

In a Wood

The onset of winter and
All around me the furtive
Stacking of woodpiles as the
First snow gathers itself
Behind cloud banks in the west.
A poor squirrel am I that
Neither scurries nor hoards,
Ear cocked to a restless heart song
While winter entraps me unawares.

Leaving the Oasis

Desert's edge, and I balk at
The hissing of shifting granules:
Whispers of desolate miles
And parched-throated doom.
Decision made, it is too late
To wonder if my dromedary
Skills have survived at all intact
Their long sojourn in the shade,
Or if I face mirage, delirium
And the heart's desiccation
Amidst the migrating dunes.

David Butler

What made us dream that he could comb gray hair?

W.B. Yeats, 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory'

We were the first of six,
Sequentially paired, two to a room.
In even-numbered destiny
We lived in forced proximity
Some twenty-odd years – longer
Than you lived with anyone,
It seems worth noting now,
Now that you are gone,
Beyond reach of all but memory.

Odd how word of an early death
Gets out, finding old companions
Or lovers long out of touch --
As if, out of nowhere, they'd
Felt a cold wind blow and looked
To find its source, turning up,
Against the chill, the collar of memory
From a shared youth, a once-long-ago
When all things seemed possible.

Their tributes call to mind the promise
Of your early days; the golden circles
In which you traveled, in a time out of time,
Beyond recapture. I grant now what
I begrudged you then: you were the
Best of us, gifted of mind and body,
The center of every company, destined,
It seemed, for great things or, failing there,
At least happiness -- at least that.

All of us deceived, looking back, perhaps
You most of all. Some missing gene,
Some somnolent flaw, lay in silent wait for you.

It stole upon you slowly, unrecognized,
Disguised as the excess of youth, a canker
Of burgeoning power, unbeknownst, that
Hollowed you out from within. Unmatched
With any heart true enough to anchor you,
Or call you back, you foundered –
more vulnerable than ever we dreamed.

Growing up in the long shadow
Your talents cast, I burrowed deep,
'An inner émigre', like Heaney's wood-kerne,
*'Taking protective colouring
From bole and bark, feeling
Every wind that blows'*, husbanding
The sources of my slow-building strength:
The un-David, the blocking back,
The-one-that-could-be-relied-upon.

Lower profiled but better moored,
I became, for as long as memory serves,
In all that mattered (save strict chronology),
The eldest; strapping on the first
Of the many obligations you shed,
One by one, year by year, until,
At the end, your passing was strangely
Without context or consequence,
Barely a ripple in our daily lives.

Our shadow brother, long since
More wraith than real, you slipped
Away one night as if determined
To spare us any further trouble
Or drawn-out goodbyes; no fuss
Or bother that would be unbecoming
A life so empty and bereft of purpose
As yours had become (thus holding onto
A sort of pride, a kind of dignity).

Would that you could have spared me,
As I'm sure you would have wanted to,

My leaning over the lip of Adams Falls,
Shaking your ashes into the thin stream
That dribbled to the shallow pool below;
So weak a flow that it could barely
Carry you: your remains a gray sludge
I had to shove over the ledge
With my fingers, ingloriously apt.

Even so, one good rain will
Wash you down Linn Run into
A soil that knows much of rebirth
And renewal. If Ree was right
And we all come back again,
Know that I wish for you smoother
Sailing next time through; fewer gifts,
If need be, but more staying power,
And the same gentle, generous heart.

Farewell, my brother.

Legacies

A contentious day at preschool.
“She has a stubborn streak,” I offer.
“Not from you!” their smiles opine,
And I smile back, as if to concur.

What can they, who see me
Only in corpulent middle age,
Benign and becalmed,
Know of the fire that once
Burned blue from within
In a youth inseparable from
My thought, quoting Yeats,
Because I’ll have no other?

And how often you were singed
By that unforgiving flame,
Flaring like a solar storm
Each time you fell short,
Or stumbled, along
The twisted, stony path
That led us both away
From that single, calamitous, event.

Sojourners

What if between this life and the next
A soul, if only for a moment, knows
Where it's been, and where it's headed:
A blinding instant of self-awareness,
A glimpse of The Big Picture it spends
The next life trying to recall, a fading
Imprint on the closed eyelid of a soul
Plunged back, ready or not, into the trial
by existence?

What does it feel in that moment,
That grace of respite, catching its
Breath before heading back down?
Relief, to know there's meaning to it all?
Reluctance, to be stretched on the rack
once more?

Or, most likely of all, longing,
Unreconciled and inconsolable,
For the life left behind. The hands
Now forever unclaspable, a parent's
Or a child's; memories of a lover's
Touch, warm breath, whispered
Promises, circling then disappearing
Down the drain of eternity. Recollection
Stripped, identity shed and reentry
Accomplished, naked and soiled, again.