



Scenes from Home and Away

Spinnaker Tower, Portsmouth.	Polperro, Cornwall.	Pyracantha Red Berries, Colinton, Edinburgh.
St Austell, Cornwall.	Merrill Farm Resort, Conway, NH.	Bield at Blackruthven, Perth.
Boscastle, Cornwall.	Fiddlers Green, Stowe, VT.	Hawkshead, Lake District, Cumbria.
Land's End, Cornwall.	Canadian Museum of Civilization, Gatineau, QC.	Rockport, Cape Ann, MA.
Boscastle, Cornwall	York	Rockport, Cape Ann, MA.
Bield at Blackruthven, Perth.	Boscastle, Cornwall.	Fiddlers Green, Stowe, VT.
Rockport, Cape Ann, MA.	Boscastle, Cornwall.	Fiddlers Green, Stowe, VT.
Merrickville, Ontario.	Landsend, Cornwall.	Culross, Fife.
Land's End, Cornwall.	Forth Road Bridge, West Lothian.	Culross, Fife.
Boscastle, Cornwall.	Churches House, Dunblane, Stirlingshire.	Merrickville, Ontario.
Hawkshead, Lake District, Cumbria.	Churches House, Dunblane, Stirlingshire.	Mirror Lake, Lake Placid, NY.
Marais, Paris.	Jenners, Edinburgh.	Torphin, Colinton, Edinburgh.
Galerie Vivienne, Paris.	West Quay, Southampton, Hampshire.	Permaquid Point, ME.
Marina, Bangor, N. Ireland.	Hawkshead, Lake District, Cumbria.	Winchester Cathedral, Hampshire.
Moors Valley Country Park, Dorset.	Mill House offices, York.	Railway Worker Statue, Eastleigh, Hampshire.
Grasmere, Lake District, Cumbria.	Aylesbury, Hampshire.	Minster Conference Centre, York.
New Lanark, South Lanarkshire.	Bowness, Lake District, Cumbria.	Minster Conference Centre, York.
Southampton, Hampshire.	Bield at Blackruthven, Perth.	Chandlers Ford, Hampshire.
Cathedral Area, York.	Bield at Blackruthven, Perth.	Quincy Market area, Boston, MA.
Red Rose	Yellow Rose	Pink Busy Lizzies

Scenes
from
Home
and
Away





















Three people standing on a path on the left side of the image.

Several buoys (white, blue, and red) resting on the stone pier.

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ENTERPRISE



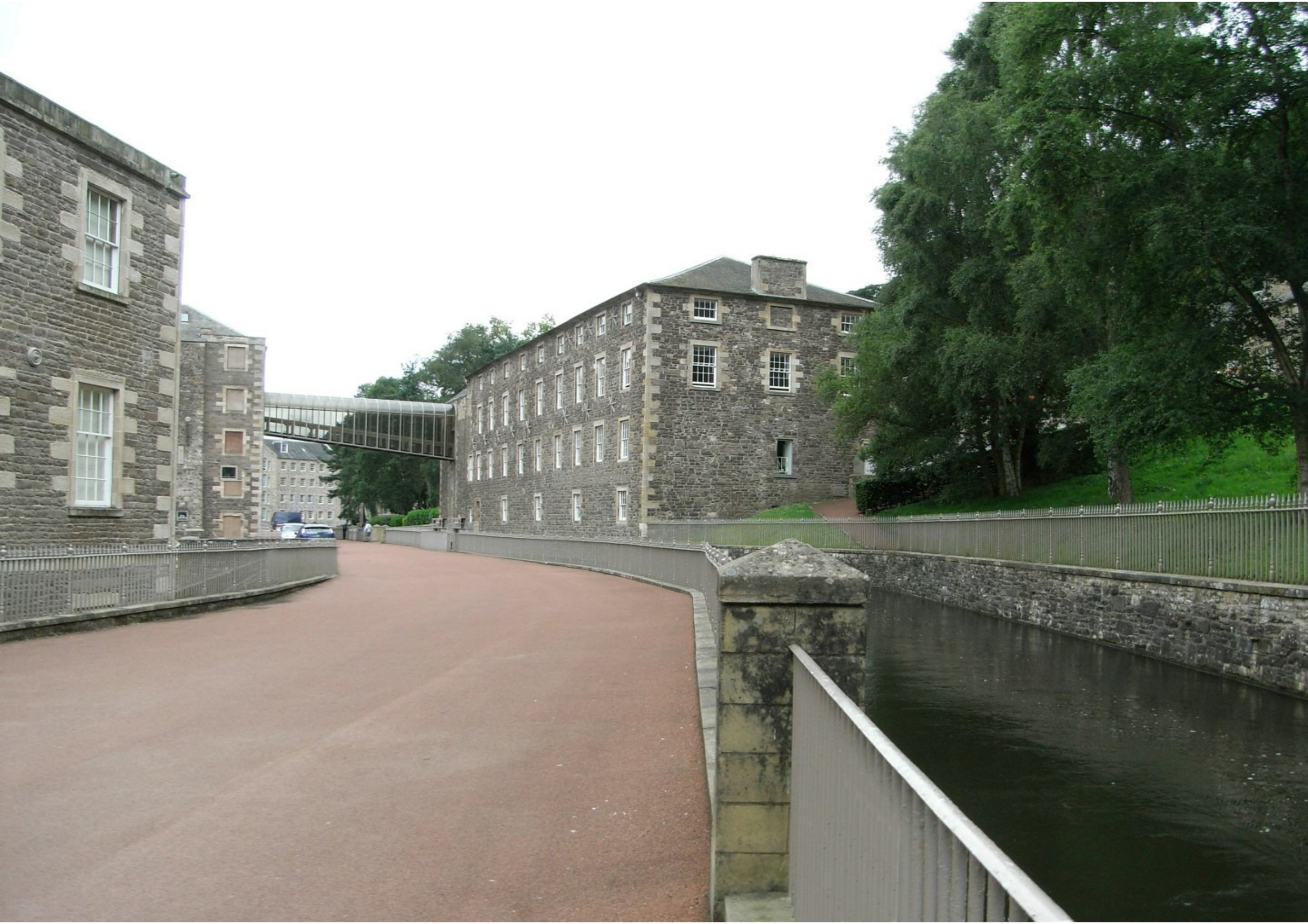








































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GAP
KIDS



Trepidation

Why should I want to appear
The expected baby said?
Outside may be cold and hostile
While now I am warm and fed.

