

The Lade Braes

The Lade Braes in the glorious November sunlight has a vitality that certainly chilling age or the labyrinths of being conscious will not extinguish. It informs her oaks and beeches! in every leaf the colour burns miraculously against the perfect blue air: and where the broken ground is cumbered with sawn boles it is present also, flooding throughout each trunk to the smallest corrugation in the exterior bark. I turn and take the track that leads from the bridge and holds for fifty yards or so to the burnside, till a weir distracts the water: above it on the silent pool two swans like a one contrivance flow toward me. White of entrancing purity! I too participate in that self-existing equanimity: and contain the macro-cosm that plainly has solved our famous teaser, the perpetuum mobile, and even put it to more or less useful employment. For here in this Buddha's Paradise with its jewel colours, its pure light, and the air as ripe as *saké*, truly nothing restrains my confidence or knocks it from its alignment, so completely am I held in the world and all its changing weathers. And I retain that poise and would not have it different as in that same sunlight I saunter home to my glumly dying father.

D. M. BLACK

Lifeboat

The word *sea* is small and easily uttered.
They utter it lightly who know least about it.
A vast ancient terror is locked in the name
Like energy in an atom.
Sailors, explorers, fishermen know this.
Women who stand on headlands, they know it.
The maritime tribes knew it well.
Their poets mingled harp with loom
To cover the terror with beautiful names.
The sea is the Great Sweet Mother.
She is the Swan's Path.
She is the Whale's Acre.
She is the Garden of White Roses.
She is the Keeper of Horses.
(The Loom also, the Harp with a Thousand Strings.)
She is the Giver of Pearls.
The Vikings, her closest children, hated the word.
Its nudity quelled their simpler lusts.
They called her, with cold mouths, the Widow Maker.

GEORGE MACKAY BROWN

Honeysuckle

Honeysuckle grew at the back door
of the house sheltered from the salt
wind by the granite wall. Girls came
to kiss by the washing green
and the honeysuckle blossoming
while the sky was falling into night.

Under an impeccable noon sky
father left by the front door,
shoes shining, moustache bristling,
navy blue suit without a spot,
to do business, with a view to
profit, to keep the house upright.

At the back door the stars
reeled about in a purple sky,
drunk on honeysuckle dew.
Into a night of small noises,
voices one to another — lovers.
The back door squeaks shut.

GEORGE BRUCE

For my Father

One of my earliest memories (remember
 Those Capone hats, the polka-dot ties)
 Is of the late thirties: posing
 With yourself and grandfather before
 The park railings; me dribbling
 Ice-cream, you so spick and smiling
 The congregation never imagined
 How little you made. Three generations,
 In the palm of a hand. A year later
 Grandfather died. War was declared.

In '42 we motored to Kilmarnock
 In Alec Martin's Terraplane Hudson.
 We found a pond, and six goldfish
 Blurred under ice. They survived
 That winter, but a gull got them in the end.
 Each year we picnicked on the lawn;
 Mother crooking her finger
 As she sipped her lime. When
 They carried you out on a stretcher
 She knew you'd never preach again.

Since you retired, we've seen more
 Of each other. Yet I spend this forenoon
 Typing, to bring you closer — when
 We could have been together. Part of what
 I dread is that clear mind nodding
 Before its flickering screen. If we come over
 Tonight, there will be the added irony
 Of proving my visit isn't out of duty
 When, to myself, I doubt the dignity
 Of a love comprising so much guilt and pity.

STEWART CONN

Going

Half packed, living out of cases,
with bookings unconfirmed,
we find ourselves between places

at a loss what, in such
short time, unless it's compelled,
or the true individual touch.

Perhaps some are good travellers,
others go out of their lives at the thought
of accidents done to travellers.

One thing I know: some time before
we leave we really ought to get
new luggage. Was that the door?

