Book IV

The Better Poems of
John Hewitt

From 19 November 1943
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On hearing Music

The man who made this used another tongue
than this slack speech we chafe our fancies with.
His house was other. Both his name and kin
I know so lightly I can scarcely guess
if he should give the landslake of a friend:
and yet this thing he made will warm a heart
when I am cold, as it has armoured me
when one good heart I love is ticking out ...
I pause to marvel how it leaps the bounds
and mocks the limits set by man to man,
the twisted mouth, the fingers round the ear,
not understood so lately. Sharper yet
that it should hold a piece of travel through
the small vext struggles that comprise my mind
into a resonant cave which lies beneath,
after slow voyage on a dream-dark stream,
steepled & hung with corals that require
no hammer-blow to touch them into sound
that echoes even out of memory.

16. XI.

Of Friends Overseas

Awake and thinking now of friends
I lie a bracken, lie a stone
or curse the draughty Nissen hut
or lean upon the rail alone.

Now dance of masks emerges first
one heeled a weathered bilge keel
running her rule along the wood
or leaning in the Dorset glade
to hear the drumming woodpecker
or watch the squirrel frolicking
who knew the long brown Antrim hills,
the colours of our niggard spring:

and Cecil somewhere in the sun
is striding urgently to scan
some bloater's lotus monument
or talking of obsidian
to yawning men in khaki shorts
who curse his tedious interest
in plant & stone & artefact
or pointless predynastic jest:

and Patrick graven now & tired
with gentle fingers seeks to find
the fevered wound's geography,
the scab upon the tortured mind,
and thinks, perhaps as I must think,
of myths of talk so far away,
& kicks the dry Italian dust
& longs for a november day
when peatsmoke blows across the road
& trees are bare in field & lane
and Antrim sunset-fingers yet
in wheel-ruts pull of shining rain.

1 Hester Mayberry
2 R. P. Mayberry M.D. (poet)
3 Cecil S. Cree author of "A Title for Burney"

17·XI

Ambition

Ambition is a wieldy thing;
it buys and banishes.
The man who bends throughout the noon
finds sunset only his.

For some it is the little box
whose finger points the way
and shows no anytime we look
how far we've gone astray.

The tilted cross against the sky
the tallest cross midmost of three,
for all I care may keep it yet,
worm-riddled shrimp, on Calvary.
It brought no luck to mine or me.

For all the men my sense begot
clothed in humility or pride
sleeved on the flesh or on the heart
the thorny crown, the wounded side,
the sentence of the crucified.

They failed to finish out the course
or never started on the chase
for that defeating virus ran
its poison into every place:
our eyes betray a beaten race.

While there is time, if wise, we'd seek
for other images instead;
the tattooman walking on the tide,
the old man's bride sky-garmented,
the seven stars round Mary's head.

19.XI.

Sign Post-

Three swans came flying from the north
over the town -abreast and high
with beating sweeps like galley-oars
across the sunday-quiet sky

But when they came above this house
they sudden turned, no more abreast,
and in unhurried level file
drove out towards the glowing west.

I well may guess from whence they came
and to what shores they sought to go;
though round they steered their course by me,
what sign they read I'll never know.

- - - - - - - - -

This wood wears death beyond the season's death;
the tax of time has sapped its capital,
its interest can scarcely keep the birds.
Infrequent thistle and ground-ivy here
still signal life amid a world's despair

Book

20/22.XI

7

November Wood

Walking today beneath the bankrupt trees,
the long grass grey and shabby & the tracks
glazed with the rain, defeat seems absolute.

Here where the berries bred defiance of
brambles' defence in depth, shrunken & black,
a few remain on winter-shrivelled bush
that if you reach a hand & touch the tongue
are tasteless drops of water round a seed.
The seasons of the leaves are stratified;
the first, save for the ribs, dispersed in clay,
the later layers gone rotten but intact,
and crisp on top, the silver sycamore.

On a dead trunk brought down by falling years
are mats of moss soft to the cheek and dry
with little crocus-threads of hanging flowers,
and all the thorn-trees sheathed and smothered in
a fur of lichen lifeless to the touch
through which hard haws thrust out on slender stems,
their shape and colour both irrelevant,
with the dead texture of the muffled twigs.

[continued opposite]

23.XI.

The Heifer

Above a high dark topped by frost-stripped hedge
the sloping fields that ran abruptly till
it met the sky with ragged rim of grass
was crossed by cattle browsing. All save one
brown heifer that had shouldered to a gap
and stood remotely gazing down the road
with grave dark eyes, her muzzle laced with frost.

And as the car presented to the climb
a stronger pulse, I had a seconds space
to catch the stance and on the easy rise
outflanking the high ground, I found my thought
fumbling for explanations.

Was it fear
that soon or late a shouting man would come
up the steep hill with dog and twisted stick
to drive her down the way her kindred went?
or that her lonely calf days came again
when the soft-muzzled mother lurched away
and in the slow rain hope still held a thread
to draw her back in all her friendliness
with the rough comfortable tongue, the teats
smooth on the grass-rasped mouth?

But caution checked
my leaping fancies with a sober doubt,
and I dismissed the image finding more
evocative and plausible motifs
better conditioned to our timid thought
that seeks known signal for the safe response
in contemplation of familiar rooks
nodding and jerking in and out among
dark stooks of flax uncarted, or the mob
of reckless starlings taking trees by storm,
then sudden scattered over all the sky
like tea-leaves in a basin swirling round.

5.XII

Pangur Ban

My wife's thick needles click and slide:
her fingers loop the dragging wool.
The pencil makes a scratching noise
across the paper on my knee.

The glove she knits will warm a hand
that time has chilled. The lines I write
can make no claim to any use
beyond a vain dexterity.

8/10.XII.43 11

The Ways Diverge

I read awhile before a shrinking fire;
the minutes pile like ash. In another room
my father coughs. He has not left the house
since the white hawthorn on the hill beyond
his window and the streets' end was in flower,
that now is black with winter. Last July
a foal ran with its dam about that field
gawky and undaunted. They have gone
out of his life as many things have gone,
the trivial, the irrelevant as well
as the known posts by which his senses steered.

He lives now only in the newspapers
that cram their seasons in a single day
from the expectant morning's offered sprig
to the late evening's stop-press epitaph,
and in the voices out of the thronged air
that fringe and feature what the grey print gave.
Letters and friends report remembered things.
The invalid's grave ritual insists
its certainties, but time has narrowed in
between your walls and spread its ripples out
over a life of affectionate energy

now flattened to a pool of retrospect.

I, in my prime, enmeshed in these same actions
he gave his days to, duly make accounts,
but feel the sharp warm shapes behind my words
rigid and cold, inconsequent and strange
as infusoria upon a slide.
And so I sit here already on two worlds
diverge and change in quality beyond
mere separation of the parting paths
that makes coincidence impossible.

Moult: Railway Carriage

Weary of all the mouths of passengers
chewing with wagging chins, elastic cheeks,
wide in their talk, or puckered on their pipes,
curled to grimace behind a magazine,
or yawning in a loose lead, I observe
the grey beaked rook upon a leaning fence
and the brown horses plowing up the grass
into moist lips of clay whose kiss is life.

Barren

27.XII

The Graft

My grim fore-elders
My eager people reached this misty shore
later than thousands who took easier ride
in trim caulked plank bobbed over the grey sea
and stuck their tall spears in the yielding sod;
yet
but hearth-rolls evidence three hundred years
since the rash Irish brigand named the fields
to the dark-suited clerk that we should till
for noted rent and service.

We have lost
what land that was, tough farmers of our name
still labour in Clonroot (once walking there
I took a bet with myself the first milk can
I'd come to at the loaner's end should bear
that name, and it was so) and if the coin
turns up the side I call for, I should like
my fifteen acres with a slated house,
an apple-orchard filled with sprawling boughs
and dappled calves beneath them, and a hill
when
that late withholds the sun's last flames
in a bare ledge.