Likewise the poems within me
Know that though nurtured there
They may someday, if ever published,
Face many a hostile stare.

For style may change and develop
But the things I want to say
Are there, to be loved or rejected
Like the dog that would have its day.

Poetry Personified

She has loved me all my life
From the very first day we met
And despite long years apart
I know that she loves me yet.

I loved her first as a child
In the infant way I knew
And throughout my teenage years
My love for her blossomed and grew,
Till I turned to another love
Thinking she offered me more
And coldly closed my mind
To the love I had known before.

This lady helped me succeed
While together with her at the start
For she taught many things that she knew
But she never captured my heart.

And once, when my life was distressed
My love was found knelt by my bed
For I must have whispered her name
Though never a word I said.
Now again, in the evening of life
She has answered my silent call
As slowly I'm learning to know
The sound of her soft footfall.

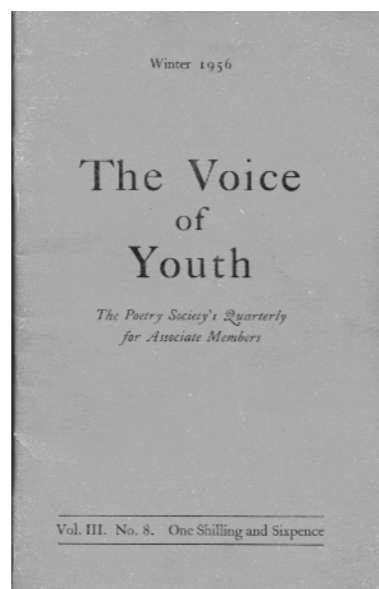
A Walk By Twilight

I walked the dim-lit level sands and watched
The ruby-tinted twilight gild the sky;
As the red frieze, with myriad sparkling lights,
Crept o'er the trembling water, the plaintive cry
Of the last lone seagull echoed on the cliffs
That overhung the shore. A call of peace
Dying among the murmur of the waves;
And sun-lit islands melted in the seas.

I turned and traced my path across the bay,
The cool sand stirred beneath my dusty feet,
The town lights glowed like sequins through the dark
Marking the plane where sky and water meet.
The tide was washing memory from the beach
As sleep washed memory from the mind of man,
And little Everests of children's hands
Broke, as ideals have since time began.

But in my mind the sun again had risen,
And children's voices sounded from the shore.
The brown waves swirled in foam around the feet
Of happy bathers, joined by more and more
Until the water echoed with their cries.

Four boys were leading ponies round a mark
While wind-blown children clung upon their backs,
Till with the softening sea-breeze came the dark.



Then rugs were lifted from the cooling beach,
And tired children, close to mother's side,
Watched the boys lead the ponies from the strand.
The sun's red plume sank lower on the tide.

The figures disappeared as they had come,
The vision of the day once more had gone,
The dark and bitter night-air whipped my face -
And left me but a dream to dream upon.
1956

Lines from 'The Circle'

Now life settles to a round,
With new sense of purpose found,
Till ambition's luring call
Draws, like water to a fall
From a pool in rocky deep,
Dreamer lately waked from sleep.
So the water through a gorge
Past steep rocks its way will forge,
With the beckoning distant moan
Cataract of thunder grown.

And the water boiling on,
Carves its way and then is gone
Towards the torrent crashing down,
Kaleidoscope of sight and sound*.



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LIFE

Then the river onwards flows
Ever slackening as it goes,
Till in stagnant pool as lain
Turns to wonder what is gain.

Then comes peace, like solitude
Full of meaning, when one would
Smooth each memory free from care.

Little self! 'Tis so when prayer
Brings an unknown deep content,
Or when arm to comfort bent
Brings a healing and a balm.
And the tumult willed to calm
Is as river spread to sea,
And a strange eternity.

Now comes death; be quiet, brave;
Now the darkness of the grave;
Now the dust upon the ground.

See the circle, full and round;
First and last together meet
And the circle is complete.

** perhaps presaging the 'unfathomed within' of 'In Evening Light'
Early 1971*

Memories

My earliest memory,
unless a dream,
was waking up

in a crowded room
in my mother's arms

and something,
perhaps the tension
in the group,
must have imprinted
this one scene
on my infant mind
for no other memories
(except perhaps one)
survive from that time.

It may have been
in an air-raid shelter
during the blitz of 1941
when I was aged two

on a night when Belfast was ablaze
and over half of its houses
were damaged or totally destroyed

for the family had run
there after a warden
had mistakenly told them
their roof was on fire.

Almost immediately
we left the city
and until after the war ended
lived in a bungalow in Bangor West
owned by my grandmother.

I remember sleeping over
with friends of our family
who had a home not far away

(for a surprising number
then of people who lived
in the terraced streets
of Belfast owned or rented
such sought after second homes)

and an unusual experience
for me was when the mother
kissed us goodnight,
for the adults in my own home
were less demonstrative.

My father and the other menfolk
in our family connection
stayed on in Belfast
throughout all of this time

and one night he
and one of my uncles
came close to being killed.

Some of the incendiaries
that always preceded
the main bombardment
had fallen among
the stables and garages
of the family premises

and my father and uncle
had gone there quickly
to extinguish them.

The standard issue stirrup pumps
seemed to have little effect
("You might as well pee on them!"
said my forthright uncle)

and instead they used the manure
that was liberally provided
by the black funeral horses
that were then the hallmark
of the family trade.