ALASTAIR FOWLER

Poem from
 ‘In Memoriam Antonius Block’:
 a sequence in progress

pure verticals pure horizontals (marks
 of civilization) the surfaces are stone-hard
 ground polished rigid at beautiful right angles
 an example to the incorrigible curves of nature

we listen to the incorrigible voices off-stage
 prompting, confusing

ultimate adaptation to be transparent
 to stand against the wall and be one with the wall
 an eye without substance yet seeing everything

‘somewhere in this elegant city there must be
 a soft stone a secret that will yield to the foot
 somewhere in this decaying city the surface must give’

‘there *is* no surface’ say
 the voices of those whom the surface has long since absorbed

ROBIN FULTON

Greenock at night I find you

As for you loud Greenock long ropeworking
 Hide and seeking rivetting town of my child
 Hood, I know we think of us often mostly
 At night. Occasionally it is always night.
 And welding lights in the shipyards flower blue
 Under my hopeless eyelids as I lie
 Sleeping conditioned to hide from happy.

Dear Brigit, Hugh and double-breasted Sam,
 Sec. I am here. My father, sec. I am back.
 This is the door. And I am him, your son
 You cut the thorn stick for on the Whin Hill.
 Please, this is not me homesick, only looking
 Back through the dark to see if you are still there.

I took the shortcut over Maclellan's Sidings
 And I almost had my leg off. Those wagons
 Are silenter on the rails at night now.

Dad, do you know me? Sam, Hugh, are you there?
 Brigit I need not ask about. I see you
 Waiting beside the skiff on the long loch.

So what did I do? I walked between the words
 To Cartsburn Street and got to Cartsburn Vaults
 With half an hour to go and my father and mother
 And Hugh and Sam and even Alastair was there.

But I had not come in. I was remembered.

W. S. GRAHAM

Ticky Bot

ticky bot
 ticky bot
 what do you say?
 — *going a big journey*
no have to pay

ticky bot
 ticky bot
 how can that be?
 — *go is by moonlight*
shady and free

ticky bot
 ticky bot
 share us your boon
 — *gladly, but can't, sir,*
your air is noon

Nice

nice
 to be on a pasture
 nibbling
 — bell
 and a call at sundown
 humped in steam through the night
 slosh o' mornings
 and found for snoring winter
 not built that way though me
 ici always uneasy
 'cause i always icy
 not like the flock the likeable lump me
 for i would die down if i did lie down
 in an animal warmth
 their sleepy envelope of one complaisant skin

ALAN JACKSON

Travelling Folk

Cornered in wastes of land, spinnies of old roads
lopped back from the new, where done horses
leant once on starved haunches, battered cars
nuzzle scrunted bushes and caravans.

Copper-breasted women suckle defiance
at schools inspectors. Sanitary men
are met with bronze-age scowls. All to no purpose.
Blown across Europe's centuries, bound only

in piths and withies to settlements not moved
by permanent impermanencies — smokey
violins, dusks gathered from skies
purple as hedge-fruits, or plucked stolen chickens —

these exiles from our human order seed
in the rough, overlooked verges of living,
their stubborn litter filling with vagrancy
the cracks our need of conformation shows.

MAURICE LINDSAY

The Mist

As they left Mainz, it drew in
More and more of the free surfaces. At first,
Only a spire on a hill,
Or a sharp village, would, quite slowly, begin
To lose place, to drown in it. The worst
Areas were over dark, annulled trees, till

They left Frankfurt. At more speed,
Air drained away, emptying the immense train
Of all it could shape. A deep
Layer of eroded seething, like the feed
Pump of a lost machine, left a stain,
A wool-blur, on the rock-face. As if asleep,

Hurling towards a new dream,
Each carriage, growing warmer, gathered its light
Into a ball. They lost hold
On something that could have been time. From the stream
Of what was dissolving foreign height
Outside the window, a single tear-drop rolled,

Swelled to a singular grain,
Was ice. Touched, they were travelling in the clear sheet
Of a pane of glass, alone
Beyond confines of privacy. As the brain
Absorbed its internal banked-up heat,
They moved on their trip. In the world of white stone

Fractured by the mist, no sun,
Solidified out of human need, split frost
From the rocks. Life was all hard
For ever. Seeming to turn black, things poised, spun,
Then fell away, broken. What was lost
By this, fathered its own movement. In the yard

Of a passed farm, a greyed ox
Lay on its knees, a statue. Through the peeled wood
On the bluff behind, a white
Royalty of arriving tramps, with a box
Of mysterious green perfumes, could
Service, they were able to see, their god. Flight

Of a train could never stay
Such advancing reluctances. The mist rose,
As it came, revealing towers
In its gathered thinning. Somehow it made play
With its own habits. As if it chose
To be a bride, the landscape unveiled skirts, flowers.

