precious; but even now and here
it echoes with a sense of other places
where things were meant for always, as for once.

At home, talking of places, all they say
is that's like everywhere, and that's like always;
listen more closely, hear *and I was there once.*

III Half-world

A bar—almost any bar might do,
whether modelled loosely on the speak-easy,
the grime concealed by indirect lighting,
smoke making the half-light hazy;
or with pebbled glass letting the daylight through
onto worn lino, butts and ubiquitous tile:
though mainly they displayed a sense of style
(‘Claret for lunch? He'd order
the best we had’)—with lots of drink and talk,
nothing in writing.
Abortionists, policemen, stoolies, lags and lawyers
unable to tell cheese from chalk,
manslaughter from murder,
successes from failures,

themselves from one another—
and not inclined to bother
so long as things were fixed and nothing broke.
That much is now on record; in the smoke
surrounding the dim flame of an inquiry
other faint shapes appear as friends,
visitors, party-goers: these evoke
professors, gunmen, politicians, whores,
makers and breakers of our laws,
driving, one would have thought, to different ends.
Whoever was not named will not be sorry.

Los Angeles, Miami and Chicago seemed
creations of the thrillers that we took
free from our city libraries, badly dreamed
to shudder us to pleasant sleep: we slept.
Waking, we find black fantasy no more
the shameful province of a book,
evidence of corruption dense and shifting—
however much inopportune, inept—
in our own morning papers, slowly drifting
from the front page to page twenty-three or -four,
and know ourselves in a metropolis—
not now that stable, backward-looking city
which once we took it for
with boredom, love, or pity;
rather, a free field for the psychopaths,
the politicians, criminals, police:
another figure for the graphs.

IV Sunday

Standing there looking older, greyer, they
are reconciled as on no other day
to old age and retirement, as our car
disburses two shrill golden girls who are
the youngest of their grandchildren; who run,
comically comely, shrieking with the fun,
down the steep driveway into waiting arms.
Inside the house, the new oil-heater warms
rooms very much the same as they have been

for—would it be thirty years? They seem smaller somehow, with the four children gone to marriage and professions, moving on to other suburbs, other cities. Nothing's changed: just the same furniture is still arranged just as it was, except where in one room a telly-set is cornered in the gloom of closed venetian blinds: it doesn't look like something that's much looked at. In a nook the bookshelves bear the same small range of titles in the same order: life is not beer and skittles. . . But now the rooms are streaming with the light of afternoon and our arrival, bright with children's chatter and grandparents' laughter—equally heedless of before and after—in which we stand encompassed by a love simpler, more selfish and more certain of itself than we can, yet, quite understand: cupboard-love, yes—a love where each demand is met (for chocolate frogs, for lemonade); for which in turn the grandparents are paid by perfect satisfaction: nothing more is asked of them than what they have in store ready to squander. But with that they give most, now, of what it means to them to live, familial love, so hard in other ways to show, to prove, to offer nowadays. When we sit down to eat, they say, *O Lord please make us truly thankful*, and the board bears in effect an offering to us and to our children, simple, without fuss.

V Cocktails at Six

Parking our battered Morris vaguely across the front of four garages which were not waiting for us, we rang the doorbell, then were taken to a terrace opening off the gallery and den; there we were offered 'charges'.

The sun looked much more mellow
through polarised, green-tinted glass; the shade
was welcome, and the yellow
canvas on teak was bright
if arguably callow—
martinis helped me to make it all look right
against the colonnade.

But even then our dress
seemed somehow slightly wrong for the occasion.
What should one wear to mess?
Black tie would be alright, or
something supposed to stress
artistic freedom—something rather tighter,
even more out of fashion.

How bright the chatter was,
how awful all the drinks, the fleeting meal:
views on the current plays,
prunes wrapped up in bacon,
talk of the galleries,
wine-bibber's talk—and most of it mistaken—
cocktails with lemon peel.

Wealth overwhelmed us most
along the gallery and in the study,
where, far from looking lost,
paintings hung in a crowd
asked, 'which one of us cost
our owner most' almost as if aloud,
sulky-sounding, bloody.

