

SOME SPIRIT LAND

FOUND POEMS FROM NATURE ESSAYS OF RICHARD JEFFERIES

**FINDER:
COLIN BLUNDELL**

Cover Photo by Fran Baggett

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PREFACE

Cyril Wright (1909 - 1995)

*(Secretary of the Richard Jefferies Society
when this book was first published)*

One of Richard Jefferies' most dedicated admirers, the novelist Henry Williamson, addressing a meeting in Swindon, was asked if he thought that, given a longer span of years, Jefferies might well have turned his attention to writing poetry. Henry's indignant response was: "But all Jefferies' essays are poetry!"

The plinth around Jefferies' gravestone in Broadwater Cemetery, near Worthing, bears the inscription

TO THE PROSE POET OF ENGLAND'S FIELDS AND WOODLANDS

a somewhat ambiguous tribute: where does prose leave off and poetry begin, or are the two as closely intertwined as convolvulus around a hawthorn?

Colin Blundell, who has had a magical relationship with Richard Jefferies, with the idea of the man and with his writings, since adolescence, is in no doubt that in many of his essays, Jefferies was writing poetry in the guise of prose. In this book he has recast these 'found poems' in verse form, but wisely he has left for the perceptive reader to enjoy in the form that Jefferies gave them to us many treasured passages that require no such transfiguration. In other essays, which readers prize for the easy harmonious flow of thought and of sense impressions, not only on nature but on the human scene, Colin Blundell invites us to share with him a new kind of delight in Jefferies' poetic writing.

My own entry into this world was a little cautious, but I soon found myself under the spell, liking better the 'found poems' whose theme is Nature and Beauty, or is based on a fundamental truth, than the everyday subjects of the architecture of Brighton, the bathing season, or the lions in Trafalgar Square. All these poems must stand on their own and may suffer a little here and there by removal from the context of the essay. Against this, it must be said that, so rich is the quality of Jefferies' writing, that it is only necessary to open his books and start reading to be immediately absorbed. The poems in this collection must therefore, as they did with me, lead the reader back to the essays from which they are derived, with an enriched sense of their beauty.

In 'a sacred temple', for instance, Colin Blundell has distilled from the long essay 'Nature and Eternity' the very essence of Jefferies' vision of the world that can be if the human mind will only free itself from the limitations imposed upon it; to achieve a world in which prisons, judges, lawyers, kings and armies, will no longer be required. A union between Nature and the physical and intellectual perfection—this is the triumphant echo of *The Story of My Heart*... Today, thinkers, idealists and philosophers are still reminded that the real world is a violent place: here is Richard Jefferies' answer.

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To reflect that another human being, if at a distance, of ten thousand years, would enjoy one hour's more life, in the sense of fullness of life, in consequence, of anything I had done in my little span, would be to me a peace of soul.

INTRODUCTION

This book of adaptations from five books of essays—*Field and Hedgerow*, *The Life of the Fields*, *The Toilers of the Fields*, *The Open Air*, *The Hills and the Vale*—began more or less by accident. I had wanted to write something to celebrate 1987: one of the ideas I had was to look systematically at Jefferies' imagery, to analyse the distinctive scenes, atmospheres, the pattern of references he chose to convey his 'message'; while collecting material for this I began to notice the way in which already well-wrought metaphors and a wide variety of 'poetic' cadences would suddenly emerge from a set of more or less disconnected observations—from the sort of ramble that is perhaps what *The Athenaeum* described as 'emptying his notebook in decent English' (H.S.Salt (1894 *Richard Jefferies* p101) and certainly what Walter Besant described as 'cataloguing':-

'To some of us the picture is always being improved by the addition of another blade of grass, another dead leaf, or the ear of a hare visible among the turnip-tops; others are fatigued by these little details...'
(*The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* 1905)

For instance, in a single paragraph, in 'Summer in Somerset' (*Field and Hedgerow*), there are comments on a cottage, its turf fires, a view of a river, oak woods, moss growing on branches. The paragraph goes on:-

Though moss is common on branches, it does not often make a raised cushion, thick, as if green velvet pile were laid for the birds to run on. There were rooks' nests in some tall ash trees; the scanty foliage left the nests exposed, they were still occupied by late broods. Rooks' nests are not often seen in ashes as in elms.

Then, suddenly, out of the blue, a high-point in the sequence, the next paragraph contains the touching and amusing image of little 'Audrey' who is neatly compared to a machine that requires a penny in its slot to make it 'go' which did not take much to make it into the 'poem' on p 105.

I set myself to read systematically for 'found poems'. I found that this pattern repeated itself frequently: the warming up randomness of observations suddenly focusing, so that it leapt off the page at me, on a stunningly 'poetic' idea—but not in the sense of its being, crudely, just a descriptive one. Sometimes it was only necessary to render the prose into the 'look' of poetry; sometimes the 'poems' are a distillation of several pages; always the words are Jefferies' own.

I am only too conscious that I can be accused of plagiarism, of chopping Jefferies' essays up for my own purposes, even of irreverence; I apologise in advance to anybody who thinks this: in my defence, I am hoping this volume might be seen as a kind of alternative anthology that, on the one hand, recognises what any 'Jefferies enthusiast' must come to terms with—his often lengthy digressions—but, on the other hand and more importantly, isolates for inspection his moments of concentrated poetic expression. I would want to emphasise that I have very rarely, if at all, made 'poems' out of what could conventionally be called 'purple' passages: Jefferies' 'poetry' seems to me to consist of far more subtle things than merely the descriptive tour de force. It is often asserted, but not demonstrated, that Jefferies is a prose-poet: I have made a humble attempt to encapsulate in these 'poems' precisely what can be classed in a number of ways as 'poetical'; to have a look at something of the poet that might have been. For instance, there are strikingly original images that are worth dwelling on for their own sake such as 'the murmur of poets' (p37) a metaphor which Jefferies works out fully, or the undeveloped, strangely surreal, image of

the ox skull (p77); then there is the anti-romantic irony of the 'three fruit pickers' (p2) in which Jefferies is clearly engaging in a bit of self-mockery; there are vividly drawn scenes that seem to round themselves, give themselves 'poetic shape', with some neat concluding idea (p73), or a deflating sudden change of focus (p17); there are economically done character-sketches like that of the chapel elder who

could make a cucumber frame
out of a church window
or a church window
out of a cucumber frame (p98)

This 'poem', as well as the Audrey 'poem' already referred to, is an excellent example of the subtlety of Jefferies' quiet sense of humour; many other 'poems' in this anthology provide examples of it. The easily observable ironic twist in the short space of a poem can give the lie to the idea, given undue emphasis by Salt and Besant, that Jefferies is devoid of humour.

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The concept of the 'Found Poem' has a very respectable ancestry: it has been convincingly demonstrated that Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* is largely a 'found poem'; the Dadaist 'Objet Trouvé' eventually included collage poems made up of random juxtapositions of images, resulting in surrealistic streams of ideas, 'cut-up poems' from newspaper clippings, 'poems' extracted from prose writings and made to look like poems. 'At about the same time as the Dadaists were elaborating their ideas, T.S.Eliot was composing *The Wasteland*, thrusting together, and subtly treating, gleanings from a variety of sources. A more recent 'treatment' of a book to extract 'poetry' from its prose pages is Tom Phillips' long-term carve up of a Victorian novel published under the title *A Humument* (Thames & Hudson 1980).

The process of extracting 'poems' from other sources has become acceptable; the only question that remains is to ask whether the present 'poet' is justified in what could be regarded as an act of vandalism.

I would have to say that this anthology is in inspiration totally Jefferies; in a very real sense these 'poems' found themselves; I have made the anthology with a never-ceasing admiration for a writer whose words exercise a fascination for anybody who comes under their spell at the right moment and for whom, like myself, 'life is never the same again' (*Nature Diaries and Notebooks* ed Samuel Looker 1948). Isolating 'poems' like 'threshing' (p69) or 'the summer passes' (p100) allows the reader to focus on Jefferies' highly effective poetic imagery—thought being like straw that is threshed, binding the hastily stitched book of summer 'with the crimson leaves of autumn'—which would, perhaps, otherwise be glossed over. It is not intended at all that these 'poems' should take the place of the essays from which they are derived, rather that the reader should return to the essays with renewed enthusiasm for their treasures and perhaps a different way of looking at their cataloguing of existence.