They were with the horses
when my uncle said urgently
"Let's get out of here
before the heavy stuff
comes down" and thereby
saved both their lives

for only moments later
a landmine landed nearby
on a separate building
and a large block of masonry
was hurled over some distance

to penetrate first the roof
of the coffin and hayloft
of the two storey stables
(my play place in later years)

and then tear its way
through the ground floor ceiling
between the two rows of horse stalls
(sparing those beautiful animals)
to where my father and uncle
had been standing

and it is sad and sobering
to think that the multitude
of memories from sixty years
of knowing my caring father
would then never have been

and a forceful reminder
that the vagaries of memory
are but a pale reflection
of the vagaries of life.

Diversity

I wonder if the Scots might ever say
Their words in the usual English way?
For the lexicon one here must face
Can make this seem like a separate place!

Were small instead of *mickle* said
I wouldn't have to scratch my head,
And large instead of *muckle* would
Suffice and may be just as good

(Although those words once meant the same*
The Scots are probably not to blame).
And why say *dreich* when another word,
Or maybe four**, might be preferred?
And '*Auld Lang Syne*' - lest I despair
Acquaint me back with the way things were!
For I fear that my '*lum* may *reek*' less long,
Though I love this land where I now belong,
And why go back to my Ulster *hame*
When most of the words there are the same?

So as I wish to be here for *aye*
I'd better learn the Scottish way,
For while *havering* thus in a *body's lug*
*Yin's dithering*** like a *blootered* rootless mug.
* *originally mickle and muckle both meant large*
** *see definition in urbandictionary.com*
*** *some northern English words are familiar in Scotland*

Does Money Grow on Trees

"Does money grow on trees" we say!
I guess so think the young today
For everywhere one looks one sees
Kids coming down with 'consumerese'.

Yet all of forty years ago
I cannot say that it was so,
Especially when on holiday
Much less sufficed my kids for play.

In Belfast at their grandad's home
My eldest daughter (not alone)
Was wheeling an old baby pram
That was kept there, my darling lamb.

A soldier passing on patrol
Took pity on the poor wee soul
And crying in his beer he said
"A thousand blessings on her head".

Years later in another land
This soldier chanced to hurt his hand
And thus to hospital retired
To get the treatment he required.

Full trained as physio by then
My daughter did to him attend *
And chatting as she worked apace
Learned he'd served in that other place.

My grandad's home is over there
And that's most often where we were
When holidays would come around -
Do you know the road where it is found?

I travelled there most every day
Our barracks sure were out that way,
Such poverty I do declare
I never saw till I went there.

The kids so little had to please,
Ah sure, 'twould make your blood to freeze,
If I had kids, I tell you straight,
I wouldn't leave to such a fate.

Tears welled up in his big blue eyes
So deeply did he sympathise,
His hand it shook at such a rate
'Twas hard for her to concentrate.

My daughter, taken quite aback,
Had never witnessed such a lack;
Whatever makes you think that way?
Was all that she could find to say.

Two little girls, my heart is sore,
Were playing there outside their door,
And all they had between the pair?
An aged pram, I do declare.

My daughter gave his hand a pat,
Please don't distress yourself like that
For that was sis and me you see
And we were happy as could be.

I loved that ancient rambling home
With attics I'd delight to roam;
Entranced mid old-time trove, I'd spend
From morning till the day would end.

The pram was just a thing was left,
Don't think that we were so bereft;
Imagination brought more joys
Than every room stuffed full with toys.

This poem may be all in fun
But I can't be the only one
Who thinks that something said in jest
Is often wiser than the rest.
** A strange but true coincidence*

More Gods than One

Have no other gods before me He said*
But we have fixed that by declaring Him dead!
And other gods worship from broadcast and press
Whose images tempt us in decor and dress,
And as for not taking God's name in vain
We'll text OMG which is casually the same.
Not work on the Sabbath? We would gladly agree,
But that's more to do with employers than we,
Although we'd be keen if they were to say
Our pay would be double on that seventh day.
And honour ageing parents? That's easier we found
When neither too much nor too little around
(Yet those we most welcome have shown us concern
In ways more important than what they could earn).
Don't kill or steal or false witness bear?
Some might be tempted enough to go there,
While popular as ever adultery has been
Since Bathsheba and David together were seen.

And what about covet, close neighbour to greed?
Our economy depends on them both to succeed,
For the gods of dollar and sterling and yen
Demand the obedience of women and men,
And counting all coinage, forgive me the pun,
We'll be up to a hundred in more ways than one.
** Exodus 20:3*

Humour Unalloyed

Some people were sitting at the bar
near where my wife and I
were shown to our table
beside a welcoming log fire.

We had found this favourite place
when looking for a restaurant here
in the picturesque village of Stowe
and then too a log fire had welcomed us.

The fall foliage in Vermont was fabulous
on that first visit and we fell
firmly in love with New England.

'So you're from Scotland - that's a long way
to come for dinner', the waiter said facetiously.
And I replied in kind, 'Yes it is, and I know
you will make it worth our while.'
Now the heat's on!' he said.

It was then that I noticed her
with a half smile on her lips
and knew that she had overheard.

I thought no more about it until we rose
from the table after a delightful meal
(‘I’m so reluctant to leave!’ my wife said)
and our eyes met briefly as I walked past.

We both smiled and I was pleased
that the humour mirrored in our eyes
was devoid of mockery’s alloy.

Rhona's Love

She was a single mum
and so absorbed
in her autistic son
that her email address
used his name
rather than her own.

Why did Rhona
listen so intently
as I played
Steph Macleod’s track
‘Man in the cold’
with its haunting line
‘It won’t be long
until I’m homeless too’

while the others there
took so little notice?

When Rory tried
to play a song
in competition
she quickly took
her phone from him.

The incessant rain
had ceased by the next morning
and we sat outside for coffee
in that quiet rural setting

where raindrops clung
to long blades of grass
and insects flitted
from flower to flower
in a maze of movement.

She entertained us
with a story
of once working
with young people

and of her subterfuge
to calm them
when sailing
in a storm

for she had a way
with words
and there was humour
in the story
as she told it.

It was later
after dinner
that she poured
out her heart
to just two of us
with tears welling
up in her eyes

and when we rose
from the table
we embraced.

I do not know why
she had been homeless
and in some way
neither did she

for she was a graduate
and thought in despair
'how have I come to this'?