Yet this indulgent whim,
rootless as smoke, will disappear as soon.

My father's elder brother found his hearth
a long shot farther in the fabled west;
his son, my cousin, took a German wife,
and their tall children are Americans.

My father's younger brother died in France:
his soldier son is known by another name
a name I do not grudge him, for it is
a good man's name, of a just and kindly man;
and he will likely find his world is bound
by the high castle over the windy town
and the salt breezes blowing from the Forth.

These are cut off from Ireland. In their hearts
Whitman and Burns, Wallace and Jefferson
may throng the plinths the heart must always raise:
but never can Cuchulain or the proud
king-baiting bards this bare and lonely land
bore for our spirits' nurture - for our spirits' -
for we have lived so long upon this soil
beneath these lanterned overhanging skies
and given our bones to this enclosing mould
that I would challenge any black-browed Gael
to prove a deeper mystery than we;
and yet it seems that when my last breath ebbs

That small three hundred-year adventure ends,
and the slow stubborn English attitude
grafted upon the Keltic turbulence
dies in one branch that had with better luck
borne fruit and leaf not listed in the book,
which yet may come but will take another way.

The Souterrain

We cut the sod. We dug the heavy mould
to bare the stones that stronger folk had laid
over their tunnelled dwellings. Pick and spade
reminded back and arm that we grew old
save for the lad whose easy gesture told
that this was something near his usual trade.
Absolved by age the nodding farmer made
his shrewd predictions we should find no gold

At last the stone was scraped, was bared to light
and shifted as the mould began to run
in sand-glass trickle slowly out of sight,
and for a moment gold could never buy
I left the restless world of moon and sun
for the cool air of still antiquity.

27/28. XII

Christmas Day

At noon a flock of rooks dispersed and high
passed slowly over, certain of their way.
The fine rain ceased. The sun came out to stay,
and at the Cross Roads mustered leisurely
men met to talk; and in the woods nearby
a rifle banged, for it was Christmas Day,
and sober farmers had the right to play
though every field unplowed should question why.

It was far more than
~~not merely~~ sabbath of restraint
with its tolled duties and its vacant spell
when the good husbandman with silent stride
marks out his bounds, and notes the need of paint,
of broken fence, of tillage going well,
and evidence of spring's returning tide.

Bell Jan' 48

30/31. XII. 43
Packing the Present
new work Book

19

The Swathe Uncut

As the brown mowers strode across the field
shapes flee before them thrusting back the grain,
till in a shrinking angle unrevealed
the frightened hare crouched back, the last at bay,
for even the corncrake, blind in his dismay
had found the narrow safety of the drain.

And so of old the country folk declared
the last swathe holds a wayward fugitive,
uncaught, most gentle, tremulously scared,
that must be, by the nature of the grain
the spirit of the corn that should be slain
if the saved seed will have the strength to live.

Then by their ancient ritual they sought
to kill the queen, the mother, and ensure
that her spent husk and skull be safely brought
to some known corner of beneficence
lest her desired and lovely influence
be left to mock the next year's signature.

So I have figured in my crazy wit,
in this flat island sundered to the west

the last swathe left uncut, the blessed wheat
wherein still free the gentle creatures go
instinctively erratic, rash or slow,
unregimented, never yet possessed.

The Yacht

I perched in safety on my father's shoulder
(light for my age and I was not yet four)
to watch the circus flourish up the road:
sunlight on brass, and on the dry laburnum
with pods I must not pluck.

The piebald ponies,
the roaring clowns, the barred and nodding beasts,
the fleece-thighed cowboys with the banging guns
the beautiful lady on the fat white horse,
and all that creaking wealth of caravans
had reached the corner at the hot road's crest
and disappeared for ever.

They are gone
with kites and marbles that I thought should be
part of my fortune forever,

and my lovely yacht,
a stout seaworthy shape - a sailor carved,
not one of your slight Shamrocks trembling on
a long torpedo-keel.

One summer day
I set its bowsprit for a wrack-fringed rock
my father pointed, across the bouldered pool.
The voyage halfway finished, suddenly

the boom swung over, and she bobbed her bow,
the brown-sailed "Argo", to the narrow gap
the fishermen come through with dripping oars.
We watched her head for Scotland out of sight,
and I limped home to a ruined holiday.

I gave my rabbit, gave my football boots
where they served well a season and in turn
were handed on & ends I never knew.
I did not grudge them: they were freely given,
not even like toys to orphans, with a sense
of comfortable virtue spiced with guilt,
but freely, as I'd share a bag of sweets.
I had no choice. The yacht was taken from me,
The things that matter are the things time takes.

Cushendall in Winter

I come again where verse has never failed,
where in the sheltered north of the deep bay
the long hill Lurigedan - and the blunt
sheep-bitten whin-bright cone of Tieveragh
contain my freehold and admit my scope.

I had the right her, none has questioned it,
to take the colour of ledges, forms of growth,
the song and flight of birds, but most the flight,
and mix them with the faces on the road
to shape a mannikin world of little lives
that have a true proportion in their place
wherein they mime and gesture safe from change
in a locked chamber of my restless mind
which I can enter when I have the need.

But now the landscape barren and the earth
not lively yet save in the gold of whin,
in hesitant flowering currant, and among
the hedge-foot grasses gold of celandine
offer no largesse to my snatching thought
who lack the plowman's faith that in the dark
crow-furrow scarred across the withered stubble
signs a receipt for certainty of grain.

The Old Stone House

Here in the old stone house
well his wit-laurels from the mad squires' view,
where muddy coachmen on the cold flagged floor
stubbed toe on heel to slough the heavy boot
before they twisted aching limbs to bed,
where later, gardener after gardener
held dirt-grained fists to taps
but could not wash away the friendly smell
of mould until they went into the mould
we somehow share the brave humanity
of hearty men, of knowledgable men
whose talk was grape and vine, whose wildest tale
was of a fabulous rose or fecund mare.
And we from thirsty in the desert years
of roaring streets and blanched stampeding crowds
suddenly turn our heads towards the door
expecting some tall man to snick the latch
and bring the tang of leather into the place.

But for the sea's persuasion and the salt
wind bitten from the east, the earth had been
sheathed in frost's crust, snow wedged in crutch of trees,
for it was cold. The sky hung threatening,
with random landfalls of flakes that reached as sleet
the raw wet soil, or ran mercurial
in bellied beads along the withered straws.
And in this truce, this indecisive gasp,
I swung at tether, waiting for the word,
the word full crystal, giving resonance
to the clapped notions jumbling in my mind
that took for frost to earn the pay of breath.

29.2

We vex our minds with thought. Pursuit of proof,
at times, forbids the easy acts of sense,
and to the halfpen and gear-driven hours
offers no more than, at infrequent moments,
the child's surprise that two and two make four,
a thing to babble of and shew to friends:
while vacantly the sad and patient heart
wraps callous fingers round a wincing cinder
and longs to stretch to grasp the falling sparks
before they blacken in the sober air.

The iceberg bulk below the waterline
drives through a richer world than splintered prow
that rocks inconstant, vowed to gall or stir:
the dark keel never leaves its element.

19.7. 27

Arranmore:

The small boy drove the shaggy ass
out of the yard along the track
rutted between two drystone walls,
to fetch more turf to the stack.

Barefoot he tripped behind its tail,
too shy to beg and stride at us;
an older lad would match our pace
and find some topic to discuss.

He swung his switch, a sally rod,
his bleached head glinting in the sun,
but only flicked his ragged thighs
and pattered nonchalantly on.

x

We spoke no word. The boy, the ass,
the rutted path across the bare
unprofitable mountainside
were native to this inland air.

But as we followed, rag and patch,
the thing that braced the splintered creel,
the bare, rubbed flank, the hooves unshod

growing awry and down-at-heels,

so woke our pity, I pronounced
a bitter sentence to condemn
the land that bears such boys and beasts
to starve the beauty out of them.