Statements in Looker and Porteous (*Man of the Fields* 1964) confirm me in my feeling that this experiment in constructing 'Jefferies poems' from the essays is justified: they point out that Jefferies tried to write verse but felt 'cabined' by conventional strictly rhyming forms—'he wanted freer expression'. Reading Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and *Specimen Days* gave him the inspiration to attempt a free verse form: Looker and Porteous comment that 'had Jefferies survived, he might have evolved a blank-verse rhythm such as Lawrence was able to use.' I hope that the truth of this will be clear from what I like to think of as the Lawrentian flavour of poems like 'porpoise' (p32) 'white arm' (p40) or 'all persons found wandering abroad' (p60).

I think that, on many occasions, Jefferies actually falls naturally into what might be seen

as Whitmanesque cadences and I have tried to preserve this effect in poems such as in 'Swindon' (p47) which could perhaps be mistaken for an extract from Whitman's 'A Song for Occupations'; then there is Whitman's proclivity for cata-logging—I have tried to capture this in 'poems' like, for example, 'a city' (p23), 'the spot markings of Nature (p26) and 'autumn sunlight' (p42)

More significantly, however, it is possible to trace similarities of thought-structure between Jefferies and Whitman. While construct-ing the title poem, 'some spirit land' (p1), I was reminded of Whitman's address to Poets to Come:-

I myself but write one or two indicative words for the future
I but advance a moment only to wheel and hurry back in the darkness
Leaving it to you to prove and define it,
Expecting the main things from you

The tenor of this is surely more or less the same as Jefferies'

wavings and gestures rudely convey
the framework but the finish is not there...

Or: 'If I cannot. penetrate the organum... [my work] may enable some other to do so...' *Nature Diaries and Notebooks* (p103)

His tongue-tied-ness comes perhaps from trying to deal with what Eliot calls an 'intolerable wrestle/with words and meanings': 'sunlight and books' (p88) is the most dramatic expression of the problem. An interesting gloss on the difficulty of collecting ideas together (and on this collection's methodology!) is contained in 'the country begins to read' (p75) in which Jefferies envisages the cottagers gleanng fragments of curious information from the pieces of newspaper in which their various provisions are wrapped by shopkeepers. You could write a book about an idea, he suggests, by

cutting out the paragraphs that relate
to it—no villager does that
but this ceaseless searching for scraps
comes to something like the same thing

*

In his poetry Whitman constantly seeks to indicate ways in which the Many may be combined in the One, and vice versa, in a mystical manner:-

Splendid suns, the moons and rings, the countless combinations and effects
Such-like, and as good as such-like, visible here or anywhere,
stand provided for in a handful of space which I extend
my arm to and half-enclose with my hand,
That containing the start of each, the virtue, the germs of all...

In 'these are the days of convolvulus' (p54), Jefferies seems to be trying to identify the solid germ from which all speculation starts—the soul—and moves swiftly from the flower in the hand to grass, tree and earth and then senses the much vaster... invisible touch

which arranges the sense to its waves
as the ripples of a lake
set the sand in parallel lines

Jefferies has the 'unseen forces' that link all existence in 'a sacred temple' (p50) and Whitman's image of the arm cupping space comes out in 'miracles' (p39).

Jefferies' optimism for the future ('generations to come' (p91) is reflected in Whitman's

Thoughts...

Of what was once lacking on earth, and in due time
has become supplied—and of what will yet be supplied...

Jefferies' intense preoccupation with sensory evidence (a Zen-type *Suchness*) can be put down to an unconscious desire to focus on and then transcend the world as it is.

When the deep mystery of Suchness is fathomed,
All of a sudden we forget the external entanglements;
When the ten thousand things are viewed in their oneness,
We return to the origin and remain where we have always been.

(Zen text in Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy*)

The organising metaphor of the 'poem' 'camera obscura' (p101), provides a natural way of cataloguing scenes; the 'camera' depicts lists of images of life and by the end of the 'poem' it may seem that we have transcended the 'ten thousand things' and arrived at a large vision of oneness so that

you might almost fear to breathe for fear
of dimming the mirror sun and sky
and clouds shoulder to shoulder with man

The 'poem' 'leaves' (p20) works in a similar way—leaves, butterflies, the gateway of an ancient building, all work up to

dim stories
which float like haze over the meadows around

The idea of the first part of this poem is pretty much the same as that contained in this Japanese haiku:-

fallen flower I see
returning to its branch
ah! a butterfly

—just one small example of Jefferies' other-than-conscious thinking from a Zen Buddhist point of view. As Suzuki points out in *Zen in Western Literature*, it is not unusual for Western writers unconsciously to adopt Zen attitudes.

One of the root ideas of Zen Buddhism is that the object of human life is to transcend dualism, 'not to silence the feelings and cultivate bland indifference' but 'to see that good without evil is like up without down'. (Alan Watts: *The Way of Zen*) Jefferies' constant struggle to unify optimism with extreme pessimism, his battle with illness as against his desire for extreme soul-life, put his thinking uniquely at a point of balance. When H.S.Salt asks the question 'Why, if [as Jefferies says] Nature is wholly ultra-human and indifferent, is communion with nature so strongly advocated by Jefferies as the surest training for the soul?' he betrays his Western dualistic way of thinking: in Zen there are no oppositions so that, for example, Nature may be both inspirational and antipathetic; the irony of what we Westerners see as a paradox comes out in the two 'poems' 'indispensable' and 'totally dispensable' (pp55/56). These two 'poems' are derived from the same essay so that it is difficult to imagine that Jefferies was not alive to the irony of his so-called contradictions.

Dualism, the attempt to separate out observer and observed, thought and thinker, good and evil and so on, can be conquered from a Zen point of view: 'To make an end of the illusion, the mind must stop trying to act upon itself, upon its stream of experience, from the standpoint of the...ego:-

Sitting quietly doing nothing,
Spring comes, and the grass grows by itself

Alan Watts: op cit.

Compare Jefferies in 'never enough' (p57):-

I will sit here on the turf
and the scarlet-spotted fly will pass over me
as if I too were but a grass
I will not think
I will be unconscious
I will live

and 'sun-song' (p4) represents a way of transcending pain by noting that the common factor in all experiences, happy and painful, is the yellowhammer singing in the sun.

In this context, it is worth comparing the opening of 'if only...' (p43):-

on the beach such an organ of discord
you hear nothing and see nothing

with lines 300-303 of Eliot's *Wasteland*:-

On Margate sands
I can connect
Nothing with nothing

An extraordinary point of contact between two writers who do not normally trip off the tongue at the same moment: both were attempting to pare themselves down to a central core of truth in order to get closer to what one might call the Infinite.

So long as you...have any hankering after eternity and God for just so long
you are not truly poor. He alone has true spiritual poverty who wills
nothing, knows nothing, desires nothing.

Meister Eckhart in Aldous Huxley op cit...

*

I have chosen to arrange the lines of the 'poems' with a minimum of punctuation to convey something of the stream of thought that Jefferies struggled to put down on paper, to leave the 'poems' with a sense of unfinishedness, to preserve the fragmentary nature of the essays from which they are derived.

Except for the title 'poem' and the last two 'poems' in the anthology, I did not do much in the way of arranging them in any order. The long poem they turn their faces away (p112) with which I had intended to end the anthology began to seem so appallingly sad that I turned to the last page of *Bevis* for what amounts to a new beginning, a turn of the wheel from misery to expansive optimism, which is what I feel Jefferies might have approved of. I hope he'd have approved of what I've done here altogether!



some spirit land

scarce fit to be touched
lest it should fall to pieces;
too beautiful to be long watched
lest it should fade away;

a story that cannot be told
because he who knows it is tongue-tied
and dumb: notions of hands
wavings and gestures rudely convey

the framework but the finish is not there;
no day no hour of summer—no step
but brings new mazes:
I am obliged to turn away

from the endless cataloguing of days
the counting of grass stems
the watching of wings
and the long fall of leaves

but how shall I shut out the sun?
how shall I deny the constellations
of the night? the things
that take root in the mind

Wild Flowers:
Open Air

1

three fruit pickers

hour after hour in the gardens and orchards
they worked in the full beams of the sun
gathering fruit for the London market

two faces glowed with a golden brown
with the sunlight under their faces
the summer light absorbed by the skin

thrice blessed and fortunate beautiful
golden brown in their cheeks superb
health in their gait they walked as Immortals

on earth; they cursed me in their hearts
for my idleness who did no visible work
(their indignant glances spoke it plainly)

but I envied them their ideal health and hue;
I envied their unweary step and measured
yet lazy gait but most of all

the power which they possessed of being
always in the sunlight in the air
abroad upon the earth (not

of course intentional power) but if they chose
they could see the sunrise be with him all
the livelong day stay while the moon

rose over the corn till the silent stars
at silent midnight shone in the cool
summer night till the cock crew