GEORGE MACBETH

No Fixed Star

Say, Ishmael (could I meet you
 Carrying your wilderness through the wilderness)
 What's the high star (that every man must have)
 That will not let the wilderness defeat you?
 That turns your No into a final Yes?

Such congruences, that let you
 Deny all but yourself, make me, too, think
 That there but for the disgrace of God go I.
 — My snug oasis tells me to forget you
 And gives me shade and food and wine to drink.

What, Ishmael (could you meet me
 Carrying my oasis through the wilderness)
 — What better love than mine would quicken mine
 Could you lay by your bow and run to greet me
 With your accepting No, rejecting Yes?

Yours, or His? You set me
 A dangerous problem. My highest stars all sink
 Shuddering into the dark. Should I go out
 Into your wilderness (if you or He would let me)
 Where the air's so clear stars fail to wink and blink?

NORMAN MACCAIG

Mother at the Fireside

My mother sits alone at the fire.
Sustained by heat now more than love
she faces partly away from me and nods.
Her chair's like a hump on her back.
Each year when I return, her glasses
have slipped down a little further.

Bracken

Young shoots of bracken
are gathering on the slope
above my croft. I keep
a wary eye on them.
They haven't shown
their true colours yet
but I can tell their programme
by their clenched fists.

ALASDAIR MACLEAN

The Lilypond

The lilypond is lush with green leaves
Clustered so thickly
That there is scarcely any water to be seen
And the goldfish of which one catches
Occasional shining glimpses
Spend their lives in a perpetual twilight.

I peer into the green-hidden depths.
The flicker of a golden tail answers me
And a faint sidling movement of the lily-pods
Gives token of a darting fish beneath.

Poor devils! Fish like the dusk,
But this is living in Cimmerian darkness.
I wonder if I can pull off a few of the leaves,
But the lily stems are tough as thongs of leather
Or like a plaiting of great black snakes?

HUGH MACDIARMID

Last Message

The pyramid is closing. Will there be time
 for a last message — who can imagine
 the grey universe rolling its millions
 of last messages as it must do,
 unheard, washing everywhere? Oh it is cold
 in the pyramid, colder on the plains
 where the Forms clash and screech in blue,
 our enemies, on their dimensional wheels.
 The claws! There were so many dead
 the air was hardly to be breathed,
 we could neither bury nor burn
 in the radiation summer.

Is this our defeat then, as we lock
 the white doors, to lie a thousand
 thousand thousand years, who knows,
 in silence, letting the raucous Forms
 go rich and multiply their aquamarine
 on ember-red dead dust and men?
 Oh those embers, when they raze
 every laboratory, pavilion, mast, book,
 every chair and hand and lip — blue,
 cold, blue, cold, cold
 eternity of the embers!

I wish you could hear the wings now
 scraping the pyramid, it must be
 an unspeakable anger to them
 that we few have saved our flesh
 and mean to live and think of them
 and of the world and of ourselves
 and the grey universe that rolls us
 a thousand thousand thousand years.

EDWIN MORGAN

Magdalene Wonders

How well you know
— not just to resuscitate
my four day dead brother —
when I want you.

Tears make you simple,
yourself come out into the open
like a handsome boy
scuffing bare feet along the path.

Then the translucency of skin
with tears coursing above it!
White fantails tilt
in flock to the first leaves.

Untwining a blanch thin cotton
off my brother's face (its brass discolour),
a slow compassion of your hand drew
across as dawn pinks the sands.

You beat down my eyes by beauty.
Your smile fists its way to my throat.
I can no more love in a timelag
than *you* could hold out to mourn.

VALERIE SIMMONS

The Letter

Here is my letter out of the mirror
God who created us.

Why did you put the rabbit in the belly of the fox?
Why did you put man in the box of his days?
Why did you build us of frail bones?