X

The small boy heard - not quite my words
but rather say - my angry tone;
a bright flush warmed his sunburnt neck:
he struck a sharp and jolting bone,

and drove the ass with prod and cry
clean off the track and out of sight,
although the deep tiny trenches lay
clearly ahead like on the right;

misjudging my intent, and sure
that we were proud and critical
Your father's breast is very dear
if you are poor, if you are small....

From a Sonnet-

Could I equate them: thought and spoken word,
I were a wiser man than I can shew
from evidence I have but overheard
in the coiled chambers of my challenged heart.
I can but find the mask and speak the part
which least denies what my best moments know.

Cherry Tree

There is a high and lovely cherry tree
topping the sprawling apples, reaching to
a tall and never-wind-neglected beech,
that carries on a bare and splintered branch
errantly thrust from the close interplay
of sudden elbows and involved twigs,
a socket-nest of bees that fill the shade
with all the stirring life of sycamore.

The cherries grow far out of hands' stretched way
and can be gathered only from the grass
when chance snaps stem in ripeness. Most of them
are left to thrushes and the weather's care.

It seems a just and honourable act
that in this garden there should be a place,
a gesture of oblation and of thanks
for green fat pods and rain-veined cabbages.

Function

No longer now the panache of the duel
the cloak flamboyant with the proper attitude
the wind-blown locks the numbing guarantee
the gaunt brow mooning up the misty hill.
The poet now must tread the common level
be member of, as active as may be, board, council, subcommittee
this board or that, must speak responsibly
on trend and faction in the lecture hall,
dissect his syntax

must potter also, listening intent
chalk up the score of human rights and wrongs
know at first proof what is significant
in buyer's thumb or drover's gift of tongues
yet find his softest pitch for all his care
in parachuting seed and punctual star.

24.7

The Craft to Learn

I have grown anxious at this tense concern
with the poet's role, with how the adjusted cells
charge rattled clashing metal to a peal of bells:
there is no book of rules that you may learn
by heart: there is no proof that you may earn,
by patient study of the parallels,
the corpse that has been chosen from all else
wherein the biting coal may kiss and burn.

And yet, and yet there surely is a place
not on the lonely tower of prophecy,
but in the common street where, I have read,
the patient craftsmen unobtrusively
make diligence their prayer, without whose grace
the city shall not be inhabited

26.7 33

Autumn Returns

Autumn returns, although the summer's tide
shattered in trough and never lit its height
in sun topped crest of vast translucent wave.

We waited for the abandoned indolent
unroubled moment of eternity
when earth lies satisfied and senses yearn
but lack the effort to include all food
and food pervades us in an act of grace:
but chill uncertain mornings, showers at noon,
and pitiful sun provocative denied
the slow warm consummation of the year.

Now in the slack and leeway of the days
the long rope tightens to a touch of frost
to sharper voices in the evening air
and the sweet sudden odour of the fall;
and the silent rain beats down the tattered shreds
from the ripe beeches, as the chestnuts show
deep in the weft of leaves the yellow torch
on tip and tooth and here at last I stand
on the quick limits of the year fulfilled.

Sonnet

I may have faltered in my love for men,
let a contemptuous vanity infuse
my sullen features; for the part I chose
must keep my passions chill and alien
to one at least who pass me out often:
and if I lose that loneliness I lose
the inner power which my knit ~~senses~~ senses use
to make the valid moment live again
in patient verse, in phrases that contain
what wisdom I have reached by anxious art.
So, though I spend no love and even bring
to those who love me moments of pain,
I know, in spite of all my faltering,
there never has been treason in my heart.

September Lull

This is a lull in time. The oats are stooked
but not yet carted; and the blackberries
are only on the warmest bushes ripe:
birdsong has slackened, save for thrush and robin,
morning and evening colloquy of rooks,
and distant pigeons throating in the wood.
The leaves are not yet clotted in the ditch,
though here and there a low twig roughly snapped
lies yellowing in the mud. The fitful sun
checked by the frothy alps and slabs of cloud
spills momentary light on gull and cliff,
brown basalt and white feather clasped with gold
somehow eternal, somehow absolute.

The White Horse

Take then a moment in the early night
when day's black showers are blown to rags of grey
and on the twilit world there breaks a light
a moon that soon will be the largest moon
the place a lush thick meadow after hay
that slopes to quiet willows (alleys) by a stream
and all is silence save from faraway
the tired sea beating on the lonely shore

meshed in the webby texture of a dream
that gives its logic to the chance event
my eyes blink no surprise when suddenly
a white horse races down from the shadowed ledge
to pause and shiver (whinney) by the rippled edge
where the tall angler casts and casts again
his swishing rod as the black stream swirls by
and the white moon goes slowly up the sky.

Rooks in the Rain

At noon the rain began with streams of mist
that rolled and spilled along the open glen
and webbed the world with grey and spiked the thorn
with beaded light, and later sagged the leaves
the larch vainly stretched to catch the sun.

A single thrush in undergrowth gave voice
above the tedious battery of the rain
that slackened only for the gusty wind
and then continued steadily to fall
through the long sabbath hours.

The cottage smoke went up among the trees
half-heartedly. No other evidence
of life dare venture from the safe dry walls.
And at the hour the rooks flap crying back
from the bare stubble to discuss their day
and arbitrate the mutual argument
in the last sunlight on the topmost twigs,
they came without a caw, and settled down
with minor scuffles to a dismal night.

I turn to trees –

These trees are metaphors
for some green truth that traps and taps the sun
not merely in my own and lonely mind
but in that part of life all beings share
which seeps from the end-results of sense
the flow the pulse the continuity
that even gives the forked divided man
the mute coherence that a shadow throws.

These are not merely allegorical trees
fictions for fashion counters for a game
with this and this by usage or agreement.
These mortal trees have immortality
lively in sap and acid. When I walk
my heel is always on a withered leaf.

Stableyard in September

This yard's a well in time. Although for years
no neat hooves sparked and clashed the flinty cobbles
and the great door now opens to admit
only a creaking barrow, there's a sense
beyond the mere mortality of things
that gives it quality. Along one side
beneath one roof, two storied, warm brown stone,
is cornstore, stable, and the coachman's house:
the stables stacked with hay, the store with tools;
only the house maintains its former purpose.
The other three sides of the yard are walled;
there on the right hand from the house it's lower
to where it joins the tiled fronting wall,
and at its base a strip is rich in colour
with rank nasturtium and mauve clematis
that floods the corner with its lavish growth;
subdued a little by this rhetoric
sweetpea and stock suggest that they be known
more by their scent. A bank of laurels hides
the towsled wall its broad sky-laden leaves.
The runnelled cobbles are overlaid with dirt
save for a path before the latticed porch.
But here come thrush and robin when they will,

the coarse thrush coaxing round the jarring flowers,
the brisker robin giving pride a song
from tilted plank, or busy tit and finch
concerned with stubborn crust that will not fly;
these in their efforts three dimensional
flutter and peck and go and fluster back;
while in the autumn skin the air is scored
with insects whose swift courses carry light
in horizontal and tangential traffic
but never like the sunshower, vertical;
the whole yard swims with eager life at noon.

Above the walls the tall sides of the well
are lined with tree boles, elms, beeches and conifers
whose heads that end far up in branchy foliage
lively with black rooks daily setting out
on plotted errands to the stooky fields
and cawing home with comment, while the sun
still smears the upper lights with meaty gold.
Our sky is the small pool they do not cross
even when, at random, from the house, a man
will step to light his pipe and gauge the weather,
and at that instant nervously they break
into erratic flight and scuffling rape
making him feel as irritant as dust.

Chestnut and beech
sycamore and willow
with one chill touch
of autumn are yellow

Even the alder
slanting over the river
is cold and older
than you shall be ever

who hold a thought
with a simple passion
shall last through drought
to the rainy season.