2

the whole time in the open air:
resting at mid-day under the elms
ripple of heat flowing through the shadow;

at midnight between the ripe corn
and the hawthorn hedge on the white wild
camomile and the poppy pale in the duskiness

with face upturned to the thoughtful heaven—
the life above this life to be obtained
from constant presence with sunlight and stars!

blackness gathered in the third face:
scorched and half-charred a stick
thrust in the fire withdrawn before flames

seize it cheekbones like knuckles the chin
brown stoneware wrinkled twisted
gnarled tree-trunk hollow and decayed

*

in the evening I found them again: a quarrel
had begun; the men swore but the women
did worse the two golden-brown

girls were mouthing and gesticulating and one
held a quart from which as she staggered
to and fro she spilled the ale

Golden Brown:
The Open Air

3

sun-song

one yellowhammer
sat on a branch of ash
the livelong morning
still singing in the sun;

his bright head
his clean bright yellow
gaudy as Spain
drawn like a brush

charged heavily with colour
across the retina
painting it deeply
on the eye and memory

it endures
(though that was boyhood
and this is manhood and pain)—
the same sun-song

*Wild Flowers:
The Open Air*

4

odour of tar

mastheads stand up
against the sky;
a loose rope swings
as the breeze strikes it;

a veer of the wind
brings a puff of smoke
from the funnel of a cabin
where some one is cooking;

shingle rattles
shovelled for ballast:
sound of labour makes me
more comfortably lazy—

they are not in a hurry
the tides rise and fall
slowly and they work
in correspondence: no infernal

fidget and fuss (I wonder
how long it would take me
to pitch a pebble to lodge on
that large brown pebble there—

I try) as the swell of the sea
carries up the pebbles
so the drifting of the clouds
and the touch of the wind

the sound of the surge arrange
the molecules of the mind
in still layers—a dream fills it
and the odour of tar

*Sunny Brighton:
The Open Air*

5

Brighton

there are more handsome women
in Brighton than anywhere else in the world;
you have to walk (as the Spanish say)
with your head over your shoulder:

the only antidote known
is to get married before you visit the place
and doubts have been expressed
as to its efficacy—

every morning the girls' schools
go for their constitutional walks:
the place has a garrison of girls;
long residence accustoms you to good looks

*Sunny Brighton:
The Open Air*

6

real work

the fishing boats and the fishing nets
and all the fishing work are real:
they form a link with the facts of the sea
with the forces of the tides the winds and the sunlight
gleaming on the white crests of the waves;
they speak to thoughts lurking in the mind;
they float between life and death;

 their anchors
go down to the roots of existence real
work real labour of man
to draw forth food from the deep
as the plough draws it from the earth utter
contrast to the artificial work—
the feathers the jewellery the writing at desks
of the town the writing of a thousand clerks
the busy factory work the trimmings
and feathers and counter-attendance do not touch
the real; the old brown sails
and the nets the anchors and tarry ropes
go straight to Nature
 you do not care
for Nature? you will go there one day soon:

I rede you to recognise the sunlight and the sea
the flowers and the woods now

*Sunny Brighton:
The Open Air*

Brighton, revolt!

all Brighton chimney pots
are put on with giant cement
to bear the strain of the winds
rushing up from the sea

the wind gets between iron shutters
and the plate glass
and shakes the windows loose—
the windiest spot

is at the corner of Second Avenue
Hove enough to choke
those who face it double windows
(Russian fashion) all along the sea-front

*

there is a scheme for planking over
the ocean an immense central pier
is proposed: Brighton would be destroyed
Brighton ought to rise in revolt

*Sunny Brighton:
The Open Air*

8

a deserted house

once school

where a minor world played out
its little drama and left half its history
written on the walls: of a kingdom with its monarchs
its ministers and executioners, its changes of dynasty

now only the silence of huge hollow
halls and endless dormitories the storms
that sway with savage force down
from the hills have wreaked their will on windows
and rotting roof over the antique
carved mantel-piece two swallows'
nests white-washed walls yellow
and green with damp and covered with patches
of saltpetre efflorescence still bear
legible and plain the hasty inscriptions
scrawled on them years and years before
by hands then young now
turned to dust: the history of this little
kingdom its hopes and joys the fears
and the hatreds of the subjects still remained
and might be gathered from the writings on the wall
like the history of Egypt and Assyria on palaces

9

where now
are the merry hearts that traced these lines
upon the plaster in an idle mood?

all swept away now
the plaster on which generations of boys recorded
their history has been torn down and has crumbled
into dust

*An Extinct Race:
The Toilers of the Field*

the orchis mascula

grew in the brook corner
and in early spring
sent up tall spikes
of purple flowers
alone in an angle
of the brook and a hedge
within sound of water
ceaselessly falling
over a dam

in those days to me
it had an aspect of enchantment
not only on account
of its singular appearance
but because I had read
in old folios
that it could call up
the passion of love:
there was something in the root
beneath the sward
that could make a heart
beat faster

common modern books
are silent on these things;
a dry and formal knowledge:
mere lists of pistils & petals
a dried herbarium of plants
that fall to pieces
at the touch of the fingers

11

only by chipping away
at hard old Latin
contracted and dogged
and by gathering
scattered passages
in classic authors
could anything be learned

but how to identify
the magic plant?
(the same description
will very nearly fit
several flowers)
how determine
which really was
the true root of love?

uncertainty and speculation
sustained the pleasure
till at last I should

not have cared to have
the original question answered

with my gun under my arm
I used to look at the orchis
from time to time
so long as the spotted leaves
were visible
till the grass grew
too long

Orchis Masculina:
The Toilers of the Field

12

look!

the lions in Trafalgar Square
the centre of London: by those lions
began my London work; from them
as spokes from the unmoving centre of a wheel
radiate my London thoughts standing
by them looking south you see
the Houses of Parliament where resides
the glacier mastership of England; at your back
is the National Gallery (art) and further
back the British Museum (books)
to the right the West End (wealth
and luxury) to the left (roar and labour
craft and gold) the City

the lions!

in London there are many structures and things
but no other art: bold
curves and the fine touches of the master
hand—his thumb in the plastic metal
technique and grasp legible at a glance
calm strength in repose indifference
to little things the resolute view
of great ones the soul of the maker the spirit
taken from Nature abides in the bronze
finer than the lions that crouch in the cages
at the Zoo: truer and more real;
lions to whom has been added the heart
of a man nothing disfigures them neither
smoke nor black rain nor choke-damp of fog
the idea in the metal is no more touched than Time
itself by the alternation of the seasons

13

if you still want the meretricious
 painting of warm light and cool
 yet not hard shade the effect of colour
 with the twitching of triangles the spangles
 glittering and all the arrangement contrived
 to take the eye you can have it here
 as well as noble sculpture: ascend
 the steps to the National Gallery and stand
 looking over the balustrade in summer hours
 let the sun have sloped enough to throw
 a slant of shadow outward; let the fountains
 splash whose bubbles restless speak
 of rest and leisure idle and dreamy;
 let the blue-tinted pigeons nod
 their heads walking and crowd through the air
 to the roof-tops shadow on the one side bright
 light on the other azure above
 and swallows

the human stream flows
near enough to be audible toned
to bearableness a stream of human hearts
every atom a living mind filled
with what thoughts? a stream that ran
through Rome once but has altered its course
and wears away the banks here
now and tritulates its own atoms
hearts to dust in the process

yellow

omnibuses and red cabs dark
shining carriages chestnut horses
all rushing and by their motion mixing
their colours so that the commonness of it disappears
and the hues remain a streak drawn
in the groove of the street dashed hastily
with the thick camel's hair

in the midst

the calm lions dusky unmoved

full always of the one grand idea
 that was infused into them so full
 that the golden sun and the bright wall
 of the eastern houses the shade that is slipping
 towards them the sweet swallows and the azure
 sky all the human stream
 holds of wealth and power and coroneted
 panels (Nature man and city)
 pass as naught
 mind stronger
 than matter the soul alone stands
 when the sun sinks when the shade is universal
 night when the van's wheels are silent
 and the dust rises no more

15

at summer noontide when the day surrounds us
 and it is bright light even in the shadow I like
 to stand by one of the lions and yield
 to the old feeling: the sunshine glows
 on the dusky creature under the skin
 coming from out of its limbs the roar
 of the rolling wheels sinks and becomes
 distant as the sound of a waterfall when dreams
 are coming all the abundant human
 life is smoothed and levelled the abruptness
 of individuals lost in the flowing
 current music heard so far off
 that the notes are molten and the theme
 only remains the abyss of the sky
 over and the ancient sun are near—
 they are immortal thought: when the yellow
 Syrian lions stood in the old time of Egypt
 there too the sunlight gleamed on the eyes of men
 as now this hour on mine the same
 consciousness of light the same sun
 but the eyes that saw it and mine
 how far apart! the immense lion here
 beside me expresses larger Nature—
 Cosmos the ever-existent thought
 that sustains the world exalts the mind
 till the vast roads of space which the sun
 tramples are as the arm's length such
 a moment cannot endure long:
 gradually the roar deepens the current
 resolves into individuals the houses
 return... it is only a square—a square potent