It's hard to find your way
with acres of split-level everywhere,
even if, as they say,
you make yourself at home,
to have a piss: you stray
looking for bathrooms till you're tight and numb
and gasping for fresh air.

VI Elegy

Waking briefly on a windy night
gusty with rain,
I lie listening to the dark.

Somewhere far off I hear a car
coming closer.
The humming motor, then the change of gears,

bring back the country nights
of childhood, under stars,
when all the landscape listened, and we woke

to hear a car go by.
A townee from my birth, I wonder why
the night-sounds of a city should evoke

the wonder of a silent countryside
between the drifts of sleep,
then sleep. Next day,

trying to call to mind
moments of wonder from my forty years,
what I remember most are days and nights

of country stillness, scattered here and there—
moonlight on rounded hills seen from a train,
a small stream in high mountains,

wind blowing on a foreshore far from home,
sunlight across an English field,
darkness among the redwoods,

water, rocks and trees
moving, sounding in
a stillness under stars or in the sunlight.

Now in a city park
I hear the sound of water and of leaves,
at home I hear

the stridulation of the crickets and
the chatter of the birds at dusk and dawn,
can single out

starlings and common mynahs; now I watch
the black crows flapping raggedly into
the red-gum, hear their raucous call;

find life encroaching almost
into the dead heart of the city where
I centred for so long my hopes and fears.

Language, talk to me

Language talk to me, language
tell me what I know
after forty years—
language, will you show
the way out of the labyrinth
to me, myopic, slow
and singular as when
I fell in love with you
twenty odd years ago?

Language talk to me, language,
while I listen for
the wheezing snuffling clumping
of the Minotaur:
now from your endless store
recruit a devotee who
on this illegible shore
lost, without a clue,
turns as ever to you.

Language talk to me, language
teach me what to say
in the face of disaster,
in the height of hope,
as things fall away.
Mother-tongue, lingua franca,
all that anyone knows,
bring me, kindly bring me
to a perfect close.

On Packing my Books

(for removal from one
University building to another)

Packing them into cartons carefully as eggs
so far at least as their irregular shapes
will sit conformably, odd rectangular pegs
in a square hole, I wonder at them all:

the formative works that I will never read
again, the worthy books still unperused
snapped up at book-sales, rest in the same bed
with my not-so-much-thumbed perennials.

Here, hoarded as by all accounts the squirrel
gathers in nuts against a harder time,
most of them now seem hardly worth the trouble
that all that busy garnering once took.

It all looks like a way of life, however—
Australian history, psychoanalysis,
Remembrance of Things Past, the dull, the clever,
grist to the mill of my insatiate lust

for what? for knowledge? or for reassurance
that I as much as anybody else
could show not only quickness but endurance
through the vast tracts of ponderous-pondered words?

Watching the milestones thud by in reverse,
what chiefly sadden me are the lacunae—
books that I read but never owned, and worse
books stolen, lost or strayed, a few of them.

Still, I enjoy the sheer bulk, book upon book:
to have read, to have thought of reading, all of them,
or most of them, gives me at least the look
of learning of the order I should have,

and if my wife and daughters think me less
formidable, less cumbersome than that,
they may be right, but who would ever guess
as volume follows volume out of sight?

Eight Weeks Old

(for Myfanwy)

Serenely swaddled, only her face appearing—bright-eyed, crowned by a brush of soft dark hair—she nonetheless looks no less alert, no less alive, than the most assertive, most articulate of us. Her eyes are already her own, unsubject to change her nose; her mouth,

neither her father's nor mother's, change though it may will be hers; her ears are perfect: apart from its innocent cheeks, the face is fully formed, or almost fully formed, and won't much change except to reveal the imperfections of time, and the perfections also of time, the coarsening and refining of it all as she becomes increasingly herself (what will her teeth be like?).

Swaddling is not her chief security: her life-style demands no dangerous liberties, but sometimes she likes to be free, between sleeping and feeding, in those increasing idle times, to wave about her unacknowledged hands, perhaps her feet (these too

already declare their shapeliness). Her accomplishments are not astonishing: she sleeps unfailingly throughout the night; she holds her head uncommonly erect; she smiles and gurgles responsively on occasion; endearingly, on occasion she rejects all blandishments, turning and turning her head, shifting her eyes to look at nothing; she cries when she is hungry.