I know it wasn't
because of drugs
for she had tried them
just once

and had seen creatures
crawling out at her from the crevices.

Carefully dressed
while being interviewed
at one time for a place to stay
she had almost been rejected

"for this home is not
for people like you"
they said to her

and she collapsed
on the floor
in a flood of tears.

Was it before then
that she had felt
more safe sleeping
on the streets

than in hostels
where some people
would inject you
in your sleep?

She went back
to her home town
after being advised
she would be given
more priority there

but she had moved on
before acquiring
the first place
she could call her own.

A wave of relief
swept over her
as she locked
her front door
and felt safe
for the first time.

She had taken
whatever jobs
she could find

and while working in a bar
she met Rory's father

who later
"didn't want to know"
and left her
to bring up
her autistic child
alone.

Rory was the centre
of her existence
and nor would she
have wanted it
any other way

for "he teaches me"
was all she said
as in admiration
I watched them together.

This is a narrative
with names changed
and places disguised
to preserve the trust
she placed in us
when sharing her story.

But identified or not
it is a story
that deserves to be told

for Rhona's love
for her child
was selflessly given
while that for his father
was so betrayed.

Coming of Age

As your birthday dawned that day
Though the sky was dark and drear,
With friends you were surrounded
And the room was full of cheer.

Other days you will remember
But few as well as this,

Birthdays, unlike your twenty-first,
Will pass and scarce be missed.

And many days of gladness
May your future hold in store,
Yet drink life fully to the lees
And you will love it more.

For darkness can draw deeper
And when feeling sorely pressed
Look to the light within you,
And give thanks for you are blest.

Power

Speak the truth to power,
the power to so deceive,
for what you fully are
is more than you believe.

We scarce ourselves can know
though we ourselves are known
when knowledge from within
most often we disown.

Know first that you are loved
by love that holds you dear
then face the truth you are
and face it without fear.

The Bee

The bee did not mean to disturb and startle me
as it brushed my face.
It simply did not see me there.

The bee did not mean to disturb the wasp
gathering nectar on the flower
It simply did not see it there.

And the wasp settled back to its task
when the disturbance passed.

Can I too settle back if life disturbs me?
Should I want to?

Or should I allow the disturbance
To show me a new place
a new flower
a new source of nectar?

In Evening Light

As evening shades into night
the shapes in the garden
in this quiet suburban cul-de-sac
assume bolder simpler outlines.

The towering woodland trees,
young saplings fourteen years ago
when my wife and I first visited,
are deceptive in their stillness



and the remedial night
is full of the sounds
I know I cannot hear.

The moth and the bat
the barn owl and the vole
keep their tryst
and to its lair the fox will return
to feed its young

for in the ecology of the earth
the unreflective life of the woodland
is so much more important than I.

Four dimensions including time
encompass reality as we experience it
but even with another seven
curled incomprehensibly small
quantum physics struggles to describe
all that there is

as too with those dimensions within ourselves
that we can never truly comprehend
yet which give to our lives
their profoundest meaning.

Thus some forty years ago in my early thirties
I perforce faced the unfathomed within me
when painfully perturbed by violent events
then unfolding in my native province in Ireland.

To relieve my feelings I wrote some poems
then for the first time since my teens
or rather some poems wrote me

and six weeks ago I returned to writing
as a poem* came unbidden to my mind
after a bee had brushed my face
and disturbed and startled me.

and I wrote -

.. if life disturbs me
should I allow the disturbance
to show me a new place? ..

I cannot know what life holds in store
in these generous twilight years,
but the welcome disturbance I now feel
comes not from external events
but from a poetic urge within.

So I said to my soul
be still be still
and be deceptive
in your stillness.

* *The Bee*

Sanctuary

"It is here you are meant to be"
a silent voice spoke within
as I reached the door of the church
where worship was due to begin.

In the cool of that morning early
I had trod forest paths alone
and powerfully felt an assurance
in a way I had never known.
Light through the branches was dancing
with shadows on the forest floor
where fallen leaves were hinting
that Autumn was beckoning once more.

I looked out from the edge of the forest
on a vista of meadow and hill
and there on a bench I was tranquil
as I sat for some time and was still.
Then with canopy of leaves above me
and a carpet of moss beneath
a prayer of thanks I breathed softly
walking back in that sanctuary of peace.

But a tempest raged within me
that was far from a feeling of calm
after entering that other sanctuary,
the church where this poem began.

Nothing I heard in the service
could explain the trembling I felt
but the previous week had known traumas
and places where terror had dwelt.
For this was the week when Internment*
had unleashed the demon of dread
with riots where twenty-six perished
and seven thousand people had fled.**

My father had Catholic neighbours
who were threatened with fire to their home
and this mother and daughter he sheltered
till the husband from England could come.
I sat with them that night long after
midnight had come and had gone
to secure some semblance of calmness
and assure them they were not alone.

This was the start of a sequence
that ushered in difficult days
when leaving known paths of perception
I journeyed through uncharted ways.
But I never once felt abandoned
having loved ones in whom to confide,
and the presence I sensed in the forest
a sanctuary safe did provide.

* *Detention by army and police of suspected IRA members*

** *See Wikipedia article on 'Operation Demetrius'*

On the Death of Angela Gallagher

Our innocence is buried with your child
She not from hatred but from folly died
Her death is both our sorrow and our shame.
In harming her we have profaned the name
Of him who gathered children to his side.
You are my brother, should our faiths divide?
This was my infant though not mine the name.
Rachel* shall weep
And pity dries no tear.

**Matthew 2:18*

1971

The Valley*

Trees slant in the wind
Precarious equilibrium.
The water serrates.
Round the lake mountains press
Cathedral majestic.
Such wildness worships.
Across the gorge I see a figure,
A distant stranger.
My heart spreads out to call him brother.
The valley voids at my pretension.
He turns
My heart heavy on his hand
Unwelcome burden.
When voices winnow in the wind **
Can hearts do better?



The trees are a gnarled cross
Straining to the valley.
This is the violence of the dying
Who are dead.