The Lions in Trafalgar Square:
The Toilers of the Field

Savernake

lie there
half in sunshine half in shade
in a Nirvana of indifference

the wind sighs in soft music
a leaf falls to mark time
clouds go by in rhythmic motion

*

time is no more to you
than it was to the oak
only you feel the broad earth
beneath you and (as to the ancient giant)
there passes through you
a strength renewing itself
energy flowing into you

Monsieur Lessops of Suez Canal fame
is reported to have said
that Marlborough Forest
was the finest he had seen in Europe

*Marlborough Forest:
The Hills and the Vale*

17

a modern Parthenon

if the Greek sculptors
were to come to life again
and cut us out for another Parthenon
they would represent us
shuffling along heads down
and coat-tails flying
splash-splosh a nation of umbrellas
mere hurrying machines forced by
the demon Drive-on
the irresistible horse Circumstance

on the railway platform as the train comes in
five hundred well-dressed and civilised savages
wet cross weary eager to get in for home
five hundred stiffened and cramped folk
eager to get out mix and mingle

how is the traffic worked at night
in safety over the inextricable
windings of the iron roads into the City?

*A Wet Night in London:
The Open Air*

18

now for it!

the wind strikes the chest
like the blow of a strong man
the chest responds
with a long-drawn heave
the pliable ribs bend outwards
and the cavity within enlarges
filled with the elastic air;
the stride grows longer and longer
the shadow slips over the surface
the fierce joy of reckless speed

in the glow
and the speed
and the savage north wind
the old Norse spirit arises
and you feel a giant

oh that such a sense
of the fulness of life could last!

the ice-fair has started
dancing parties are formed
under the level beams of the sun:
westwards the white ridges of the hills
stand out for a moment
sharp against the sky
cut by the engraver's tool

*Skating:
The Hills and the Vale*

19

leaves

a shower of yellow leaves
wrested from the high elms
blue sky behind droop slowly
twirling fluttering towards me
a cloud of autumn butterflies

the gateway of an ancient building
stands up on the hill against the sky
the banqueting hall of a palace
of old times the centre of those dim stories
that float like haze over the meadows around
*Outside London:
The Open Air*

20

wheaten words

silly foolish people
to let all the flowers wither
for a thousand years
while you keep each other at a distance
instead of agreeing and sharing them

is there a sort of poison in you
that teaches little children
to follow the same silly objects
to try which can get
the most round things?

only to die at the bottom
of a hill of wheat;
the earth is full of skeletons
nothing but stones all round them
stone walls and stone streets

*

a man came staggering
out of the wood
he had an iron helmet on his blood
stained the green wheat red he died
before he could get to the stream

*Saint Guido:
The Open Air*

21

the Thames

is free for swearing:
you must moderate your curses
on the Queen's highway;
you must not be profane on the streets
lest you be taken before the magistrates
but on the Thames you may swear
as the wind blows
howsoever you list

you may begin at the mouth
off the Nore
and curse your way
up to Cricklade

a hundred miles for swearing
is a fine preserve:
it is one of the marvels
of our civilisation

*The Modern Thames:
The Open Air*

22

a city

depends very much on its roofs
mile upon mile
mass of life
brought up at the extremity
with thin masts
rising above the mist

beneath the red surface
the excavations:
and men and women hastening
horses with mighty loads
groups at corners
fragments of crowds

then thin masts
still and quiet as trees:
labour at sea
long hours of ploughing
the waves by night
labour at warehouses
labour in the fields
the mines the mountains—
masts are always dreamy
to look at: a romance
of unknown lands
of distant forests
tropical colours
strange forms of life
something beyond experience

hardly any of us but have thought
some day I will go on a long voyage
but the years go by
and still we have not sailed

Red Roofs of London:
The Open Air

it is a Piccadilly crowd
by the sea exactly
the same style of people
you meet in Piccadilly
but freer in dress
and particularly in hats:

all fashionable Brighton
parades the Kings Road
twice a day
morning and afternoon
always on the side of the shops

the route is
up and down the King's Road
as far as Preston Street
back again and up East Street

these well-dressed and leading people
never look at the sea:
watching by the gold-plate shop
you will not observe a single glance
in the direction of the sea
gleaming under the sunlight
fresh breeze calling white horses
from the deep neither ladies
nor gentlemen ever go on the beach or lie
where the surge comes to the feet—

the sea is not the thing in Brighton;
there is more talk of horses

*Sunny Brighton:
The Open Air*

everybody knows
the mono-attitude man
becoming famous by being always
in one attitude

morning noon or evening in the street
in the carriage sitting reading the paper—
always the same attitude:
thus they achieve social distinction;

it takes the place
of a medal or the red ribbon—
or some invariably wear
the same short pilot coat;

some sit at the same window
of the reading room at the same hour
every day all the year round:
this is the way to become marked

and famous; winning a battle
is nothing to do with it
when it was arranged that a military band
should play on the Brunswick lawns

it became the fashion to stop carriages
in the road and listen to it;
frequently there were carriages four deep
while the gale blew the music out to sea

and no one heard a note—
still they sat content

Sunny Brighton :
The Open Air

wings of butterflies feathers of birds
surface of eggs fish and foxglove
spotted meadow orchis brown dots on cowslips—
all spots dots dustings of minute specks
mottlings and irregular markings

it was thought a wonderful thing
when at last the strange inscriptions of Assyria
were read nail-headed characters
whose sound was lost; it was thought a triumph
when the older hieroglyphics of Egypt
were compelled to give up their messages
and the world hoped that we should know
the secrets of life but there was nothing
except superstition and useless ritual

the antiquity of Egypt is nothing to the age
of the spot-markings of Nature—they date
from unfathomable time: in them the sun
has written his commands and the wind inscribed
deep thoughts; they were composed in the old world
when the Immortals walked on earth
handed down thousands and thousands of years
to tell us that today we are still in the presence
of the heavenly visitants if only we will give up
the soul to their pure influences—
the language in which they are written
has no alphabet and cannot be reduced
to order it can only be understood
by the heart and the spirit—
 look into the foxglove head
and you will know this

The Pine Wood:
The Open Air

down the dusty road
inches deep in sand
comes a sulphur butterfly
dancing like a flower let loose
rushing as quick as if hastening
to a butterfly fair:
if only rare how valued he would be
his colour is so evident
and visible he fills the road
being brighter than all
and for the moment
is more than all the trees & flowers

a February pleasure
this summer butterfly is a dream

The Pine Wood:
The Open Air

27

out of doors

straw going by the road
on a dusky winter's day
bundles of yellow tubes
thrown up against the ivy

tiles red-burned
or orange-coated
the sea sometimes
clearly definite

the shadows of trees
in a thin wood;
not only romantic things
but plain matter-of-fact things

as a wagon
freshly painted red
beside the wheelwright's shop
wet with colour

delicately pencilled
at the edges:
it must be out of doors;
nothing indoors looks like this

Wild Flowers:
The Open Air

28

blackbirds singing

in the oaks blackbirds whistle—
you do not often see them
leafy top-branch lovers
except when they quietly flutter
to another perch

their whistle too is very human
like some one playing the flute;
an uncertain player
now drawing forth a bar
of beautiful melody
and then losing it again:
he does not know what quiver
or what turn his note will take
before it ends;
the note leads him
and completes itself

it is a song
which strives to express
the singer's keen delight
the singer's exquisite appreciation
of the loneliness of days
the golden glory of the meadow
the light
the luxurious shadows
the indolent clouds reclining
on their azure couch

such thoughts
can only be expressed
in fragments
like a sculptor's chips

29

thrown off as the inspiration
seizes him
not mechanically sawn
to a set limit
the stops of his instrument—

now and again the blackbird
feels the beauty of the time:
the large white daisy stars
the grass with yellow dusted tips
the air which comes so softly
unperceived by any precedent
rustle of the hedge
the water which runs slower
held awhile by rootlet
flag and forget-me-not

he feels the beauty of the time
and he must say it

his notes come like wild flowers
not sown in order—
the sunshine opens and shuts
the stops of his instrument

*The Coming of Summer:
The Toilers of the field*

30

but...