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with emendations New Poems 1954

Swan

The swan I see upon the sullen water
is Leda's lover and a child of his
moves slowly now encumbered by the verses
remembered from a half forgotten year.

The very whiteness that its cold reflection
sets in a lower key to keep subdued
is white of cloud and snow and wall and collar
is gesso scumbled over the dark wood.

Its feathers are the feathers of a gull
stuck in short turf beside a gurgling lamb.
Its hard eyes are unfriendly as the eyes
of the tall stranger in the crowded room.

The bent neck swaying and the flat dark beak
are stretched neck, hissing beak when I was small,
anxiously waiting till they cruised away
where we could slide my fleet home in a hole.

Substance and light provide the unthumbed clay
my eyes give texture, fingertips give shape.
This never can be just the ~~swan~~ you see;
this is the swan I see before I sleep.

Hurst Jones 11. x 43

Because I faced my thought by the natural world,
the earth organic renewed with the palpable seasons,
rather than the city falling ruinous slowly
by weather and use, swiftly by bomb and argument.

I found myself alone who had sought for attention;
if one listened a moment he murmured his dissent:
This is an idle game for a cowardly mind.
The day is urgent. The sun and the moon are toys.

And some who hated the city and man's unreasoning acts
remarked: He is not with us. He does not say that
Power and Hate are the engines of human treason.
There is no answering love in the yellowing leaf.

I should have made it plain that I stake my future
on the birds flying in and out of the schoolroom window,
on the council of sunburnt comrades in the sun
and the picture carried with singing into the Temple.

13. X

Solipsism

Remote I gaze upon my bathing limbs
the navel-cratered belly like a mound
with running well fed by breasts' watersheds
cupped by the gradual lapping of the tides
dark fan of mons hair sways as seawrack sways
with rested codpiece lolling like a seal
and the smooth rounded thighs white basking whale
untunked somewhere safe from preying hulls.

So must God muse upon a secret place
some untrod fragment of Antarctica
above the world that still is part of him
and lacking which there were no God to gaze.

26 X

On one side this: the mathematical
the insulated theorist the mind
that finds equations for untethered thought
that rules its canvas into coloured squares

and on the other: the dream-sodden man
with only the conviction of his loins
for unstoried vision's dumb authority
I've jooled my wits with both these absolutes

for all the time my senses join the chords
with swaying prickets of irrelevance
with gay event of dawn or thistledown
(no blown seed passes but I am aware

of times and textures never catalogued)
while from Jaffers' jake or lack of life
or chemical accident, I must remain
a man rejoicing in the visible.

B

24. XI

Thunder

When I heard thunder I was most afraid
thunder for more than darkness frightened me
darkness had dreams warm comfortable dreams
not always not even often crouching dogs
or tall men shouldering past you on the stairs
but thunder is terror ripping the sky in strips
a bony fist thrust through the newspaper
thunder is sudden bombarding over the hills
rolling its shunted trucks in another sky
then all at once you are caught on the crest of the zoned
shelter is distant the hard rain smashes down
thunder exhults and brags the rocking earth
tilts at your heels the horses buckle back
the hard rain battens down in spikes of steel
short flowers will neither scent nor colour flower
thunder protests and shoulders over your head
and shifters halfway down the beanstalk stairs
relents clumps up again and bragging still
trundles his waggon over jolting clouds
and you are shivering in a dripping world.

25. XI 41

Cricket Match Betjemanesque

Packed in the carriage and swarmed at the window
we stook our heads to the master's gage;
twelve of the team with Tom for the scorer
bags on the racks of leather and baize
Summer is over. The last term is ended
This was the crown of our merriest days

Met by the Captain with solemn command
we walked to the school in the morning sun
changed our togs in the gloomy pavilion
gulped the milk and bolted the bun
changed
moved some names in the batting order
saw Bill toss and knew we had won

I was one of the opening batsmen
not for my style or the runs I'd make
but rightly because I was safe and careful
and had a difficult wicket to take
The bowler handed his cap to the umpire
and loosened his arm with a slow off break

Much has happened. Hot world has gone under.
The likely lads are sober and staid

[to p. 53

St. Patrick

So Patric once striding the flogging weathers
and hoisting hills with fire took kings to task
proud only as a man who bears a mask
to glaze his wound against the cynic fingers
brought Christ to Erin better than the others
who baffled owned the yeasty bellows' risk
and grated safe on limestone, lake, loquacious
for he died blessed and lies in his own shadow

Yet land with Leary dominant with druids
passing with stags tall-antlered down the valley
was happy only when his text vext eyes
saw the flat length from Slemish as before
Low Lough ago the boy stood with the swine
and dreamt of Christ's light-sandals in the heather.

Columcille

Of Columcille blood arrogant and royal
spilling a war like a flung fist of cards
throwing his purple round the threatened poets
and taunting the slow king with lettered vellum
too much remains within the veins and sinews
of this mad people turbulent and rash
the knuckled swift intolerance the lips
too ready with the rasp and bleeding words.

Rather for succour think of Hot Jar island
the Latent fellows singing in the byre
the small world scooped and narrowed to an Eden
whence daily he would pass with blessing fingers
to print the tides back with his sharpened ribs.

28.10/16.XI

Autumn River

The autumn river loaded after rain
wipes the long grasses of the lapping bank
earthy and dull and lardily yielding up
its smudged reflections of the coloured trees.

This was the season I had looked for peace
the mellow branches taking the last sun
the slow smooth water like a dream of time
that held the moment in a mirror's spell.

But now the crowded berries on the thorn
have gone past redness and are over ripe
the vext leaves swing as if stiffened by a frost
that hit their prime and suddenly the world
is old and sterile as my withered heart:
the sap's wheat, the buds' restraint and death
and the tired light will scarcely have the strength
to round earth's underside and rise again.

17.XI

5

The Railway

The stealthy railway that the town ignores
and turns a shabby back to, finds its fun
in women hanging washing out and lens
that scratch on cinders, and in scummy ponds
in jagged gable ends where painted words
are epitaphs of passion and of guilt.

And yet the dismal town has its revenge
the foolish rocking train must bear its world
of grit and metal everywhere it goes
through the green fallow and the curving hills
as a dull tourist insulates himself
from the comfortable gestures of a crowd
whose speech is unfamiliar.

23.XI.

The Barrel

The high fat barrel sat beneath the spout
which guided every roof drop to its care
and though the twisted spiggot spurted out
when brown just bade, the barrel was content
for all that shining blessing from the air
was held for need and use not idly spent.

And though the water was not good to drink
swilled bucket only wiped the muck off hand
or blossomed into batter in the sink
the barrel was content to take and wear
a crisp dry leaf blown off the chilling land
and floating on the stars reflected there.

[from P. 47]

One is a minister one is a doctor
and one a commander covered with braid
Some have died beyond the equator
some grown grey in the linen trade.

But I remember that summer morning
the yokels perched on the low stone wall
the bowling screen and beyond in the valley
the full leafed sycamores glittering tall
and faraway in the Polaa Barracks
the stirring thrill of a bugle call

the flight of pigeons: the cockrow distant
the smell of grass from the spiky heel
the pock and knock of the maiden over
the snick to leg and the quick appeal.
The hour is noon and the score is twenty.
The bell in the tower is beginning to peal.

That world went under. Disaster struck it
we had not the strength to keep it alive.
My innings' end was prophetic token
when what I meant for a cover drive
went straight through the slips like a skimming swallow
to the small swift fingers of Kenny Tovi.

Perfect the setting: the heart of it begins
not a county name in the twenty two.
Our parents could scarcely afford our blazers
neither the pads nor the boots were new:
less than half of our team were boarders,
but our ties and mufflers were white and blue

Whose grave approval do I seek for most?
The howling crowd that rims the level square
to roar them little pitiful despair
when the tent football shutters past the post?
The hoping athlete priests whose private boast
is in the consummation of the rare
who lack the heart's humility to share
the common consecration of the Host?