Her appearance, her accomplishments, unremarkable enough as they appear, and properly, on the page (who wants to hear a father's love-song to his eight-weeks' daughter?) more than suffice to win an undeviating, tireless dottiness. I ask myself why, I ask my wife: is it regressive, a refusal to accept adulthood, experience, life, a backward cry for an unspotted state, that kind of thing? But what I feel is a kind of light and buoyancy in things, including me, and with no back-lash. Today I asked a psychiatrist: love for their young is common to all species and perfectly O.K.

Elegy for Kate Mackenzie

What I expected to meet on that first occasion
was a virago, even then
likely to gobble up diffident young men
without saying grace—
certainly not this decent little woman,
grey, timorous, mousy even,
firmly suggesting for lunch some kind of collation

to be had nearby—vegetarian, 'organic' . . .
the details of our repast fade
almost as if our being together made
her attention span
my own—it must have been ninety in the shade—
and therefore nothing that she said
struck me as rich or strange, until with sudden panic

I heard her mildly say as we walked from the landing
of the Taronga Park ferry,
vis á vis talk of her own theosophy,
how long she had planned
to hand on at last her husband's poetry
only to someone who could be
trusted to bring to it the proper understanding.

In her little old car we climbed up steeply winding
roads high over the harbour to
the theosophists' haven, and on the way
she lightened my mind:
it wasn't the case, so far as she could say,
that Mackenzie had cut clear through
to Blavatsky's truth—his truth was of his own finding.

She parked the car and we climbed to a sort of attic;
under its high window-sill,
surrounded by cases—some unpacked, some still
labelled and piled flat
as if in transit, serving as a table
for tea and biscuits—with good will
she answered what I asked, generous, unemphatic.

She was much too vague to satisfy any scholar—
and later, with time to reflect,
she was no better, could never recollect
what to say at all
on any of my patient matters of fact.
I think she couldn't quite connect
questions like these to her blur of feeling and colour.

But I must have seemed from the start just as dismaying
to her as in her way she was
to me: not the man she had hoped for, alas,
making all my grey
enquiries centring baldly on time and place,
nervously reluctant to raise
the issue of what all that poetry was saying.

So for her, accepting my part in things was partly
for her dimly to acknowledge
that all those years had given no privilege
to what she knew by heart.
The poetry was not made in her image;
she wished to do it no damage.
It was a trust she would have to surrender shortly.

Poor Kate, little Kate, grey Kate: whenever I met her
she was any and none of these—
ill-cast as the poet's widow, but at ease
as having done more
than was asked, and with her own faint dignity
which always made her seem to me,
through our slight acquaintance, more poised, somehow the better.

There must of course have been those for whom lamentation
ran deeper—her son and daughter,
some of the friends she had at times about her.
All things have their place,
and my love and knowing of her were slighter
than I could wish they were, after.
But Kate Mackenzie's death wraps me in contemplation.

A Winding Song

If the lyric simplicities still

rise to my mind in the morning,
they never comprise the whole music. Delight, yes,
delight is still my element.

But waking

at four o'clock, say, to wonder

why I've woken

and finding that what I've had

is not exactly a night-mare
—too plain and simple for that—
more simply a dream

in which you preferred some other company to mine
(the detail meticulous, boring)

there is, in that dark hour,
wanton reassurance
in turning back into your sleeping arms.

Waking to rise, waking to face the day,
dreams shadow less: they offer
merely the cast of hope, cast of dismay

with which I look toward
your waking demeanour: if

you wake with a smile, my mood
is ebullient; should
you wake with a frown, I know
that I can cope. But if,

of all things, what you choose to do is shut
your eyes again, turn over,
pretend that neither I
nor our girls need your attention

—as indeed at that hour, practically, we don't,
which allows this kind of performance—

why then, without choice, I cope
but the day
is overcast: the sun

should it witlessly chance to be shining
can cast no comparable shadow.