the ships of the flowers
the humble bees
to their quays they come
unlading priceless essences
of sweet odours
brought from the East
over the green seas of wheat
unlading priceless colours
on the broad dandelion disks
bartering these things
for honey and pollen

slowly tacking aslant
the pollen ship hums
in the south wind

but tangled and crushed
by their own growth
a crown of thorns
hangs over the thrush's nest
thorns for the mother
hope for the young

is there a crown of thorns
over your heart?

a spike has gone
deep enough into mine

*Wild Flowers:
The Open Air*

31

porpoise

a porpoise came up to Mortlake
a porpoise came up from the great sea
past Gravesend past Greenwich
past the Tower under London Bridge
past Westminster and the Houses of Parliament
right up to Mortlake—

some one hastened out in a boat
armed with a rifle
and occupied himself with shooting at it

*The Modern Thames:
The Open Air*

32

on the downs

the sward is the original
untouched unploughed
centuries old

the bees like it
and the finches come
it is silent and peaceful
like the sky above

by night the stars
shine not only overhead
and in a narrow circle
round the zenith
but down to the horizon;
the walls of the sky
are built up of them
as well as its roof

the sliding meteors
go silently over
the gleaming surface
silently the planets rise
silently the earth moves
to the unfolding East

sometimes a lunar rainbow
appears—a strange scene
at midnight
arching over almost from the zenith
down into the dark hollow
of the valley

summer changes into autumn

orange specks on beeches
in the copses

there must be a good store
of fuel & provisions

the ladies had best add
as many volumes
as they can to the bookshelf

wind & rain & snow
are very different here

*Downs:
The Open Air*

34

beneath trees

beneath trees
the heart feels nearer
to that depth of life
the far sky means

the rest of spirit
found only in beauty
ideal & pure
comes there because the distance

seems within touch of thought
carried up by the ascent
of the flame-shaped fir;
round the spruce top

the blue is deepened
concentrated by the fixed point;
it is painted in bright colour
in my mind colour

thrice laid and indelible
as one passes a shrine
and bows the head
to the Madonna

so I recall the picture
and stoop in spirit—
there is no saint like the sky
sunlight shining from its face

*Wild Flowers:
The Open Air*

35

in the forest

in the forest
there is nothing but beauty

to the imagination
pleasant pageants of old time

to the ear
the soothing cadences of leaves

the beeches rear their Gothic architecture
the oaks are planted firm like castles

quick squirrels climb & dart
deer cross the distant glade

and occasionally a
a hawk passes like thought

*Forest:
The Open Air*

36

the murmur of poets

the murmur of poets
is louder in February
than in the more pleasant
days of summer—for then

the growth of aquatic grasses
checks the flow and stills it
whilst in February every stone or flint
or lump of chalk divides the current

and causes a vibration;
with this murmur of water
and mild time the rooks caw
incessantly and the birds at large

essay to utter their welcome
of the sun wet furrows reflect
so that dark earth gleams;
the lark and the light are one

*Out of Doors in February:
The Open Air*

37

footsteps

time lies heavy on the world:
the old old earth is glad to turn
from the cark and care of drifted centuries
to the first sweet blades of green;
broad cloud shadow warm embrace of light

the moments we forget the mire of the world
are the most precious seldom do we realise
that the world is practically no thicker to us
than the print of our footsteps on the path:
on that surface we walk and act our comedy—

the years have accumulated first in drifts
then in heaps and now a vast mound
overshadows us; step aside from the trodden footpath
step out upon the broad down beside the green corn
that springs from the dead and unknown darkness

*Out of Doors in February:
The Open Air*

38

miracles

white tent walls of cloud
stretched across from ash-top to ash-top
a cloud canvas roof
a tent palace of the delicious air:
one great flower it is
drawn round about over
and enclosing like Aphrodite's arms
as if the dome of the sky
were a bell-flower
drooping down over us
the magical essence of it
filling all the room of the earth—

a little feather droops downwards
to the ground a swallow's feather
fuller of miracle than the Pentateuch—

nothing twice: new thatch on old gables
the gate swings differently
faces fade as flowers
and there is no consolation
except the old succession of days
and garland; fetch them from distant
mountains; discover them
in decaying walls; locate
their place in the heart

Wild Flowers: The Open Air

white arm

colossal white
sunlit bare
among the trees and the meads around

a large white arm
bare in the sunshine
carelessly pressing the dry moss on a low red wall

perfectly white
white as the milk
in which it was often plunged dairy-proportioned

a house roofed
with old grey stone
and peaches trained up by the window

clear and brilliant
the gaudy sun
shone on her as she stood in the gateway

her face
I do not remember
only the arm against the dried mosses on the red wall

*Beauty in the Country:
The Open Air*

40

seventeen

she walks in the glory of young life;
she is really centuries old:
from the south wind that breathed
a century and a half ago over the green wheat

from the perfume of the growing grasses
waving over the honey-laden clover
and laughing veronica hiding the greenfinches
baffling the bee from rose-loved hedges

woodbine and cornflower azure-blue
where yellowing wheat-stalks crowd
under the shadow of green firs;
all the devious brooklet's sweetness

where the iris stays the sunlight;
all the wild wood's hold of beauty;
all the broad hill's thyme and freedom
thrice a hundred years repeated

a hundred years of cowslips bluebells violets
purple spring and golden autumn;
sunshine shower and dewy mornings
the night immortal all the rhythm of Time unrolling

a chronicle unwritten and past all power of writing
(record of petals that fell from roses a century ago?)
the swallows to the house-tops three hundred times
(think of that!) thence she sprang

and the world yearns towards her beauty
as to flowers that are past—
the loveliness of seventeen is centuries old:
is that why passion is almost sad?

*Beauty in the Country:
The Open Air*

41

autumn sunlight

all things brown yellow and red
are brought out by the autumn sun:

the brown furrows
freshly turned
where the stubble was
yesterday
brown bark of trees
brown fallen leaves
brown stalks of plants
the red haws
red unripe blackberries
red bryony berries
reddish-yellow fungi
yellow hawkweed
yellow ragwort
yellow hazel leaves
spots in lime or beech—

not a speck of yellow red or brown
the yellow sunlight does not find out
and these make autumn
with the caw of rooks
the peculiar autumn caw
of laziness and full feeding
the sky blue as March
between the great masses
of cloud floating over;
mist in the distant valleys;
the tinkle of traces

as the plough turns
and the silence of the woodland birds

*Under the Acorns:
The Open Air*

42

if only...

on the beach such an organ of discord
you hear nothing and see nothing

a sparkle of sunshine on the breakers
a dazzling gleam from the white foam

light and brightness and champagniness
altogether lovely: the way in which people lie about

on the beach their legs this way and their arms that
their hats over their eyes: an utter give-themselves-up

expression the ancient philosopher (who had a mind
to eat a fig) held that a nail driven into wood

could only support a certain weight exceed it
and either the wood must break or the nail come out—

there is a wooden seat put together with nails
defying all the rules of gravity and adhesion

the music I suppose charms it
for it holds together in the most marvelous manner

four people are sitting on it four big ones
middle aged careful people every moment

the legs gape wider apart the structure
visibly stretches and yields and sinks in the pebbles

the stoutest of all sits on the lame legs
reading his paper quite oblivious

43

a sort of magnetism sticks things together
it is in the air it makes things go right
that ought to go wrong awfully naughty place
no sort of idea of rightness here:

humming & strumming and singing & smoking
splashing & sparkling a buzz of voices

and booming of sea!
if only people could be happy like this always!

votes for women!

along the yellow line where sand
and pebbles meet there stood a gallant
band in gay uniforms facing
the water like the imperial legions who were ordered
to charge the ocean and gather shells
as spoils of war the cohorts gleaming
in purple and gold extended their front
rank their fighting line one
to a yard along the strand some
tall and stately some tall
and slender some well-developed
and firm on their limbs some gentle
in attitude even in their war dress
some defiant forty or fifty
ladies a splendid display of womanhood
in the bright sunlight blue dresses
pink dresses purple dresses
trimmings of every colour a gallant
show the eye had just time
to receive these impressions with a blow of its camera
when boom! the groundswell was on them and what
a change! they disappeared an arm
projected here a foot there
tresses floated on the surface like seaweed
but bodily they were gone the whole rank
from end to end was overthrown
more than that overwhelmed
buried interred in water Pharoah's
army in the Red Sea crush!
it had come on them like a mountain the wave so clear
so beautifully coloured so cool and refreshing
had struck their delicate bodies with the force
of a ton weight down went

each fair bather as if hit
with shot from a Gatling down she went
water driven into her nostrils seaweed
forced into her throat choking her crush
on the hard pebbles no feather
bed the strange rushing roar
it makes in the ears a perfect rout
yet they recovered position immediately for more

was there ever such courage? yet some people
hesitate to give women the franchise a miserable
privilege which any poor fool
of a man may exercise any time