Why did you give us hearts
to suffer hubbub and sorrow,
why aren't they like watches
small, circular, golden?

Why did you leave the eagle alone
in a nest of clouds
suspended on rays,
hammered with nails?

Why did you not make angels or beasts of us
with cold wings, with barbaric heads?
Why did you raise the sea in front of us
with a wide meaningless face?

In the mirror
a boxer's face,
in the mirror
a rusty helmet.

In the mirror is your book with a steel band,
with an edge sharp as a razor.

In the mirror there is one rose,
our hope growing,
red, shaken by the winds,
in a circle of dew.

IAIN CRICHTON SMITH

'Auld Reekie' Winter evening

Like a great beast sleepin sound
 Auld Reekie liggs
 Cauld in its enchantment —
 Its cage bleezin wi licht
 For passing wonderment.

But look, the auld dream
 Birsles its hairy coat —
 It steers in its sleep
 Lurches blind against the bars —
 Let me out! Let me out!
 I want life in my grip.

Winds

The South wind blaws fou strang frae the hills,
 The East wind cauld frae the sea,
 The West wind blaws and blufferts loud,
 The North wind blinns the ee.

Through this fule heid all winds are rife,
 O, fain I'd find the airt
 Whar nae wind blaws — but ae voice speaks,
 Juist whispers in the hairt.

SYDNEY GOODSIR SMITH

Chairborne

Put a squad of chairs on castors
on the cobblestones, and watch
the rush to man those saddles!

Whee, look at me! No, here,
at me, I'm spinning! Wham!
Took care of that show-off.

Now a slow waltz, folks, for
the dreamers. See them glide
over bumps, regardless, in love

with the notion of arrested
motion. Needing direction, a lode
of magnetic motive to beam in on,

is what clamps young matadors.
Surely somewhere throbs an unused
throne, hooded in plexiglass,

with buffer side-jets to ward off
careless friends, the seat of purpose,
vibrant with hell's best blessings.

Nobody craves a chair whose tilt
neons a zero in the glottis-keeper's
eyes, glumping you into the abyss.

Hence musical chairs, as played by
chairmen of the bored. What are chairs
for but to sit still in, and think?

W. PRICE TURNER

Tourist

She didn't like the mountains. They presumed
an audience she couldn't quite take in.
Something about the slow shifts and shades
bestowed by weather, worn and waived
like the persistent gifts of an unwanted
lover, aroused her rivalry. Her anger
rebounded, her nerves splintered
at the foot of passes. Looking down,
she saw the ants flash by, crushed
by minute perspectives. Looking up,
she watched clouds smoulder in dark crevasses,
each crest revealed and coveted,
each curve caressed in perpetuity.
Streams about their business had no time
to pause for her reflection, but the hills
she resented most, their massed shoulders
turned and turned away from her advance,
rendering the towering snub.

ANNE TURNER

The Fen People

I

Windeby girl left in the morning
 with the singing of birds in the frost
 and all her friends gathered around
 to kill her. Without a sound she choked
 chosen as cost of surety for the wheat.
 When wheat came her family thought her lost forever
 (they were wrong) and no-one to blame.

Tollund man was older; but he went too
 like a spent babe born with the cord thirled
 at his neck pressed with the slow mud down
 in the turf deeply in brown dreams smiling
 sinking in layers of the world : wood : flint : the iron sword.
 Curled safe in the peat we burn (the smell!) he means:
 blue smoke : safe home : a sweet season.

2

That crash : comes as vivid to the mind
 as skin grinds to a halt on the tar
 and water drops still to say : this one will live
 and this not. The dashboard gives. The steering column takes.
 And makes the random to a hard principle. Perhaps he died
 that we know shame : stand in fear of the heart's
 collapse : be led away and no-one to blame.

For the dead keep us in life knowing
 or unknowing as they rise from an iron moor
 in Denmark. I mourn their well-known ghosts. And see
 in this one's lip and that one's eye the stern
 turn on the face of a dour grandmother who ended
 18 years ago of an embolism that came as sure as
 stars explode : whole worlds fail : we grow apart :
 forget to weep : and no-one to blame.

RODERICK WATSON