If the day begins well, it continues
well; if poorly,
somewhere about mid-morning
I expect a phone-call—or make one.
Then

I'm on duty again, and able
equably to face
supplicants, colleagues, the boss,

recalcitrant classes (unless,
however contrite its start,
what goes along the wire
ends in the crepitation of
minor recriminations:

those days when nothing goes well are best forgotten),

a sunny monster of
beneficence, goodwill
(paranoia discreetly tucked away),
unable to help it if

that in itself—the sheer inclination to smile—
estranges me somehow from

supplicants, colleagues, the boss,
recalcitrant classes, even
the boys in the bar after work.

Sing hey! for the private life whose complexities dwarf,
however labyrinthine,
all that the rest can do
in the way of intrigue, back-biting,
encomium, friendship and love.

Eager I am each evening
to wend my way finally homeward.

On Growing a Beard

Goodbye little chin—God knows
when I'll be seeing you again.
I never thought we'd part like this—
another healthy, durable prejudice
shot, gone down the drain
like all the ones about clothes.

That mossy old thing in the mirror, who is it?
Still me, no doubt; how absurd
after forty years with the same face
to be pitter-pattering round the place
hiding behind a beard.
If I shaved it off, would I miss it?

Not even my id would care much, nor
my ego, nor whatever else
made up the cuddly old roly-poly self:
we're still not used to the touch of werewolf
under the towel, its patently false
suggestion that we might bite, bark, roar.

And yet, little chin, farewell—
perhaps forever: the dangers of porridge,
of moths, of snot, cannot restrain
the strange venture now begun.
What is it? Not an essay in courage,
nor even, so far as I can tell,

a matter of pride. I guess
it's something odder, something quainter,
hard to describe, hard even to recognize
as the caterpillars crawl beneath my eyes
and the clear-cut lines grow fainter and fainter
and the little old map—well, yes,
gives way to wilderness.

To the Painter, David Fitts

Your craft is not my own: although I can
remember or imagine something seen
and ghost it into words like any man—
better perhaps than most—I lack the sense
of visual being mattering profoundly.
I am aware of an impermeably dense
world round about, and I have always been
caught up by it; but registering it roundly

is quite another matter. For me, the dream
remains the paradigm of those occasions
when all things seem quite purely what they seem,
fraught with unquestioned significance and yet
reluctant to be surrendered into ways
symbolic, linear, programmatic, not
merely those sheer illusions or disillusions
which radically transform our knowledge of our days,

bringing both light and dark to our precarious living.
To me the painter who is worthwhile seems
to feed on nightmare and illumination, giving
whomever may care to look a new perspective
on how things are for himself, for better or worse.
Of all the painters I know still painting, still alive,
however problematical your themes
you strike me just like that: therefore this verse.

Gnomic Reflections

1. Proust

Because she could not help but turn and look
back to the burning cities of the plain
Lot's wife was turned to salt: through years of pain
this man became the pages of a book.

2. Marginal note

You must expect to be misunderstood
if when you strike the *mea culpa* note
you make it sound too good.

3. The Muse under the shower

She might indeed have been called 'Memory's daughter',
her hair over her eyes, her ears full of water.

4. A fine line (for Bruce Beaver)

It's not the anarchist nor my fettered betters—
I'm inching out along the razor's edge
between the critics and the men of letters.

It's not the prayers, the endemic polemics—
I'm inching out along the razor's edge
between the nitwits and the academics.

It's not the parasites, the sodomites—
I'm inching out along the razor's edge
between the lovers-of-verse and Leavisites.

It's hard to say, God knows: I suppose
I'm inching out along the razor's edge
between death and prose.

5. An intellectual feast

The next genius but one
along the banquet table
sat with his flies undone,
willing but not able.

6. The academic wine committee (for Bob Priestley)

'Quite an appalling bouquet'
the plumper men agreed
(it seems to have smelt a lot),
'not one our Wine Master chose'.
Thin, with a cold in the nose,
one said in a troubled way
'It tastes good.' O what a clot—
not the type that we need.

7. On Johnson's decision not to re-run

One mistake only, one
which a statesman had to make:
he backed his administration,
including the Pentagon.

Reviled in prose and verse,
nobody's darling,
he held to his course:
the next will be worse.

8. Reflections in an airport washroom

Mea culpa:
I have not saved
Western civ.,
I have not cleaned
my teeth
(the nicotine won't brush away)
I am in love
(unjustifiably)
with vanishing things,
with what is vanishing—
really, perhaps, myself.