*The Bathing Season:
The Open Air*

46

Swindon

—wonderful and terrible at night
when the rail mill
and steam hammers are in full swing:
the open door of the glaring furnaces t
shoot forth an insupportable beam
of brilliant white light
and out from the glowing fire
comes a massive bar of iron
hotter whiter than the fire itself
barely to be looked upon;
it is dragged and swung along
under the great hammer Thor strikes
and the metal doubles up and bends
as if of plastic clay and showers of sparks
fly high and far a long strip of solid flame
is guided between rollers and flattened & shaped
till it comes out a dull-red-hot rail
and the sharp teeth of the circular saw
cut through it throwing out a circle of sparks;
the vast fly wheel whirls round endless shaftings
drums revolve overhead
humming sharp scraping ringing sound of saw
great boilers hiss furnaces roar
power just held in by bars and rivets
glowing iron in wheelbarrows
small blocks slid along the floor—
grotesque shadows on roof and walls
men have barely a human look
mingling thus with flame and heat
toying with danger handling red hot metal
with ease visible miles away in the sky

*The Story of Swindon:
The Hills and the Vale*

47

Thardover South Wood

I wish that the men now serving the great
polished wheels and works in iron
and steel and brass could be spared an hour
to sit under this ancient oak
in Thardover South Wood and come to know
that Time is no older—that Nature still
exists as full as ever—and to see
that all the factories of the world have made
no difference and therefore not
to pin their faith to any theory
born and sprung up among the crush
and pale-faced life of modern time

that they might gather themselves some
of the leaves—mental and spiritual leaves—
of the ancient forest how hurt
they would then be if any proposed
the felling of the forest and the death of its meaning:
like thrusting a stick through some valuable
painting on your walls at home

*A King of Acres:
The Hills and the Vale*
48

the arms of the mind

the grass sways and fans
the reposing mind the leaves
sway and stroke it till it can feel

beyond itself using grass blades
each leaf as new organs
fresh nerves and veins

running far out into the field
along the winding brook up through the leaves

the arms of the mind
open wide to the broad sky

unwritten impressions that will remain
when the glamour is gone
and grass is but grass and the tree a tree

*The Sun and the Brook:
The Hills and the Vale*

a sacred temple

lying prone upon the earth
in the shadow with quiescent will listening—
thoughts and feelings rise respondent
to the sunbeams to the leaf the very blade
of grass resting the head upon
the hand gazing down upon
the ground the strange and marvellous inner
sight of the mind penetrates the solid
earth grasps in part the mystery
of its vast extension upon either side
bearing its majestic mountains its deep
forests its grand oceans and almost
feels the life which in ten thousand
thousand forms revels on its surface

how grand and holy is this life
how sacred the temple which contains it!

the golden disc has risen and set
as the graven marks of man alone
record full eight thousand
years the hieroglyphs of the rocks speak
of a fiery sun inconceivable ages
before that and onwards still onwards
goes the disc doubtless for ages
and ages to come;

there is no
time at all: this instant is eternity

expand the mind till it grasps the idea
of the unseen forces which hold

50

the globe suspended and draws the vast
suns and stars through space
give us greater strength of body
greater length of days give us
more vital energy let our limbs be mighty
as those of the giants of old supplement
such organs with noble mechanical engines
with extended means of locomotion
add novel and more minute methods
of analysis and discovery let us become
as demi-gods all is possible
earth
will be as a paradise

thus occupied
we require no judge no prison no law
no punishment and further no army no monarch—
things would be just the same

all these thoughts because
the passing shadow of a rook caused
the eye to gaze upwards into the deep azure
of the sky—no limitation

fix the mind upon the sun of the present
the world cries out for an intellect
which shall found its faith on the teaching of grass
of leaf of bird of beast of hoary
rock great ocean star
and sun...
 the faiths of the past of the ancient

51

world (now extinct or feebly lingering
on) were each inspired by one mind
only but the faith of the future will spring
from the researches of a thousand thousand thinkers
whose minds once brought into focus will speedily
burn up all that is useless
and worn out with a fierce heat
and evoke a new and brilliant light

there is but a thin transparent sheet
of brittle glass between artificial
man and the air the trees and grass

*Nature and Eternity:
The Hills and the Vale*

52

blue line upon blue line

of down is drawn along
in slow curves beneath which
the distant sea appears
a dim plain with five bright streaks
where sunshine pours
through as many openings
in the clouds

the wind smells
like an apple fresh-picked

the sun comes out
its single beam merged in the many
as one new thought opens
the hearts of all men

*On the Downs:
The Hills and the Vale*

53

these are the days of convolvulus

of ripening berry and dropping nut;
in the gateways ears of wheat
hang from the hawthorn boughs
the flowers are gone to the uplands
and the untilled wastes;
the hollow side of the brook

has received the sunlight
like a silver speculum
through all the long drama of the summer

nothing compact that can be grasped
and stayed: dreams that slip silently
as water slips through fingers

no one can sit down
and deliberately think of the soul
till it appears a visible thing:

it eludes—the mind
cannot grasp it
but hold a flower in the hand—

a rose this late honeysuckle
or this first harebell—
there the soul finds itself

the grass is not grass only:
from tree and earth and soft rain
moving an invisible touch

which arranges the senses to its waves
as the ripples of a lake
set the sand in parallel lines

Sun and Brook:
The Hills and the Vale

indispensible

I wonder to myself
how they can get on without me
how they manage—bird and flower—
without me to keep the calendar
for them: I noted it so carefully
and lovingly day by day
the seed leaves on the mounds
in the sheltered places
that come so early the pushing up
of the young grass the succulent dandelion
the coltsfoot in the heavy thick clods
the trodden chickweed at the foot
of the gatepost every blade of grass
was mine as though I had planted it
separately every wild free hawk
that passed overhead was mine:
his swift careless flight
the throw of his pinions
his rush over the elms and miles
of woodland sweep and curve of his going;
day by day a change;
always a note to make:
the moss drying on the tree trunks
dog's mercury stirring
under the ash poles
bird's claw buds of beech
lengthening books upon books
to be filled with these things

I cannot think how they manage without me

*Hours of Spring:
Field and Hedgerow*

totally dispensible

green hawthorn buds
prophecy on the hedge

the reed pushes up
in the moist earth
spear thrust through shield

starling eggs
in the knot-hole
of the pollard elm:

within each a speck
(not to be found
in a cut diamond
of two hundred carats)
dot of protoplasm

drift of time
apple bloom
and blue veronica

lark sings high up
and each note falls
into my heart like a knife

the earth is all in all to me
but I am nothing to the earth

*Hours of Spring:
Field and Hedgerow*

never enough

the fly whirls his scarlet spotted wings
and splashes himself with sunlight
like the children on the sands:
he thinks not of the grass and sun
any more than the barefoot children ask
why the sea is there
or why it does not quite dry up
when it ebbs

if the sunshine were a hundred hours long
still it would not be enough
never enough of sun and sliding shadows
that come like a hand over the table
to lovingly reach our shoulder

never enough of the grass that smells
sweet as a flower—
not if we could live years and years
equal in number to the tides
that have ebbed and flowed
counting backwards till we have found out
which came first—the day or the night

my big grass book I have left at home
and the dust is settling
on the gold of the binding—
I have picked a handful this morning
of which I know nothing:
I will sit here on the turf
and the scarlet-spotted fly will pass over me
as if I too were but a grass
I will not think I will be unconscious
I will live

*The July Grass:
Field and Hedgerow*

57

stranger

a cart has just gone by
bearing a strange load
among the carts of spring

in it there sat an old man
with the fixed stare the animal-like eye
of extreme age: he is over ninety

a few chairs and articles of furniture
and he was propped up against a bed;
he was being moved—literally carted—

to another house not home and he said
he could not go without the bed
he had slept on for seventy-three years

last Sunday his son old too was carted
to the churchyard in an open van
today the father goes to a strange land

his home is broken up he will potter
no more with maize for the chicken
the gorse hedges will become solid walls

of golden bloom but never again spring for him
—a stranger I see is already
digging the old man's garden

*Hours of Spring:
Field and Hedgerow*

58

the gatekeeper butterfly

is common;
its marking is very ingenious
may I say?
regular yet irregular:
the pattern is complete
yet incomplete; it is finished
and yet it suggests to the mind
that the lines ought to go on further:
they go out into space beyond the wing

if a carpet were copied from it
and laid down in a room
the design would want to run
through the walls

imagine the flower bird's wing detached
from some immense unseen carpet
and set floating—
it is a piece of something not ended
in itself and yet floating about complete

towards the end of their lives
little bits of wing drop out
as if punched

the markings
on the underwings have a tendency
to run into arches
one arch above the other:
the tendency in Nature to curve
may be traced in things as wide apart as
a flower bird's wing
and the lines on a scallop shell

*The Makers of Summer:
Field and Hedgerow*

59

all persons found wandering abroad...