** A symbol of the division in Northern Ireland*

*** Only the chaff blows across*

1971

A Helping Hand

'I can see him still' my father said,
'a big chap with rough clothing
standing in the middle of the road
with his hand raised to stop us'.

It was around the time of the civil war
and he and a younger brother were returning
from somewhere in the far west of Ireland.
An RIC* man had been shot and killed
and they had taken his body for burial
back to his place of origin.

Afterwards they were advised not to stay
as the hatred some felt for this man
with his service in the police force
might well be taken out on them.

So they left and had started back
towards their home city of Belfast
and were in a village in Sligo
when the unassuming stranger stopped them.

'I saw you going through earlier today and was watching out for you in case you might come back tonight' he said. 'There's trouble farther down the road and it would be unsafe to continue'.

'Is there somewhere here we can lodge for the night?' my father asked, for the day was far spent.**

'Unfortunately the village hotel is closed by this time. I tell you what though. If you would like I will find somewhere safe for the car and you can come home with me. We haven't much - there is only the old mother and I, but you are welcome to what we have'.

He found a place for the hearse and then took them into his home and prepared supper. He gave them his own bed and in the morning got up early and made breakfast for them before seeing them safely on their way.

'I will never forget him - nor will I ever forget what he did', my father told me. 'He was a Catholic and knew that we were not, yet amid all the animosity of that bitter time he put himself so much out of his way to help us'.

'And they are marching in Northern Ireland today to perpetuate their divisions!' one person said after I had told that story at worship in the chapel of the beautiful Bield retreat centre near Perth, where people of commitment and vision have created a place of purpose and peace.

In the quiet and calm of the centre I had forgotten that it was the twelfth of July and the height of the marching season, although I was once a junior member of an Orange Lodge in my native Belfast. 'Mother let you go with your friends, but I know she wasn't happy about it' my elder sister told me much later.

Some sixty years and a short stretch of water separated me from that time, as I sat in that sanctuary of stillness and seclusion. And I was glad to have forgotten that martial day with its season of shared suspicion and insensitivity.

* *Royal Irish Constabulary*

***Luke 24:29 (KJB)*

Remembrance Sunday 1987

"Go in peace" a celebrant
finally would have said,
had not ancient divisions
and the cold hand of church
authority marred the harmony
of our ecumenical worship service.

We were at a peace conference
in the small town of Moy
some fifty miles east of Enniskillen
where another service was taking place
on that Remembrance Sunday.

"This is my body broken for you"
and the bread would have been
broken and passed among us.

But for what were the bodies broken
that day at the cenotaph
when those men of blood
perpetrated their plot
to dishonour the dead
and mutilate the living?

For some crucified dream
of a united Ireland?
For some nurtured sense
of injustice done?

So many bodies were broken
and eleven more dead were added
to the myriad names listed
on memorial after memorial
in the cities, towns and villages
of these islands for whom we observed
silence in our broken fellowship in Moy
- and also for those fallen millions
named and unnamed in other lands.

"Lord have mercy"
"Christ have mercy"
Men of blood have mercy!

Pray for us sinners now
and at the hour of our death.

The Sentinel

A sentinel came from Eden
to the world of women and men
and brief must be his visit
before he stood guard again.

He came to fulfil a commission
to find what humans had made
of the knowledge of good and evil
and the singular price they had paid.

But this was never the Eden
our forefathers said was once known,

but one where self-consciousness entered
and a place where divergence had grown
until life, in this Eden of instincts,
became barred to the nature of men,
but a river flowed out of the garden
by whose banks they need always remain.

The Eden the sentinel came from
knew little of evil or good
for the strong there preyed on the weak -
though as seldom for other than food
most often the strife of its creatures
in nature a balance maintained -
and the sentry was sent out to ponder
what if mankind had remained?

He asked of the world he came to
where war had been raised to an art
if the Tree of Life in the garden
might then have been torn apart?
He asked if tribal divisions
meant reason had been overthrown
for follies and hatreds were witnessed
such as Eden had never known.
And greed was extolled as a virtue
while pollution pressed hard in its train -
if this was the pattern in Eden
could mankind be allowed to remain?

And what of the life of the spirit
define this however you will

for so many remained on its surface
nor knew what it meant to be still.

In his short stay he failed to encounter
the myriads of women and men
who have eaten the fruit of goodness
and the fruits of evil disdain;
nor learned he of human genius
in science and music and art
nor the glory that once had been Greece
that might somehow have softened his heart.

So the sentry returned to Eden
a guard who never would yield,
for scenes from the world he had witnessed
were emblazoned on sword and on shield.

Forewarned

A fixed-wheel cycle I'd borrowed that day
And thought I had mastered it well
But the future failed to conform to plan
As I am about to tell.

I clearly remember the thought that came
As I passed our church and hall
A minute before the painful event -
'Pride comes before a fall'.

My feet slipped off the pedals that spun
And kept on spinning around

And try as I might I could not keep control
And knew I would hit the ground.

Before two women could reach my home
And worry my family there
I quickly asked to be helped to a phone
And rang to make them aware.

My father and mother were soon by my side
And came to the hospital too
Where the size of the needle that drained my knee
Might well have belonged to a zoo!

When the plaster started to clamp my foot
My mother was again by my side
And little I knew I'd be wearing it still
Even to the day she died.

She suffered poor health for a very long time
Indeed from before I was born;
Would actions differ if we could foresee
What the future might try to forewarn?

An era has passed away since then
And I wish we could hope to surmise
The painful things experience may teach
Before we have learned to be wise.

'Avarice must be our god' Keynes* said
For a hundred years or more'

But how then to slow the pedals down
Before crashing to the floor?

** John Maynard Keynes*

My Mother's Death

It was the unexpectedness of the enquiry
about her health that broke my resolve
as my mother lay within hours of her death,
else I could without tears have told
those friends I had been sent to inform.

The question came as I entered the vestibule
of the church and I went back outside and wept,
while a girl who was passing said disparagingly
to her two friends "what's the matter with him"?

The unexpected happened again as we sang,
for I was enfolded as though by a presence
without form and by a comfort from deep within
and there were no more tears as I endured
the pain of parting from my mother.

