

Five Poems:

Window-washing Instructions; What is Left; Dalgairn House; Friends; Something Borrowed

Window-washing Instructions

Use newsprint with the finest-quality prose –
a paper with some Pulitzers to its name.

Discard the lesser sections;
Sports and Business won't do wonders for your panes.

Crumple into fistfuls only the parts
that bend the light to reach your heart:

A weather report from everywhere, for the fug
of forgetting it's always storming on someone;

Any happy article – 'Boy Rescued at Sea',
'Cancer Drug Works on Mice' – for all the sorrow-soot.

An opinion piece with which you disagree,
for the dust-motes of self-certainty;

And to add a finishing touch, the obits,
for the ever-present residue of pettiness.

Spray a solution on the glass,
and wipe as if your life depended on it.

What Is Left

What is left of being right
when in the long run I am wrong?

At first I was just right
until at last I was just left.

Is it wrong to exit stage left
if the prompt is not in the script?

Merely to do no wrong
is a good way to be left,

although even the right way to be good
may still in the end be just wrong.

I lie down on our bed's right side
while you go to sleep on the other's.

If your right hand knew what your ring hand left,
then at least I am right that I am wrong.

Dalgairn House

Heaven came up for rent at thirty pounds a week
with no deposit down. We were freshly wed
and student-poor, and so we signed a lease
on paradise: we made our ascent
to the sunlit upper story of a Scottish
mansion on a hill in the Kingdom of Fife.

Brambles ripened in the hedgerows
and strawberries sweetened in the fields.
On the lawn that welcomed even pheasant,
a small boy nursed a patch of herbs.
All was fertile indoors, too:
stacks of books grew read, and the ribbon
of my little Olivetti seeded letters
for a garden of words I gave to you.
In the home beneath our feet, the noises
of children rose to our ears like Kansas corn,
while above the heads of our landlord family,
you turned to tell me
that one of our own had taken root in you.

That idyll ended long ago.
Garret companions in our salad days,
honeymoon scholars gaining fluency
in languages and love,
in our vinegar years we turned into
strangers even in our common tongue.
One of us yielded and one of us failed to,
both of us strayed and one of us stayed.
When one of us found – or lost – one's truer self,
one of us wept as one of us left.

So the calamity happened.
But I tell you that this did, too:
we made bramble jam from berries
we gathered on country lanes.

We had little to our names.
We read psalms aloud before bed
above the room of a child called Jimbo,
that myopic and timid sibling
of important older sisters,
the pale boy who still lives in my mind
(we moved after a year and never returned)
In a fragile state of innocence.

Friends

What are they, anyway? Can they number
into the dozens, and even the hundreds?

Can the same word signify
a regular hand at my poker game
and the one I send for when I begin to die?

Flush with them at twenty, I asked my father
whom he counted as a friend.
'No one comes to mind', he said, and walked away.

His lexicon was biblical and fierce,
and a true one, I understood him to mean,
would have made a Jonathan-pact to last a life,
and contended by day in Socratic debate,
and been a shepherd through the shadows of the night.

Is that then what they are? Or is that phantom
only a ghost of what he wished to be?

Now I am fifty, and the decades
have largely emptied the busy barn.
Just a few familiar creatures shelter
with me in that echoing edifice.

Be glad, though, Daddy, for your like-minded son,
for the remnant that still nests in its eaves
observes an unspoken covenant.
We abide in inscrutable communion.

for Angela

Something Borrowed

It weighs me down, this debt coming due
– this lease that one day won't be renewed.
All sorts of signs remind me
that these elements aren't mine for keeps,
that there's more of those in them than these,
more scatter and drift,
more of moment than of ownership.

*

This morning I was up at five,
flushing out sleep with news and music
and coffee in my rocking chair.
The radio played Bach, and the moon
was a cork of light that plugged the summer sky.
I slipped the science section from the paper's fold
and read about myself: how I am mostly
a hydrogen stew, heavily seasoned
with dashes of potassium, iodine, zinc,
down to a lone cobalt molecule –
like a single teardrop adding flavor
in a huge cast-iron pot.

*

That moon-plug was slowly pulled out
and light began leaking in
while I sifted through the paper's other parts.
A global conference had commenced in Bonn;
a bomb had killed four people on a bus;
and the Sox had won it in the ninth.
I got up and stretched, distracted now
by this peculiar matter of mine.
Science says I am a short-term deposit
in the billennial bank.
Science says I am an atomic baggage check.
Science says I am a snapshot of Union Station

at eight a.m., every moving object
on its way to somewhere else.
I am a table with a dusting of self
and the housekeeper is knocking at the door.

The daily broadsheet lay at my feet
(the Sox had scored on a wild pitch)
like slabs of discarded slate.

*

All people are taught from an early age
that borrowed goods must be returned,
an axiom that includes those items only on loan
from the void, formed when the earth was without form.
Sunlight poured into my living room.
It warmed that little global forum
in human shape (it means the world to me)
which time and the wind will disperse
about the planet and beyond.
It illuminated those past and future
bits of atmosphere and rock
which have assembled for an instant
in between, convening just long enough
for my tiny allotment of oxygen
to be put into the service of song.