These then whose love I ask for stand between
human and warm apt for the earth's demands
who know what solar myths and cobwebs mean
what may be or may not be made with hands
to whom the best and worst are both foreseen
the wave that passes and the rock that stands.

Bell March '48 2.XII

Museum Pieces

My trade takes me frequently into decaying houses
decay not in the sense of crumbling mortar
house in the image of a tottering old lady
who bears a name once famous for trade or wealth
or skill or simply breeding
and is the last of that name
for families always end in maiden-ladies

One now, the tall woman in tweeds
whose grandfather was an artist of repute
and had his introduction to the President
and later his quarrel with the Academy
and launched his angry letters
O pitiful letters
I keep the copies safe in a metal file
Her mother had been part of the caravan
he trundled through Europe
eloquent passionate poor sure of his destiny

Now she offers us a few unfinished copies
made on his first trip to the Continent
when Rubens hit him like a boy's first cigar
a badly cracked oval-head-of-a-girl

Severn

from his Roman days when he listened to
a bronze medal from the Exposition
and a beaded chair-cover made by her
grandmother

She will die in a boarding house

I remember too the old lady fairly well
her white hair twisted up in a manner
that then was out of fashion
but now is in fashion again
her deafness and her gentle smile
her way of handling things as if
they were as fragile as the porcelain
her cabinets were crammed with. I remember
her conversation not quite so well.
something of Assissi and Siena and Giotto
and the children singing at evening
and mist coming up the valley and bells
in the morning

I remember too her shelves of books
Okey Henry James Berenson Vernon Lee
and a number of popular handbooks

like Chaffers on Pottery Marks
and the maiolica plaque of a smiling head
and the large glossy photograph of Il Duce
on the mantelpiece

She was a widow and I remember thinking it odd
that she displayed no photograph of her nephew
who was at that time a Cabinet Minister

She died later at a seaside address
and left us her ceramics but her books were bought
and divided among the friends who used to come in
for an evening's bridge in the winter.

A third took me up to an attic piled with boxes
offering me antlered heads of Kudu and Ibex
a ship in a bottle and an ivory rickshaw model

She panted a little after climbing the stairs
and sat on a box to regain her breath
and showed me a golden photograph
of her tall brother who died of fever on Rhine
after his first trip home

She was leaving that house to go to another house
a house small among beeches, lastly tenanted
and in the family two hundred years

I selected a rough edged book in wooden covers
watercolours on wormholed rice paper
a series of Chinese tortures of prisoners.

—

There was also one, small dressed in black
who rang for coffee brought in on a silver tray
She had studied in France and Switzerland
She remembered a procession once in Verona
Corpus Christi she thought it had been
and the fat little priests tinkling and spelling
and blowing their noses as they went by laughing
and talking

She had no regard for the Pope after that.

Was printed in "Bell"

Awareness of Time

Awareness of time has always been
chief symptom of a certain type of mind
Gardeners have it and cricketers and good librarians
[Time past surviving not only in the compost
time present not included only in the leaf
time future not merely in the tight bud
but three fold time the dialectical moment
in the grasp and the laugh and the carefully uttered vow

Elsit for instance in our day
attempts to render the published assertions
of physicists and theologians
through the juices and traces of Rome and heraldry

Sir Thomas Browne was another
baroque with trumpet sensitive
to the shard in the mould
and the hare's foot in the drawer

and Morris at his loom
or prodding his stick in the vat
called out to Chaucer in the next room
to fetch Das Capital from the top shelf

most men need a song or a stone to invoke it

In Ireland here it is a different matter
the past persists in every knuckle and sinew
drips from the eaves and runs its lithe wiry over
the shavings on the floor
the future can find no crevice to enter by
and cannot call time for the din of the keening

walk along a road or over a bank of earth
down a green path between deep turf pits
and you do not walk alone

Even the man I met on the crest of the mountain road
swinging his heavy stick and marching to Ballyroy
was mustered with fellows hero, scribe and ghost
Cromwellian trooper or peasant on the quay
watching the full blown sail diminish to the west
and the tonsured mason chipping out
the sustaining hand of God under the arm of the Cross
Here in the Irish air they are mingled together

The English ghosts are orderly, keep on their places
Sir Isaac slippers his steps with shining buckles
the crabbed Norman yawns in his bare stone hall

They march the stated days of their generations
like the stylised figures on a Roll Call
growing smaller and dimmer up the hill

When they speak of the footloose Irish who carry
their slums
and dump them down by railway sidings and
foggy canals
the clever men of the books have an answer handy
the scabby potato the smallness of the farm
set in a cleft of hills or wedged in the mosses
cliff edge of Europe the Irish toppling off
before
from the pressure of the Royal poneys
I have said as much myself yet remained
dissatisfied.

But the answer they do not give, are unable to give
not having the doom of the data in their bones
being orderly logical men
not born in the attic close to the wandering moon
is that we here are haunted haggridden bewitched
and run from the railing ghosts to be free in the light
yet are never quite content in a restless place
and will be haggridden till Judgment Day
when the trooper the peasant the boxer the hero the priest
are standing together free on the hand of God.

13/23·XII 63

X

Exposition:
The Brendl Collection

The man with the cleft palette reports
on a recent performance of Don Giovanni: how good
it was. Not quite first rate but better than
he'd really hoped for. Mozart stands shivering
in the bare hall. The lady looks up at last.
Cold to the knees now: his fingers dead.
To ask if he will please play something.
She is ready now. Could it be gay?
Her guests would like it so.
He bows. The clavier is out of tune.
Mozart goes home to write an angry letter
on the high cost of coaches for social calls.
The man with the cleft palate reports we suspect
is homosexual: he is talking to
a half-bald young artist who listens
admiring his own words.

Brendl with the long swept collar locks
not understanding much of the chairman's speech
hoping it flatters, smiles at the audience,
and sits behind the smile remembering
how once he raised a loan on that picture there,
there in the centre, of the little village

in the blue valley, beyond the fir-topped bushes.
His native village. He redeemed the loan
after the first bad slump. A picture is money.
Better than money. It keeps its original size.
The famous Rumanian painter gave it to
Brendl's old mother. It was his native village.
He often came back there for holidays.
Did the war miss it? Curving up the hills?
Is Zoltan living or was he a partisan?
Handclaps and coughs. The Minister rises now
to declare to congratulate and to thank
Brendl wipes his fingers with a white handkerchief
and looks in every face for answering affection
unsure as a jew. You would be unsure too
and smile and pat the sleeve
or boldly hug the shoulder of any one
patient enough to wait if your world had gone up
in bitter smoke and you were left alive
with the necessity of living and finding bread
and finding affection to sweeten the exile cup

We never have pity enough, caught
in the cracked rainbow of a dream's mirror
our friendliest gestures are for ourselves
we express ourselves in shopwindows.

This woman approaching is tall, over sixty
calm as a church tower. She offers peace
skilfully with flowers and letters age has given her
peace to dispense in ripples. She knows what she does.
Her verses are feeble perhaps because of the passion
that makes her gentle, in spite of her chosen thoughts.
She once said: I should like to be wicked for
half an hour. Really wicked. And then again:
The Chinese have more of the true art of living than we.

This slouchy man, rough grey, is inventor of a name:
his numerous male ancestors were accounted witty
and clever with their hands. He mantle smothers him.
So he must be emphatic because unsure
and catch the passing laugh because he is sad.

The speeches are over. There is a scraping of chairs.
The platform party descends, and Brendl descends
leaping to hoard the hands take against the program.
Tomorrow's photograph will also be evidence.

The aging artist revolves in a climate of his own,
shaking hands with commissions or new commissions
measuring wallspace by the lady's shoes.
Once life was passionate as a rowdy party

and genius elbowed genius down the studio stairs.
It is time now for the famous critic to ~~endorse~~ sign
the blank cheque of his Sunday morning esteem.
But the famous critic is old. There are many names.