During that night I heard my father pass
my bedroom and go downstairs sobbing softly
and when I was informed in the morning
all I said was "I know", before leaving
to sit a pre-university examination.

Mother and Child

In different places apart they lie,
A woman once haunted by her baby's cry
Whom earlier treatment might have saved
Instead of being laid in an unmarked grave.
For the death certificate that gave the cause
Noted fourteen days when there'd been a pause
While meningitis* claimed the child
Before a doctor was by her side.
Perhaps that death had broken her heart
For her life was lived in a place apart,
A place apart that her burial paid
For in unmarked grave with others she's laid,
Where the cemetery records bear her name
Though the site is uncertain even then.
"Postnatal depression", the family said,
But I grew up believing her dead
Until too late to visit the place
Where she had been hidden away in disgrace,
Though I know that my older siblings knew
And made visits to her with my mother too,
A mother who died while I still was quite young
And before my grandmother's time had come.
I think you will understand if I say
Although it is known in the normal way
I have written this poem to give a name
To a woman whose life was hidden in shame.

** cerebrospinal meningitis on 14 April 1907 aged 7 months*

Mary

My cousin and I met
and spoke for the first time
when I was nearing fifty
and she a decade older

for her parents
had emigrated to America
before I was born.

Her daughter had died
in a car accident
when only nineteen

and while I knew
what had happened
the pain passed me by

for sadly the family
were names to me then
and little more.

But on a visit
with her husband
to our home in Scotland
our eyes met across the table

and tears came into mine
as she told my wife and me
about the pain of losing Mary
those few years before.

COFFEE HOUSE & ART GALLERY

House
&
Gallery
Coca-Cola
e-mail

Coffee House
&
Art Gallery
Check e-mail



For three days, she said,
she could barely move
from where she sat

but on the third day
she woke with the words
of the psalmist* in her mind

'This is the day
that the Lord has made
we will rejoice
and be glad in it'. *

The words gave her comfort
and when we met
she could talk freely of Mary

while her husband on that stay
little mentioned her name
but kept a picture of her
always in his wallet

and they were together
when showing us her grave
on a reciprocal visit.

After the accident
they had found strength
and been given grace

to forgive the boy
who had carelessly
lost control and crashed
while chauffeuring Mary
and some other friends
home from a party

for they decided against
seeking legal redress
after he came to them
with his parents
and painfully apologised.

This story has a sequel
for one of the boy's parents
on a flight with an acquaintance
of my cousin and her husband

said movingly
"They gave my son back his life".

** Psalm 118:24*

Reflection on Sonnet Eighteen

From the magazine of Grosvenor High school, Belfast

*'So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this and this gives life to thee'*

If thus our immortality
Be weaved upon a printed page,

That in the humour of men's minds
Our lives move deathless
Down the years of man's dominion here.
Can then the characters thy pen empowered
Who bred mid passions of thy soul
Whose little era was embowered within thee
Have a relationship with God superior to our own?
Ah no - they pass with time but we
Move on to reap what we have sown.

Circa 1956

Parting

Shall we part to see no more
At the ending of their day
Those we love and we adore
When death holds them in its sway?

Some have died enshrined in years
With a sense of life complete,
Those too young to know its tears
Still as infants shall we greet?

I expect to know some way
Those I've loved and now have lost,
In what form I cannot say
'Till the threshold I have crossed.

Mystery enshrouds life now
Deep the depths we scarce have known,
Mystery more must thus endow
Things known to God and God alone.



Interlocution

"You can never prove
the resurrection" I began

"No you cannot"
he interjected emphatically,
misunderstanding my full meaning.

We were away
at a Christian centre
for a residential weekend
that was more about philosophy
than about religion

and so attracted
not just Christians
but also sceptics
like my interlocutor.

He was on the staff
of a university,
possibly a classics department
one might have thought,
because he was knowledgeable
when we were reading
from Homer's 'Iliad'.

A small group of us
had gathered convivially
for coffee after supper

and the conversation
turned to religion.

"But what I think
you can reasonably say"

I continued

"is that the early
disciples believed
in the resurrection

so that here you had
a group of people
trying to express what was
beyond their comprehension".

He regarded me seriously
for a moment and then
turned and walked away
with a troubled
look on his face

and I was sorry

for I was acknowledging
the uncertainty
that for me must embrace
Christian doctrine

and I would have liked
him to have acknowledged
the uncertainty that
I believe must likewise
pervade its critique

an uncertainty that
might have been implied
by his troubled look
as he turned from me
and walked away.

Epitaph

Mark not my burial
with a stone,
a place to pause
and then pass on,
but keep alive
while memory serves
remembrance of me.

And this,
if to my children
some influence remains,
I am content.
Circa 1965

Light of Heart

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Our Daughter's Wedding

There are days the sun never ceases to shine
And days when its glimpses are few
But the day our youngest daughter was wed
Showed never a hint of blue.

"Pick up my train and we'll run for the church"
Was the urgent task she assigned
And that plus a broly held over her head
Made our entrance seem less than refined.

Gathering her dignity in both of her hands
We slowly progressed up the aisle
To join her beloved and betrothed at the front
As he turned and gave her a smile.

At rehearsal the minister made it clear
That with this my task was complete
So leaving her there I joined my wife
And together we took our seat.

Not that her mother and I refused
To give our daughter away,
But 'who gives this woman' were obsolete words
This minister never would say.

The photographer did an excellent job
(Just ask and I'll give you the name)
For although no pictures could be taken outside
The results were superb all the same.

My speech at reception seemed to go well
But 'twas unscripted humour most pleased
For the laughter evoked took me by surprise
As unforeseen meaning was seized!

A three year old grandchild we had by this time
(For I'd been through all this once before)
Who when dancing was having the time of her life
As she commandeered the floor.

On video was captured a moment of fun
Holding hands with a boy her own age
For he sneezed into his while covering his mouth
And with her's did then reengage.

She inspected her hand as she pulled away
Then wiped it down her dress
And the look when he tried to take it again
Showed this was no way to impress.