9. Oscar Wilde

When fate descended on him hugger-mugger,
what did being witty do for the poor bugger?

10. To a reader of the next millennium

Despite the extensive likeness of all lives,
for all your scholarship and my lucidity,
you will never know quite what it was to be
one of the late blue-eyed contemplatives.

11. Time please, ladies and gents

Caught here with one foot on shifting ground,
I try to find which drink's my cup of tea.
If anyone can stand another round,
the jokes are on me.

III

Separation

In the height of summer, in drought,
with a lurch like a glacier calving—
terrible strain, cracking, discontinuance—
I find myself suddenly nearer
that final isolation
where one stares blankly at nothing,
nothing stares back at one

with an unflinching gaze.

Death of a House

Mt Martha, 1973

1

The verandah light glares on the rotting boards,
shows the tall grass in the some-time driveway, fades
into the wilderness of shrubbery and dark. . .
At one a.m. cars hum along the highway,
somebody's dog is barking.
Fifty years ago, when this house was built,
there was nothing much to be heard,
even perhaps at noon, but the wind and sea:
it's one of the last of the old houses—
little enough, in an unconscious style,
dingy enough, hard to keep clean, enwrapped
in enough land to make an estate agent's mouth
water in anticipation. Two
double-fronted solid-cream-brick bungalows
could as well be here, and each with 'spacious grounds'.
There is as well, on a block connected
curiously at the back, facing a side-street
which has itself become 'desirable',
a four-room bungalow built out of driftwood
(with water, sewerage, light) which nobody
uses now; which recently its neighbours
(not the new mauve-brick own-your-owns, but rather
the thirty-year-old well-kept weatherboard further on)
claimed as a health-and-fire hazard, damn their eyes
and the mannerless dogs they keep.

It was in
that bungalow (which I remember without
sewerage, water or light) that my childhood summers
were lit by sun and Coleman lantern: this house,
and decidedly grand it seemed,
was the realm of my forbidding grand-dad, tall
and hard to imagine; in his absence
his eldest son with wife and boys were here
(my father was the second oldest son).
I played with them, I never really liked them,

hardly have seen them since
except at funerals and
as we exchange possession of this house
at the height of summer. They seem
perfectly nice, despite their odd religion,
especially the youngest one with the French wife.

2

In photographs I can be seen
clutched by my loving mummy
at three years old, on a deserted beach
that stretched for miles (she looked younger then, too).
In others, my brother and sister, even
a lady I called 'Aunt Ida' (I have
no idea who she was: she certainly wasn't
an aunt) also disport
themselves in out-dated costumes,
all looking happy, and happy not just as if
for the snap of the Box Brownie
which I suppose my father, absent
from these as from other scenes, held.

3

Once my grandfather unbended:
he built me a replica of the yacht,
'The Seagull' (named with that same unerring
taste for the inevitable which made
this house 'Moonshine', the driftwood bungalow
'Sunshine'), which he, the family's last
big-spender bought and owned for—
was it a week?—until
he moored it just off here and the wind
came up, broke her moorings, and broke her up on the reef.
The old romantic. It must have been
after that that he learned to watch the weather,
became as good at it as the fisherman—Don—
whom he used to help with the nets.

Anyway,
I didn't much sail the yacht, mainly because
too many other kids wanted to help me with it:

it wasn't our beach anymore: I put it away
carefully in the boat-shed (we had two dinghies
and a motor-boat: there weren't many then)
for better times. Next summer
it wasn't there. I asked my stern grandfather:
he had dismantled it because
I didn't seem to care for it enough.
Even then, I think,
I knew him for the sadder one. Much later
I found that I could talk to him a bit:
on this verandah. He gave me lemonade.
He drank a bit himself. He got senile before he died
I'm told. I of course was somewhere else.

4

The old man dealt in real estate himself.
He had enough foresight to buy a lot of land
round about here. He sold it:
too soon to make a killing, late enough
to make early retirement feasible, while
his second son as junior partner worked
harder than he ever had at their real estate business:
forgivable from my point of view, because,
not rich, he seems to have had a flair for life,
at golf a low handicap (three, I think).
He and my grandmother turned this place
into the plentiful garden whose abandonment
reels away now from the reproachful light.
Just over there in the dark, a good lemon-tree is dead.