I hand out cheerful words. I smile and nod
coasting from cliff to cliff, avoiding the reefs
under the shining wake of their greetings
myself unsure unwilling to commit .....
The artist is past his best, Brendl's collection
is frantic and erratic. The speeches were judge
I am unable to engage the throbbing current
in the twisting gestures, unable to waken and warm.

Blake sat in his garden waiting for Solomon
and Solomon came for Blake expected him.
The academician Richmond jotted a note,
and Blake's eyes shone with glory. He seized
his pencil and put a line round the terrible forms
that clash about us and wrestle in our hearts
and the most terrible one distended with power
his long beard blown to the stars.

I have read the books. I know about William Blake
just as you know about Christ but have worried out

and a stammer or talk too loudly, or make
small ineffective gestures that deepen the moat.

I talk too loudly and blush more readily than I need
but all the words of Blake on the tip of my mind
can never give me pity or power enough
to be the torch and trumpet to waken and kindle.

I carry my penny candle with inching steps,
am happy only arranging words in a book.

and Brendl goes and the clever man's nephew
and the artists and the Spanish woman and the hare-
lipped man and the Cabinet Minister all so
out on their cold orbits among the lovely stars.

21/22. XII

Men went to war, built temples, spanned the seas
as god or hero prelate judge or king
shared blessing only with those worshipping
who shuffled to the throne on praying knees:
while women laboured through their years unease
as bedded lover, wife or chattel-thing
bowed to whatever man's rash will should bring
and happy only as they chanced to please.

Men wrote the books. And yet when all is said
it is to Helen that the young men turn
Helen the idle who made Troy to burn
and wadowed half the bravest hearts in Greece;
to Mary also azure-garmented
who is the sky and fountain of our peace.

28-XII. 44 69

I told my heart to rest
and let the tempest rage
because the happiest
of man's gay lineage
went by in quietness
to their appointed place
slow moving but to bless
with unobtrusive grace.

But then my mocking heart
rocked on a stricken sea
and though I moved apart
the tempest-circled me
until I knew at last
that storm and I are one;
its rage shall not be past
till time and I are done.

17.3.45

~~Once more the Elms~~

We went today where we had been before
when the wild garlic fills the sultry air
and the full hawthorn's heavy on the heart
in early summer. Now the unclenched buds
the brazen celandine the puckered leaf
and kindly opened primrose wake again
the half-used wonder that the wheel spins round
seen moon tide season never wearied yet
although the best hearts weary and grow old

5/6.5.45. 71

Out of a Dream

Tiger my lower pads my gently, dream
lollops and gambols like charades my
glass-eyed and kindly wilt his whiskers wire
bumping to brush my fingers. I parade
his boned docility along the street
and cash the admiring glances in good coin
of preened esteem. But in between my steps
a ghostly footfall haunts a shadowed hack
a cold breath nidges down my brittle spine
that he may wake and leap and lay his claws
on the blank admiration of the mask
my fair world wonders under: if my lips
twitches to anger please remember this
and give me your forgiveness and your pity
to be a bit between the snarling jaws.

The golden birdsfoot, leafless thrift,
a small white flower I cannot name,
here on a shining cape of turf
a coloured paradise proclaim
above the flat worm-toothened beach
rank with brown wrack, hide-ribbed and dull,
its desolation broken by
the wing-beat of a random gull.

County Down

This rounded country ends in fat-leafed wood
distant and warm against the summer sky.
The staked farms spread their prosperity,
hedged and man-tended to the utmost rood.
Each field's a hill, each hill's a kingdom viewed
by its own skylark narrow as its cry
beats higher, broad and lone the last notes die
to the safe whin-fort and the gaping brood.

And yet I turn for sharpness of the breath
and naked lift of heart to barer hills
where March to March none but the shepherds come;
where no shy tombstones marks the final dearth,
where singing boldly the peat-burn spills
by rock and heather to the sag-roofed home.

25. 5. 45

To Roy McFadden on reading his "Flowers for a Lady"

When I have read your hard and lively words
I know your landskip stippt to wave and stone
the knuckled fingers dealing the stiff cards
insisting player and the game as known.
Unreasoned violence may charge the crowds:
you name the current and the killing power,
will meditate upon the scattered shards
mortality must make of any flower.

When I have read your own words, no more alone
I trace the chill flints and the sucking clay
companioned in a place, inhabited
so long by ghosts, well crutched by what you say
in answer for the living to the dead
and in no other voice than this your own.

28.7 75

Except for words demanded as a task
that lipped the rim of my brimmed mind in verse
and told a story that belongs to me
as native in this region, flesh of my flesh,
I have kept silence.

Time was far too vast
in large event for me to jumble with mine
or else I had lost something with the years,
the sure response of the senses attentive
to the grey leaves and the grey granulous stones
a language spoken once but with disuse
left as a tatter of sounds, the fraying threads
still cloak of gold to no eyes but my own.

"Rann" July '48 6·8

Sheep Fair

The gawky lad strides round the auction pen
swinging his ashplant, with a hushing noise
keeping the crazed sheep circling, as the bids –
a knuckled finger or a jerky nod –
push the slow price by shillings towards the pound.

The auctioneer leans from his plinth and asks
"Are they in the market, Paddy?"
The shambling lad
shakes a grave head, a grave self-conscious head,
flushing a little since his mountain lambs
look small and shabby to his own sad eyes.

7·8 77

Symbol

September mist made sea and sky a void
undated, hourless as eternity
and anchored to no rock or hill or bay
with shape or name that fixes it in space

Only a slow boat oared with lifted bow,
a tall man standing at the stern, his head
bent over, pinned upon the rippled wake,
a slender fishspear jutting from the gunwale;

and as they drifted, standing man and boat
and boy with lazy oars, along with them
there clicked and drifted on the water's face
the scarcely-stirred reflection, mirror poised.

The silent watchers on the nameless shore
were caught and held a moment, in each heart
the clenched ecstatic wonder which accepts
the incommunicable symbol's truth.

8·8

X

Here at the tide's turn of the moving year
feeling and thought are poised like the stiff leaves
which wait the word to fall and so resume
the cycle-sequence which is more than they
containing all yet manifest in each
and with no other meaning than they give.

The stacks are grey now in the clover green
where once the sweet hay under the wind's thumb
shewed changing nap and texture to the light:
the oaten stubbles glitters in the sun
as black rooks paw and peck the tufted stooks.

So I must wait as ripening berries wait,
as the ranked shadows wait for the heavy morn,
as the hill waits for heather's grains of light
to give a colour to its withered name,
for autumn on my tongue to find its speech.

The ocean and the storm I pray that I
may have the gannet's skill to fall or turn
with the same easy undiverted grace

12·9 79

Gannet

The gannet falls, bobs up to ride the waves
shaking his head
then easily wheels away with tilted wing
curves a half circle climbing steadily
in the wind's face and flaps against the wind
wiping and strong with effort hovering
with wide slow beating strokes. Again he falls
with narrowed wings a white hot meteor,
or lovers dropping lower till he turns
back to the unmarked spot he circled from
like a fast bowler pacing out his run

The steep waves crowd into the narrow bay;
the strong wind thrusts its solid stream of air
from the wide channel in between the hills;
unchallengable elements involved
in their blind purposes. The gannet takes
account of these unconsciously as one
whose intuition guides the wrist and eye
and not as those who calculate and plot
the moments intersection when to strike.

Whatever land or mind or heart contains

27.9

I write for my own kind
I do not pitch my voice
that every phrase be heard
by those who have no choice

their quality of mind
must be withdrawn and still
as moth that answers moth
across a roaring hill.

2.10 81

across the lock-smoothed river you may see
three dabchicks with a wide and pleated wake
jerk towards the farther bank: the evening sky
a gently-graded luminous haze that ends
in a cool yellow backcloth for the trees
still leaf-enough to give broad silhouette:
the hollows in the wide fields brimmed with mist
obscure and aid the fading day to mask
the stooky stubble and the reaped bare earth.