So tired was she when evening came
That fast asleep she did fall
And later watched video in surprised disbelief
Of those scenes she could not recall.

As we dashed for our cars at the end of a day
That had given us all so much pleasure
I thought how often it's unscheduled things
That provide the best moments to treasure.

The Cliffs of Moher

The cliffs of Moher are very tall
And not a place you want to fall
For to plunge from there with no one to save
Is a certain way to an early grave.

So being in charge of young people there
Was responsibility hard to bear
And to count them all when safely back
Must have felt like being reprieved from the rack.

In mitigation it must clearly be said
He seemed little older than the party he led
And thus the weight had pressed on him sore
Until we were back at our dormitory door.

During the night we heard him shout
And awoke to see him stretching out
With panic upon him clearly displayed
As he gripped a boy's arm in the nearest bed.*

The cause of his anguish it soon transpired
And the sweat on his brow as he perspired
Was a girl he had dreamed was dangling there
As in terror she clung to his hand in despair.

The nightmare it seemed would never stop
As she started to slip from his hand and drop
For were she to die and him to blame
Life could never again be the same.

So, my dear reader, if ever you find
That you have been placed in a similar bind,
Be sure to sleep next an empty bed
For this is advice that can't be gainsaid.

** an incident from a youthful holiday on the west coast of Ireland*

Finn McCool

An Irish giant called Finn McCool
Was big and strong as could be
With a wife as clever as he was huge,
A formidable pair you'll agree.

The brawniest giant he was by far
And none disputed the fact
For defeated he had the others with ease
And laid them flat on their back.

He sorrowed as said of Alexander the Great
And yearned for one fight more
Then heard of another giant of fame
Who dwelt on a farther shore.

So keen was he to encounter at once
This rumoured Scottish foe
He bellowed across the straits between
And a gale soon started to blow.

So prolonged a challenge he uttered and loud
It travelled through valley and glen
Till it reached the other giant ere long
Quietly ensconced in his den.

His mighty kilt he pulled over his thighs
For breeches he never would wear
And strode over heather and bracken and gorse
To darken the coast south of Ayr.

Bestriding the Antrim coastline McCool
Thought he had nothing to fear
For the giant seen from a distance like that
Was smaller than if he was near!

Six-sided* huge stones on the Antrim coast
Are remains of the causeway he'd built
To entice the Scottish giant across,
But his courage then started to wilt.

The nearer Fingal** came to the shore
For that was the giant's name
The bigger and bigger his stature grew
Putting poor Finn to shame.

Hastening back to the home he shared
With his wife, he was quickly advised
When she heard that Fingal was coming soon
To comply with the plan she devised.

His bathtub she used as a baby's cot
Put a frilly cap on his head
And when Fingal came to look for Finn
She showed him the cot instead.

Finn lay quietly sucking his thumb
While Fingal was filled with distress;

With such a baby, the size of the sire
Was something he dared not guess!

An urgent appointment he said he had made
Before leaving his Scottish home
And wrenching the stones from the causeway behind
Hastened back the way he had come.

Now Ireland's an island that's most beloved
By its emigrants, who oft have impressed,
But for wit and a kiss of the Blarney Stone
Those remaining compete with the best.

** the most symmetrical stones at the Giant's Causeway are hexagonal*

*** the giant Benandonner is called Fingal in the Scottish version of the legend*

A Tale Untold

To tell you this story where shall I start?
Let me choose a place that is near to my heart,
A place where on holiday I often am found,
A Cornish working harbour and delightful surround.

But instead of one harbour I should have said two
Thus offering the visitor much more to do,
And along one-way streets this historic town
Will slope with you steeply to these harbours down,
But be warned that close to the walls you'll be pressed
Should a car with you meet and pass you abreast.

The harbours had a cafe with a balcony sea view
Where I'd sit with my wife at a table for two,

Till a builder as rich as I think he was mean
Replaced it with houses that imprison the scene.

It's less a town than a village, I know,
But no more delightful a place can you go,
And to eat Cornish pasty in the sun sitting there
Is to feel like your world has had never a care.

A house to the cliff-top seems closely to cling
Where a bright Autumn day such beauty must bring
Gazing out over harbour and farther to strand
And to coast in the distance merging into the land.
One road leaving town near this coastline will stay
With a view looking down on the curve of a bay
Round which silver sand like a necklace is hung
And friends there vacationed when children were young.

Do fishing boats here leave the harbour at night
And come back again in the soft morning light?
Do trawlers that linger far out on the seas
Reduce the catch quota for small boats like these?
Do still smaller boats trap lobsters by day?
I've so little knowledge what more dare I say!
A small museum's here that I guess I'd do well
To visit and some of my ignorance dispel,
Or question the seagulls that seem to know best
Although with due deference they must be addressed
And an arrogant look they will give me that says
We don't expect more from our visitors these days.

But with this diversion I'm carried away
Till I clean have forgotten what I started to say!
And in spite of vacations we often spend there
Nothing else strikes me that's worthy to share.
So I only can trust 'twill come back to me yet
Though this grows less likely the older I get,
And why, you may ask, should you 'list' to my tale
If it travels like this at the pace of a snail?

The Death Notice

"Davy, never again
Send me on an errand like that!"
In exasperation was spoken
To my father by my uncle Matt.

Placing insertions in the paper
Was a regular task of the trade
But my father deemed unusual
What the widow had wanted said.

My uncle approached her gently
To get her to change her mind
To 'Gone to a better place'
Or something of a similar kind.

"Whatever damn place he's gone to
Is no concern of mine
So long as not back with me,
And I wish them joy with the swine."

So ladies when choosing a spouse
And taking him home to your bed
Think would you welcome him still
Even after he's dead.

Head to Tail

A rabbit sat by a railway
Watching slow carriages go by
While the express in the other direction
Was obscured to his watching eye.

Thinking it safe to venture
He sauntered across the track
Then saw the express train coming
Too late to be turning back.

He tried to scamper to safety
And was sure he'd made it alright
Till his little tail behind him
Suddenly vanished from sight.