(notice on a weather-stained board 1887)

it very often happens
that we cannot see the times
in which we actually live:
a thing must be gone by
before you can see it
just as it must be printed
before it is read so

now you must not sleep in the open
either in a barn or a cart-house
or in a shed in the country
or on a doorstep in a town
or in a boat on a beach

and if you have no coin in your pocket
you are still more diabolically wicked:
you are a vagrom man
and the cold cell is your proper place

*

this is the Jubilee Year too
of the mildest and best reign
of the Christian era

something
in this weather-beaten board
to be very proud of is there not?
something human and comforting and re-assuring
to the mind that we have made
so much progress

*Country Places:
Field and Hedgerow*

60

odd things happen in odd places

in our grandfather's days
a great man invited his friends
to dinner promising them
a new dish that had never before
been set upon the table

the fillet came in
on the shoulders of several men

when the cover was removed
lo an actress
in a state of nature

*Country Places:
Field and Hedgerow*

61

people of the easel

:

if I were a painter I should like to paint
all this: I should like to paint
a great steam-ploughing engine and its vast
wheels with its sweep of smoke sometimes
drifting low over the fallows sometimes
rising into the air in regular shape
like the pine tree of Pliny over Pompeii's volcano

a wonderful effect it has in the still
air; sweet violets in a corner by the hedge still
there in all their beauty

for I think that the immense
realism of the iron wheels makes
the violet yet more lovely;
the more they try to drive out Nature
with a fork the more she returns and the soul
clings the stronger to the wild flowers

I should like to paint the lessening square
of the wheatfield the reaping machine
continually cutting the square smaller;
people of the easel would not find it
easy to depict the half-green half-made hay floating
in the air behind a haymaking machine

sunlight falls on the modern implements
just the same as on the old wooden
plough and the oxen; eye can find beauty
in things as they really are and needs
no stagey time of artificial
pastorals to furnish it with a sham Nature

idealise to the full but idealise the Real
else the picture is a sham

*Walks in the Wheatfields:
Field and Hedgerow*

this is the wind on the hill indoors

the folded shutters shook;
indefinite noises from upstairs;
there was a hand in the house moving everything

I put down my book
and buttoned my coat—a great shadow
rushed up the valley

and strode the house in an instant
as you would get over a stile;
a handful of rain was flung at the window

little sounds ran about the floors
and round the rooms—in the night
all the orchestra is at work:

keyhole chink and chimney;
the row of pines was sighing—
each needle of the million million

drew its tongue across the organ blast
something running with innumerable
centipede feet over the mouth of the chimney:

the long deep moan had resolved itself
into a quick succession of touches
just as you might play with your fingertips

fifty times a second tattooing
on the hollow table—towards dawn
the battering ram at work against the walls

63

blow after blow heave and batter
and hoist as if it would tear the house
up by the roots—forty miles came

the battering ram without so much as a bough
to check it till it struck the house on the hill—
the sky was full of the wind and the morning star

*The Winds of Heaven:
Field and Hedgerow*

the thought of the eye

knows no butt
shooting on
with stellar penetration
into the unknown

the wind touches
the sight like a thing
tangible

equal cauldron
of valley and plain under
to the dome of the sky over

no vessel of earth
and sky is too large
for the air-colour to fill

the great hills
are but a thought
at the horizon

cymbals of aspen
clashing—the wind
walks among the mowing-grass
like a farmer
feeling the crop
with his hand on one side
and opening it
with his walking-stick on the other

red cattle redden the pond
and stand
in their own colour

65

wild wasp
and tutored bee
sing sideways

broad coloured sails
boom out
the butterfly drifts

a thousand miles of clouds a day
immense packs a mile square
laid parallel book-shape

grey smoke hangs on the hillside
the wind comes and draws its length—
geni from the earthen pot

a great red flame
shaking its head
shines in the bright sunlight—
you can see it across the valley

the heat of the oven wind

some monstrous dragon
of the Chinese sky

*The Winds of Heaven:
Field and Hedgerow*

66

a Sunday in the country

it quite dawns
upon many people
as a wonderful surprise
how still Nature is
on a Sunday morning

(Nature is absolutely still every day of the week
and proceeds with
the most absolute indifference to days and dates)

the sharp metallic clangour
of a bell went bang bang bang
from one roof not far distant
a harsher and deeper note
some Tartar-like bell
of universal uproar
hammered away at intervals
came the distant chimes
of three distinct village churches
ding dong dong ding
pango frango jango
very much jango
bang clatter clash
a murmuring vibration and dreadful stir:
the country world was up in arms
(I was about to say)
I mean in chimney-pot hat and pomade
en route to its various creeds:
some to one bell some to another;
some to ding dong
and some to dong ding

*A Country Sunday:
Field and Hedgerow*

67

artist!

in the evening when the great logs of wood
smoulder upon the enormous hearth and cast
flickering shadows on the walls revealing
the cat slumbering in the ingle-nook and the dog
blinking on the rug when the farmer slowly
smokes his long clay pipe
with his jug of ale beside him—such
an interior might furnish a good subject
for a painter...

let the artist who wishes to secure
such a scene from oblivion
set to work speedily for these things
are fast fading away

*The Farmer at Home:
Toilers of the Field*

68

threshing

man's whole thought
is purchasable at a small price:
for the value of a watch of a good dog;
the rest is repetition and paraphrase—

continual threshing has widened out
the heap of straw and spread it abroad
but it is empty: nothing
will ever be found in it—

those original grains of true thought
were found beside the stream the sea
in the sunlight at the shady verge of woods—

let us leave this beating and turning over empty straw
let us return to the stream and the hills!
let us ponder by night in view of the stars!

*Pigeons at the British Museum:
Life of the Fields*

69

Masts!

masts to the right
masts to the left
masts in front
masts yonder
above the warehouses
masts in among the streets
as steeples appear
amid roofs
masts across the river
hung with drooping
half-furled sails
masts afar down
thin and attenuated
mere dark straight lines
in the distance:
they await
in stillness
the rising of the tide

the gates are opened
and the world of ships
moves outwards to the stream:
a mighty dance
of thousands of tons
like shadows silently
as if the ponderous hulls
had no stability or weight
like a dream
they float past

70

not on one day only
not just one tide
but at every tide
and every day
the year through
year after year:

the bright summer sun
glows upon it
the red sun
of the frosty hours
of winter looks at it
from under the deepening
canopy of vapour;
the blasts of the autumnal
equinox howl
over the vast city
and whistle shrilly
in the rigging—still
at every tide
the world of ships
moves out into the river

*Venice in the East End:
Life of the Fields*

71

little

human things are small:
you live in a large house
but the space you actually occupy
is very inconsiderable—the earth

itself (great as it is)
is overlooked: it is too large
to be seen; the eye is
accustomed to the little

*Venice in the East End:
Life of the Fields*

72

shall we never know?

an endless succession of labour
under the brightness of summer
under the gloom of winter...
it is a sadness
even in the colour and light and glow
of this hour of sun this ceaseless labour
repeating the furrow
reiterating the blow
the same furrow the same stroke...

shall we never know how to lighten it
how to live with the flowers
the swallows the sweet delicious shade
and the murmur of the stream?

not the blackened reaper only
but the crowd whose low hum
renders the fountain inaudible;
the nameless and unknown crowd
of this immense city
wreathed round about the central square

I hope that at some time
by dint of bolder thought and freer action
the world shall see a race
able to enjoy it without stint;
a race able to enjoy the flowers
with which the physical world is strewn:
the colours of the garden of life

*Sunlight in a London Square:
Life of the Fields*

73

glow and glory

there are days now and again
when the summer broods in Trafalgar Square;
the flood of light from a cloudless sky
gathers and grows thickening the air;
the houses enclose the beams
as water is enclosed in a cup

sideways from the white-painted walls
light is reflected upwards from the broad
heated pavement in the centre light and heat
ascend; from the blue heaven it presses downwards
not only from sun—one point—but from the entire
width of the visible blue the brilliant stream flows

summer is enclosed between the banks of houses
all summer's glow and glory of exceeding brightness;
the blue panel overhead has but a stray
fleck of cloud a Cupid drawn on the panel
in pure white but made indefinite by distance;
the joyous swallows climb high

into the illuminated air till the eye
daunted by the glow can scarce detect
their white breasts as they turn: if the light
shall thus come in and of its mere loneliness
overcome every aspect of dreariness
why shall not the light of thought and hope?