Peace offers its hushed blessing to the heart
its coil of trouble narrowed to the night
that wears the little stars like points of dew
webbed on a sheltered and unshaken whin:
an autumn sunset-closes round the mind.

24. XI

Die with the autumn. Do not wait for spring
and its raw blades. These will be too coarse
for you to probe into the scuffled sheath

Before the channels freeze in a hard glaze
that cracks its edges and drifts separate
daily reflecting without sympathy
the trundling sky and the encroaching light.

Or lasting longer find the hills all hard
few friends to move with round the level paths
even the deaths grow scarce in the daily print.
The values flaking into striped shapes
hopes once, left stunted trunks.

Accomplishment
raw in the harsh tall air. Nothing to hold
firmly the journey'd legions to the lips
but an old man's pulse that flutters like a bird.

2. XII 83

Nourish your heart through all the ports of sense:
let sights caress compel them to come in
that furtive cringe in shadow; let touch spin
her sagging dragging threads with diligence,
so anchor cable but a net to freight,
meshed close as flesh from the reluctant tide
the teeming atomies; let the rest provide
all they can bundle through each closing gate.

See that you miss no offer. Name and store
and set in order all. Let nothing be
a toy too small, a trophy overpast
the fingered tips which reckon less or more:
for all you know or know, these must last
the wear and tear of slow eternity.

Emily Dickinson

When I, the easy one, was hurt
as never hurt before
I fumbled back through piles of verse
for one who suffered more.

But all the poets' proverbs slept
as dry as my swept brain,
save ~~one alone~~ that bright witch who knew at once
my idiom of pain.

Out of the terrible darkness I have come
alive not maimed not marked save that my mind
carries the old hurt raw again which once
was glazed and eased with wonder .. that old hurt
the heart finds in the sheer avoiding sky
and in the proof of death, but glazes with
the filmy senses' crystalline device
refracting back the doom and drawing light
from mindless circuits to illuminate
the whispering shadows with named purposes.

The millions cough in rubble or some craped
point to the shadows calling them by name.
I guide my pity past the empty sleeve.
I, the unmaimed, the free, devise my thought
to measure with the steady shapes of growth
my instinct - signs as hopeful, though the dealth
of my good father by the night of time,
or nearly so, has thrust a deeper point
than all the splinters of a sawaged world.
My thought still charts its policies which need
a wider ring of light than my lamp throws.

After a tedious winter once again
cancelled in service which in retrospect
seems so loose anchored easily to be wrecked
by whim or frenzy of fanatic men,
I seek the place where, though an alien
in word and thought and from communion checked
by blood's dark memories of flag and sect
the benedictions proffered now as then.

For here my active mind has never failed
to grasp the comfort of enduring things
the careless give and take of sand and sea
the coarse stones by the rocking tides assailed
the leaves repeated on remembered tree
the punctual birds crop the returning wings.

The hills remained: each shape identified
by its predicted attitude; the blunt
long narrow tabletop of Dunipedan,
Tievebulliagh's maiden-lap sharp-nipplèd still,
the wall of Garron shutting out the south,
the white bright-rounded cone of Tieveragh,
and Trostan holding up the falling sky.

These heights remained, and by their rock-based marks
held firm the wide net of the casting fields
though some are plumped to brown that had been grassy
mowed into stooks or left for grazing then.
Yet there was something needed bringing
the nest of feelings I remember with.
Wall, road and tree, the press of huddled roofs
the slowly climbing smoke among the rooks
the same old ocean removed to a bay
that lipped the restless tides; I measured all,
and found the equation limping unresolved

Then aiming my content at lesser point
as one returning where the words gone
uses a stricken language, trimmed to mute

the bitter gasp, I geared my scanted thought
through the same motions as the place expects.

But in a sudden brightness, vacantly
leaning on sheltered limp above the bay
the verse extended and the spent mind raw
waiting for blessing, out of the clean sky
the flashing gannet turning in the sun
struck the light water and the ripples shocked
the world to wonder, the equation clenched.

Tievebulliagh

Off the rough cliff and into the smooth air
beneath, the ravens lurched and swam with ease;
there was no hold or halt to pause and stare
on the steep camber of the slipping screes:

but from safe leather roost I could assess
the weaving lines of life above my skull:
yet with long awe that life grew something less
and more the stubborn wonder of the hill.

The rooks rose cawing noisily with fright
flapping the fire to motion, scattering
loose loops unmeshed, in mad concentric flight
from the sharp terror of this sudden thing.

Shot straight and crying out his savage trade
beneath the rocking nests that terror flew
although he seemed to take the sun he made
the sparrow-hawk had something else to do.

26.4

The Moorland

On the bare moorland
across the brown heather
the cry of the curlew
comes out of the mist

and the blur on my lenses
the light on my lashes
the chill in my heart is
from more than the mist.

B.B.C. Typed 48

26.4

Moorland Spring

Though here it seemed there was a timelessness
not hedge nor furrow to remark the date
only the bare rock face above the moor
the misted heather and the desolate
cloud heavy sky the drenched and sapless grass
that told of a dead world unmanned unblest
yet even here the exhuberant curlew's call
and the harsh raven's dropping to his nest
insist the season surely as the blunt
sheath-budded chestnut in the city lane
reminds the blackbird to remind the town
that Jack Frost spring is at the gate again.

Irish Bookman 26.4
June '47

April Awake

Lark-bright the air; the light
from leafing hedge and willow
was jacketed with white
of blackthorn and whin-yellow.

The climbing sun made light
of purple-shadowed furrow;
white was the lime and white
the horse that dragged the harrow.

Irish Bookman,
June 47

The Ploughman

Up the steep brae the ill-matched horses climb
turn at the furrow's end in shadow stand
before the slack reins loose within the hand
are tugged and they go down another time
from fronting hill I watch the pantomime
and catch at wind's whim the abrupt command
that guides the stumble down the crumbling land
intent to burst the symbol into rime.

This man will later sow and lucky, reap
talks crops and horses, drinking at the fair
will build a stall from weather soil and spade
like him, I too shall rise and eat and sleep:
may neither ever find the cork less fair
nor wish we had been taught another trade.

What possible interest can the millions have
who wait upon them luck each afternoon
in my slow moralisings, slow and grave
on the spent blossoms of a falling June?

And would they listen even if I plucked
a brace of symbols from their narrow skies
and not regard my easy usefruct
with the same mocking unresponsive eyes?

I watched a cattle-fair the other day,
the stupid frightened calves the fat proud mares
the cheapjack hustlers with too much to say
the red necked dealers of a hundred fairs.

And though my ravished eye, well trained to gauge
not merely form and colour but to relate
the social pattern to the private page
the style of building and the likely date,

missed nothing from the clabber on the boots
to the inflections of the dialect
the freckled knuckles and the blue serge suits

the shuffling bargain and the bid direct.

I still was alien, uninvolved without
a thread to hold me there, not even a ghost
for he at least has the right to claim a thought
or to gibber if all thought of him is lost.

As I moved round among them, thistledown
blown though tall grassblades as the wind demands
out of the muck and stir a symbol spun
and thrust its hilt into my grasping hands.

a rocky joiner hardly five foot high
in overalls with sawdust in each crease
suddenly lurched in view and caught my eye
his shouldered burden bent him at the knees,

a six foot bundle of thin springy kalt
balanced and lively as unhurriedly
he and his timber drove an arrow's path
straight though the jostling crowd like fish though sea

Just looked by glance or baited with a phrase.
Though men might loiter, he knew where to go:
an undiverted purpose charged his gaze;
he had his own peculiar job to do.

13.VI.46

Friends and Neighbours

From yesterday the gannets and the tern;
gannet more close than ever held before
as we sat on the thrifty turf above
the choppy water where the fishing's best,
and tern that hovered over the wave's edge
with close black cap and beak obliquely poised.