5

This verandah, so generous, so beautiful, so perfect
for summer nights like this, with a cane lounge,
a book and a glass of wine, has become something
you watch your footing on; the garden,
laboriously stripped of its native tea-tree,
looks better at night, at least, than it does by day.
Though the main fabric is sound, this house is dying.
A bit dingy, a bit dark, almost decrepit,
it isn't the place at all

that you'd bring friends to if you wanted to impress them;
it's been outbid by houses all around.

Since nobody owns it (bless her wandering wits,
my grandmother hardly counts), nobody
cares for it, literally, and nobody,
so far as I can see,
cares if it dies, though with it
all sense of my granddad and grandma, and all sense
of their extended family will die.

Granddad and grandma can't be sad now; I can't cry
either, farewelling that lot. Still,
somehow I care, I care:

here more than anywhere else my memories cohere
in ways that I've been thinking about all night
(‘Sunshine’ and ‘Moonshine’ indeed).

Soon my old grandma will die, the price be right,
the executors sell. Right in their way of course.

Song: Accessions of Love

Accessions of love come
almost as if with changes of the wind:
hours of being industrious, bored and blind
are rift by moments of bewilderment—
there we are and what is wrong?

Lonely, singular, dumb,
I try to live the virtues of good prose,
plainness, an elegance needing no gloss,
free of both dullness and astonishment.
Thinking of you breaks into song.

In your absence, my darling, love
is no great comfort. Still,
to be feeling, to be alive
is something to be grateful for. I move
from day to day by habit and by will
except when the fresh winds arrive.

Skimming, Falling

Nervy and light as a flock
of house-martins on the wing,
you are, so far as I can recall,
the only beautiful woman
who looks more beautiful smiling than when sad.

The loss of your love was a shock
which seems beyond repairing:
nothing, nothing at all
can replace that original sense
that in your ambience I could not be bad.

High-wheeling over a rock,
lost to the princes of the air
your skimming became a fall
into the mere, vexed human,
and devoid of the sheer flight to be either grieved or glad.

Where is my wandering boy tonight?

(for Frank Kellaway)

Whether they're intellectuals or bums
(not that the two are mutually exclusive),
the insecure sons of insecure mums
yearn towards something elusive.

Nature intrigues them: they explore
the plumage and flight of birds;
the farthest peaks, the ocean's floor
are their domain, at least in words

Mute or articulate, they divine
kinship, estrangement from all things:
manic, depressive, sober, in wine
they know the icy fate of kings.

Always somewhere within their horizon,
like and unlike the shadow of mother
(a longing for home, the fear of prison)
they quest for a caring Another.

Good people, warm in your beds tonight
pray for the boys who wander
from insight through darkness to insight
to your enlightenment, to your wonder.

Song: Wanderer

(for Gerri Savage)

Wanderer, wanderer through the drifts
of a shifty, shifting time,
how well you confront the winds
blowing wherever they blow from.

Capable, alert,
easy to be with, and
whatever's on your mind
not too easy to hurt,

whoever at all could think
it easy to consign
you, obdurate, tender, talking tough,
to some corner of his mind?

For Peter Steele, S.J.

The more things sway, the more it might be argued they
describe arcs round some centre; but that is
an elegant, an almost Jesuitical
contention of a kind that satisfies
nobody, least of all a Jesuit like you.

What's coming from these tremors? History says
that all upheavals leave us *homo sapiens*
behaving not much better than he did,
if not, indeed, much worse. Nothing at all suggests
the perfect consummation of all good
unless one sees Apocalypse impending, thus
a new and righteous order in pure chords.

Feeling our way among such imponderables,
each with his odd sense of things that even
might prove to be crucial, neither quite thinks of mere
ruin as curative, chaos as salve.

Nursing and nursed by your strict belief, nonetheless
some sense of impending radical change
though not in the scale of time must reassure you
as I am not reassured: nothing, none
for me but sheer admission of the sway, and then
somehow the effort lucidly to prove
transcendence of it perfectly by remaining
neither more nor less than my muddled self.