His wretched rump he regarded
And the sight of it made him sore
"They will laugh at me in the burrow
And the ladies will want me no more!"

His tail he ran back to recover
For who could blame his distress
But the train that truncated his body
Made even more of a mess.

So I say to all of those fellows
Too easily instinct led
While chasing a wee bit of fluff
Don't go losing your head.

Never Mislaid

No shoes on his feet nor hat on his head
Nor coat on his back adorned him when dead
But a black dicky-bow that his shroud had displayed
Had someone's approval and was stolen instead.

Rising to the Occasion

A funeral director my father once knew
Told him this story and swore it was true
'And I fully believed him', he afterwards said,
'For strange things happen in our family trade'.

I'll give you a moment to picture the scene
Where some days before a death there had been
In a small country town and with funeral now near
Acquaintance all gathered for the requisite tear
In the house where the corpse in the parlour was laid
And the widow was fulsome in the grief she displayed.

On the day before the deceased was interned
A couple of jokers in the Irish town learned
They could ask in private the body to view
Their respects to pay the acquaintance they knew



And alone with the corpse a plan there was laid
To bring to fruition the story foresaid.

The wake that evening was alive in full swing
For to sorrow or joy the Irish can bring
A sense of fulfilment distinctly their own
And a chance of free liquor will seldom disown
Although Rabbe Burns might discredit the claim
And say that the Scots put the Irish to shame.

As midnight approached the noise faded away
And they started a hymn to bring in the day
When finally the deceased would be laid to his rest

And this was the time that the jokers judged best
As from outside the window they with caution surveyed
The solemnity now that the mourners displayed.

A string to each of his wrists they had tied
That led out the window to where they did hide
And as hymn neared its climax and final amen
The corpse seemed determined to join the refrain
And the air he exhaled made a most mournful sound
As he rose in the coffin and they swore looked around.

The pair in the darkness in merriment viewed
The panic and chaos inside that ensued
And for years thereafter those present all swore
That the dear dead departed had joined them once more
And some even insisted the funeral next day
Had been for some stranger who had just passed away.

As for our merry friends hugging in glee
And wishing the uproar forever to see
If video recording invented had been
Thousands on utube would have witnessed the scene.

Uninvited Wit

An undertaker's pride in his fleet
Is like a woman's pride in her hair
But what's a perm or a hearse
Until an admirer is there?

For convenience I'll call him Ted
For what after all is a name
And the splendid hearse he'd acquired
Would still have cost the same.

Like parents welcoming neighbours
To wet the new baby's head
Invites were printed and posted
To view the purchase he'd made.

Most of the folk who received them
Were Protestants broadly defined
For in death as well as in life
They mainly consort with their kind.

When the drink was flowing freely
And the hearse was gleaming in pride
Ted swelled his chest in satisfaction
Till an unwelcome guest he espied.

The desultory character he confronted
Whom most people chose to disown
Had a name he pronounced with displeasure
Though adopted to rhyme with his own.

"Fred, I've no care to insult you
Though plenty I know who do
But this is a hearse for Orangemen
And not for the likes of you".

Fred's lifestyle had oft been derided
But his wit was to earn him renown
For quick as a flash came the answer
"May it carry every Orangeman in town!"

With pride that was sadly deflated
Thinking what the brethren might say
Ted knew the first it would carry
If he could but have his way.

My father told this story when interviewed by the Belfast Telegraph (circa 1975)

Poverty and Pride

He was minister* of the local congregation
Where the young couple soon were to wed
And the family envisaged the splendour
Of the bride in her glory arrayed.

The lavishness planned for the wedding
Was like something from Vanity Fair
While poverty peeping through the keyhole
Tried in vain the expense to deter.

The minister, who knew the position,
With his conscience could not be at rest
Until he had tried to persuade them
Something simpler would be for the best.

Pleased how the young couple listened
He felt the situation was saved
For their silence seemed to betoken
They accepted the advice that he gave.

But he failed to notice the granny
Who sat in the corner retired
Till she broke the silence in anger
And spoke like a demon inspired.

"Her mither an' me afore her
Ne'er a weddin' gown wore
Sh's the first bride in three gen'rations
And the de'il knows when we'll ha'e more".

"So quit your bless'd connivin'"
Was the diminutive woman's upbraid
With a few well chosen expletives
To colour the point that she made.

"The ne'bours long will r'member
This weddin' with no expense spared"
And the fire in her eyes quickly told him
That to answer was more than he dared.

The minister abandoned the contest
Like a dog that was hiding its tail
For a peacock that's proud of its feathers
Is not the best bird to assail.

** my brother knew this minister*

Requiem For a Computer

Little did I think, my faithful friend,
When I sent you away for repair
I soon was to hear you had met your end
While under their surgical care.

For eight full years you attended my needs
While your own were simple and few
I doubt your replacement ever succeeds
In giving better service than you.

While staying with me you showed little sign
Of the troubles you must have endured
For the faults you displayed seemed quite benign
And I thought they could quickly be cured.

I only discerned the extent of your pain
When the repair shop rang to say
Some long-term memory they could not retain
And proposed to excise away.

New memory, inserted the old to replace,
You decided at first to disown
Until they agreed to slow down its pace
To a speed that would match your own.

Happy the call I received that said
You were ready for me to collect
But a short time later another was made
I'd been given no cause to expect.

Another test they'd decided to run
And from tone of voice I could tell
This was something they'd only begun
As all might still not be well.

The news next day when I enquired
Was not what I wanted to learn
For the test results it now transpired
Had given much cause for concern.

Deep hypnosis they carried out
Your operating system to renew
But why did I let them mess you about
For the little good it would do?

Your short-term memory too had failed
When they tried to bring you around
And your thoughts, whatever within you prevailed,
Were oblivious to all your surround.

Strength enough I had hoped you'd retain
When you and I came to part
So that charity use might still remain
To gladden your tender heart.

Perhaps the selfless choice was your own
To calmly await your end
And spare me the sight of you suffering on
My faithful helpful friend.

Cloths of Heaven

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

W. B. Yeats 1865 - 1939

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