Today the cool grey heron and the lark;
heron in slumnous beating through the reeds
close to the hedge where we'd surprised his mood,
lark where eyes hunt against the brilliant sky,
song's highest point maintained when sight's withdrawn
cloud-plummeting to heather to be lost
among the coloured finches in the whins.

These all are positive, securely sealed
against the heart's drought in the clanging street.

But now tonight the well is overbrimmed:
a man tells of a badger the other night
that crossed this lane beside this very house
glimpsed on a midnight walk, most likely come
from Tennergh, our little neighbour hill,
and heading for the yard behind the woods.

13.VI. 101

The Lodge

Here at the wood's edge in the small square house
with the sharp windows and the thick stone walls
you'd think it was a monk's cell shut from time,
yet while the light lasts there's a chaffinch calls,
not merely his brief note but the full phrase
over and over to be answered with
chuckle of blackbirds, and a robin comes
to sit on fenceposts in the afternoon;
and in the evening beyond the trees
the lordly cuckoo sounding leisurely
his name in the long field of sunlit oats
is countered by that kinder, harsher cry,
the corncrake winding up his tireless watch,
and in the dark, when the full moon's blurred with cloud
the curlew's bubbling whistles close enough
for anyone who feels that men are mad.

The Booleys

Crackling on burnt whin, springing over moss,
stopping to search our memories for the names
of little unfamiliar flowers, we sought
over the rough grassed hillside in the warmth
of a June morning for the town earth circles
the map showed for this townland, Ballybooley.

Once a brown mare led off her tall Jason foal
and grazing cattle lurched across our path,
larks singing in the light, and sinister rooks
plotting in health what to do in corn;
and in one place a pause to chart our steps
when caravans shook out its warning tufts.

Then suddenly we found our bright mounds,
small neat earth circles each a lake of nettles,
where centuries ago the young folk came
to pasture their scraggy cattle all the summer
on lush warm slopes above the village-clearing
where the old people yearned for their return.

And as we stood together, gazing round,
naming the landmarks of the stoned glens,

I thought and surely you thought, somehow these
laboriously raised, forgotten rings
were richer than the lichened walls of castles
held cleaner memories than those of kings
and their blood-sodden tapestries of guilt
and touched our pale lands with kind sunburnt hands.

9/10. VIII

The Woodcutters

They are taking the best beeches in the wood:
close to the house for days they sawed and chopped
and let the fat trees crack and tear and fall
with a harsh final sound.
We gathered the chips,
handsize or under, for firing, without the shapes
of growth or are no good for anything else.
The heavy tree boles, trimmed and safely roped
on a long open truck, have come down the drive
and down the road and out of sight forever.
The sawed-off heads, lopped of their thicker branches,
lie in red loads of leaves; the greying cows
take them for granted now.
The woodcutters,
red necked and noisy, have gone up the slope,
and only when the wind is from the northeast
is any sound of axe or timber heard.
The motor once a day still roars and stops
till the gate's opened. Every evening
walking across the hill we note each fresh
grey ring of ash where cans were boiled each day
and that day's tally of the raw white stumps.
Weather and time do merciful things to stumps.

17. VIII 105

City Morning

Sun on the city morning high on walls
drips down the awnings carpets float the corners
flowersellers fill their tins at the public fountains
and dustmen empty bins in the hooded ark
shop doors have the blank just awakened look
the fixtures in the windows tilted stiff
as if surprised at their revel and ashamed
of the coarse glances which will carry them
but the bare streets are clean and ready for feet.

The invisible elastic bands that scattered
the racing buses last night to the suburbs
now twang them back to the centre full of faces
that also drank of sleep and now are people
for a short while until by ten o'clock
an ordinary day contains their gestures
as a thick meadow the small and the taller weeds.

first Bookman: June '47 21. VIII

5.

Will

It is a matter for the human will
and will's the thing we have no answer for: -
the senses may go praying, or we may till
the stubborn clods of our nature and be sure
of some crop sprouting; and the open heart
can always snatch some wonder from the air
that for a while may set our steps apart
from the swift jostling hurry to despair.

But will works idly, like a tethered skiff
unoared or captained settling slowly down
which, given the habit and the practised hand
could carry easily past the burnished cliff
between the washed reefs and the spray cowled stone
that safely we might come to our own land.

26.27.28. VIII

The House at Leamore

This fine house built, half burnt and built again
there on the round breast of the stark lined brae
has roofed the schemes and dreams of many men
and watched for more than seasons go their way.

First there, the thrifty man who turned his coat
when the old faith seemed caught in tempest shock
and in the thick sleep woods across the Glen
the hunted priest served mass upon a rock;

and with the loyal lining he displayed
he found safe names to cut into the stone
that lies upon the Papist bones at Layde,
the details and the heraldry his own.

And the rough Gaels became fine gentlemen
their places marked safely on the coaching chart
the lodge, the drive, the shape of the walled garden;
the change of name announced a change of heart.

. . . . .

Yet after the coarse centuries are over,
an old man standing by his workshop door
first answers Glenville if you ask the address

In the old times the townland was Learmore.

His story's muddled, threading in and out
in no neat sequence for his coiling wit
remembers brightest what is farthest off
and mixes gossip with the rest of it:

and his bare words have that strange quality
which makes you leap ahead of your slow guide
till what he says and what you may have known
become a moss too tangled to divide.

. . . .

He can move back among his sixty years
to times the place changed hands from whom to whom—
the city merchants' French carved screen, he hears,
is still the ornament of the drawing room.

He stent a fortune on it then and sold it
to an admiral who wore a famous name;
it was a kinsman, in another cause,
whose rebel death gave all they have of fame.

The wheel spins quicker now: they come and go;
the Clydeside publican whose lucky bet
bought grooms and jockeys, till with a sudden blow
the bank directors seized it for his debt.

Some bought the house and renovated it
planted more trees or had some cut away
proved it too big or inconvenient
or found it more than they could safely pay;
cost for more than they could

or, more ambitious, made the architect
build a blank wall to match the other wing
put up the tower and laid the tennis court
but did not stay to see their second spring.

and then the fire that gutted the middle part
just when the painters and the plasterers
had made it neat and tidy for a bride
as though it suffered something of a curse.

Then the gay years when what was once a home
became a new hotel with bright tin sign
and tweedy golfers noisy as their cars
came roaring up the quiet lane to dine:

and the rooms added to their memories
snatches of jigs and clatter, out of key
with the shrewd Scots political argument

and the light Dublin Castle quarter.

. . . . .

The Church has taken it now. The lily Lord
with his quiet statues like a sculptor's play
the gravelled walk where stopped the Jew-in-Land
with news of Bunker's Hill or of Castlereagh

are seldom crossed by any other shadow
than that of gentle nun with hooded face
whose quiet voice and step and courtesy
give comfort to the change-tormented place.

Although the jobbons slab may still be found
in Layde's walled thicket of long grass and stone,
or the high House, a landmark miles around,
the old faith slippers back to claim its own.

—

lonely at heart, but avid for regard,
eager for friendly hands, but self-concerned
too much to yield the duties friendship earned,
I sought the melley yet remained unscarred.
Did some cause beckon by its own reward
I lent my voice and thought, in service burned
my quick hours up, yet from the strife returned,
still from the blest heart's consecration barred;

at worst, an arrogant critic, overlord
for the still values which without a voice
must yet, in God's good time, inflict the crowd:
at best, an unaccountable ally
who pays no heed to tunes for marching by,
and answers orders with an act of choice.

Verse written during the period but not recorded here since otherwise available

Townland of Peace : Bell Aug 1944 also recast in couplets in "Freehold"
Splendid Dawn : Poems from Ireland
Minotaur : Lagan No. 2.
Poem in May : Northman Centenary No.
First Comrade : Irish Harvest.
The Ruins Answer : in "Compass"