Some things are not on: but to know that for oneself
one has to have some sense that one is not
an isolate washed over and over by tides
swelling beyond his comprehension (who
wants to be schizophrenic except Ronald Laing?):
so one deeds friends of durability.

Why I have had, and above all have, such good friends
is something I have never understood,
for which I am properly grateful, even though
I always sadly thought it showed a lack
of insight into my black nature. Oh well. Still,
thank God, whatever that means, for you, Peter.

The Point

(for R.A. Simpson)

The point, I imagine, is
not to learn to expect
betrayal, self-deceit, lies
however thick they collect
in the cul-de-sac of one's days,
half-noticed, half-numbered, half-checked:
but rather to learn to praise
fidelity, trust and love
which in their modest ways
continue to be and move
(however mocked, however derided,
however difficult, indeed, to prove),
utterly undivided—
if inarticulate or mute,
still mortally decided.

Neither fashionable nor astute
this point to take to heart:
merely final and absolute:

without it no people, no life, no art.

Lullaby

(for Denis O'Hearn)

The things that happen really don't,
the things that do, well God knows why—
free, fleet, thick, fickle, bearing the taint
only of causality.

Rock in your endless cradle, dream:
chaos to an infant eye
might threaten trembling, shaking, screaming
or simple harmony.

Just hope now that of all the lies
at least one will look new and true,
a demon in the nicest guise
especially designed for you.

Stacked Deck

(for Jim Young)

To hold a good fistful is
not in itself enough:
if one spends something like
six years guardedly playing,
fending off the always impending blow,
and then finds—what?
that all of it was finesse?—
one might at the same time find
some loss of interest in winning,
however odd that be
for a man to whom *homo ludens*
had always seemed a percipient phrase.

Where is the game at now?
(What a cry to come welling up!)
No answers are forthcoming.
To discover, to invent
a whole new set of rules
might take him years, might take
the rest of his life. In the meantime
the ace of spades is high;
one looks for new partners, knowing
not quite what to know them by.

Afterwards

(for Chris Wallace-Crabbe)

When the future has dropped its chopper across my flickering gaze
and the calendar leaves lie idle upon their rings,
gathering dust like the glasses, will there be one who sighs
‘He was a man who used to notice such things’?

If it be in the dusk when, like an eyelid’s soundless blink,
a sneaker-shod scholar comes wandering in a fright
only to stop, turn, scuttle back, will anyone think,
‘To him this must have been a familiar sight’?

If I pass during some nocturnal blackness, breathy and warm,
when the likely lads are trying their vices on,
will one say, ‘He strove that such innocent creatures should come
to no harm,
but he could do little for them; and now he is gone’?

If, when hearing that I have been stopped at last, they stand at the
door,
watching the traffic’s random ebb and increase,
will the thought strike those who will hear my chatter no more,
‘He was one who had an eye for such mysteries’?

And will anyone say when my lectures die out in the room,
and the sibilant murmur pauses in its outrollings,
till it rises again, sweeping like a new broom,
‘He hears it not now, but used to notice such things’?

The Long Love

(for Alan Davies)

Too deep an immersion in
the Romantic poets, or
an insecure relation
with mum, the conjunction of stars
at the hour of genesis, or
something within genetic structure itself—
we know of course which one
of these wild hypotheses we
would soonest back, but neither
knows better than Yeats how to cope
with the notion of life-long attachment:
all that's over, let it fade.

Well yes, of course. But how
did Yeats himself go? How
are you going, going to go, how
will I go myself, with all
the chips down, half of life
still to be played, and played without a wife?
Not too badly I hope. One thing
I've learned from you though, talking
about Freud, about this and that:
if you can't beat them, join them.
Meanwhile, on with the game.

An end to running

(after Dylan Thomas)

It started back before I can remember—
all my life I have been running scared
of shadows, faces without number
because, by God, I cared.

The whole damn' thing was growing to
recognition of a face
not in the mirror: not me but you:
and strange and delicate to trace.

Dark is a way, but light is a place.

Coda

All of the stories the old storytellers told
went in the end back to the beginning.
A hill-side house is something to try to hold,
losing or winning.

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