*Sunlight in a London Square:
Life of the Fields*

the country begins to read

the cottagers in far-away hamlets
miles from a railway station
read every scrap of printed paper
that drifts across their way like

leaves in autumn: the torn newspapers
in which the grocer at the market town
wraps up their weekly purchases
stained with tallow or treacle

are not burned needlessly—
some paragraph some fragment
of curious information
is gathered from the pieces

the ploughman at his luncheon
reads the scrap of newspaper
in which his bread-and-cheese
was packed for him; men read

the bits of paper in which they carry
their screws of tobacco;
the stone-pickers in spring in the meadows
(often women) look at the bits of paper

scattered here and there
before putting them in their basket:
a line here and a line yonder
one today one tomorrow

75

in time make material equal to a book;
all information in our day
filters through the newspapers:
there is no subject you can name

of which you may not get together
a good body of knowledge (often superior
because more recent than that contained
in the best volumes) by watching the papers

and cutting out the paragraphs that relate
to it—no villager does that
but this ceaseless searching for scraps
comes to something like the same thing

*Country Literature:
Life of the Fields*

76

snow mirage

it is said
that in the Far West
on the level prairies
when the snow covers them
you see miles and miles away
a waggon stopping;
you hurry on
and in half a day's journey
overtake it to find
the skull of an ox

*Sport and Science:
Life of the Fields*

77

new fangled things

the earth has a way of absorbing things
placed upon it of drawing from them their stiff
individuality of newness and throwing
over them something of her own antiquity:
as the furrow smooths and brightens the share
as the mist eats away the sharpness
of the iron angles so in a larger manner the machines
sent forth to conquer the soil
are conquered by it become a part of it
as natural as the old old scythe and reaping-hook
the new agriculture has grown hoar:
there is nothing new in it; it is all old as the hills
the straw covers over the knives
the rims of the wheels sink into
pimpernel convolvulus veronica
the dry earth powders them

sunlight and shadows of trees throw
a mantle over and like the hand of an enchanter
softly waving surrounds it with a charm:
so the cranks and wheels and knives and mechanism
do not exist—it was a machine in the workshop
but it is not a machine in the wheatfield: the air
is of old time and the shadow the flowers
and the sunlight and that which moves among them
becomes of them—the solitary reaper
alone in the great field goes round
and round the red fans striking
beside him alone with the sunlight and the blue
sky and the distant hills

there are yeomanry
still living who remember how they rode
about at night after the rioters
guided by blazing bonfires
kindled to burn the new-fangled things

*Notes on Landscape Painting:
Life of the Fields*

78

days of Autumn

vast atmospheric curtains
roll away opening a view
of the stage of the hills
a moment and closing again
reach from heaven to earth around

the dark sky thickens
and lowers as if it were gathering
thunder (as women glean wheatears
in their laps) it is not thunder:
the wind grows solid and hurls itself
(as a man might throw out
his clenched fist) at the hill

the inclined plane
of the mist-clouds
reflects a grey light;
as if swept up by the fierce gale
a beam of sunshine comes—
you see it first long
at an angle
then overhead it shortens
and again lengthens after it has passed
(somewhat like the spoke of a wheel)

in the second of its presence
a red handkerchief a woman wears
on the ricks stands out;
the brass on the engine glows;
the water in the butt gleams;
men's faces brighten;
the cart-horse's coat looks glossy;
the straw a pleasant yellow

79

it is gone
and lights up the backs of the sheep yonder
as it runs up the hill swifter than a hare:
swish! the north wind darkens the sky

and the fly-wheel moans in the gloom;
the wood-pigeons go a mile a minute
on the wind hardly using their wings

the brown woods below
huddle together
rounding their shoulders to the blast;
a great air-shadow not mist
a shadow of thickness in the air
looms behind a tiled roof in the valley

the vast profound
is full of rushing air

*Notes on Landscape Painting:
Life of the Fields*

the lost leaves

measure our years;
they are gone as the days are gone
and the bare branches
silently speak
of a new year—its buds
its foliage and fruit

there is no wind
at the edge of the wood

*January in the Sussex Woods:
Life of the Fields*

81

steam plough

when the spotted arum leaves unfold
on the bank before the violets
or the first celandine while the pussies
hang on the hazel the engines roll
into the field pressing the earth
into barred ruts the massive wheels
leave their imprint—the footsteps of steam—
behind them

by the hedges they stand
one on either side and they hold the field
between them with their rope of iron

like the claws of some prehistoric monster
the shares rout up the ground;
the solid earth is hopeless before them
they tear and rend it

one engine is under an oak dark yet
with leafless boughs up through which
the black smoke rises; the other
overtops a low hedge and is in full profile

by the panting and the humming and the clanking
as the drum revolves by the smoke hanging
in the still air by the trembling
of the monster as it strains and tugs
by the sense of heat and effort and pent-up energy
bubbling over in jets of steam
that struggle through crevices somewhere
by the straightened rope and jerking of the plough
as it comes you know that mighty is the power
that thus in narrow space
works its will upon the earth

82

planted broadside its four limbs
the massive wheels hold the ground
like a wrestler drawing to him
the unwilling opponent: humming panting
trembling with stretched but irresistible
muscles the iron creature conquers
and the plough approaches all the field
for the minute seems concentrated
in this thing of power there are acres
and acres scores of acres
around but they are surface only—
this is the central spot
they are nothing mere matter
this is force
Thor in another form
if you are near you cannot take your eyes
off the sentient iron—
the wrestler straining

but now the plough has come over
and (the signal given) reverses its way;
the long monotonous clanking
as the drum unwinds on this side
the rustling of the rope
as it is dragged over the clods
the quiet rotation of the fly-wheel—
these sounds let the excited thought down:
as the rotating fly-wheel
works off the maddened steam
the combat over you can look round

*Notes on Landscape Painting:
Life of the Fields*

83

hedges

without hedges
England would not be England

hedges thick & high & full
of flowers birds & living creatures

of shade & flecks of sunshine
dancing up & down the bark of trees

you never know
how much there is in hedges

*Notes on Landscape Painting:
Life of the Fields*

84

boots but no feet

when a book goes with a bang
on the table the dog creeps
under it wild creatures
catch their manners from men:
walk the lane with your hands
in your pockets and you will see
twice as much of the birds and animals

a quick movement sets wings
quickly beating even horses
in stables do not like visitors
with jerky brisk angular
ways of moving: a stranger
entering in a quiet easy manner
is not very objectionable

but if he comes in in a bustling
citizen-like style it is quite probable
that one or other horse will show
a wicked white corner in his eye:
it roughs them up the wrong way;
a great many people seem to have no feet;
they have boots but no feet

Mind under Water:
Life of the Fields

seventy-nine miles to London

glance through the gap
in the hedge by the oak
and see how concentrated it is—
all of it every blade of grass
and leaf and flower
and living creature
finch or squirrel:

it is mesmerised upon itself—

a great broad province
of green furrow
between the old house
and the city of the world

such solace and solitude
seventy-nine miles thick
cannot be painted:
the trees cannot be placed
far enough away in perspective

it is necessary
to stay in it
like the oaks
to know it

*Meadow Thoughts:
Life of the Fields*

86

prodigality of nature

a grasshopper
calls on the sward
by the strawberries
and immediately fillips himself
over seven leagues
of grass-blades

a line of men and women
file across the field
seen for a moment
as they pass a gateway
and the hay changes
from hay colour to green

behind them as they turn
the under but still sappy side
upwards they are working
hard but it looks easy slow
and sunny finches fly out
from the hedgerow

to the over-turned hay
white clouds slow pass behind the oaks—
large puffed clouds
like deliberate loads of hay
leaving little wisps and flecks
behind them caught in the sky

*Meadow Thoughts:
Life of the Fields*

87

sunlight and books

how pleasant It would be
to read in the shadow
of the American crab tree!

but I can never read in summer
out of doors: summer shadows
are broadest daylight;
the page is so white and hard
the letters so black
the meaning not quite intelligible
because neither eye nor mind
will dwell upon it

human thoughts and imaginings
written down are pale and feeble
in bright summer light
the eye wanders away
and rests more lovingly
on greensward and green lime leaves

the mind wanders
yet deeper and farther
into the dreamy mystery
of the azure sky

once now and then
determined to write down that mystery
and delicious sense
while actually in it
I have brought out
table and ink and paper
and sat there in the midst
of the summer day:
three words and where is the thought?

88

gone the paper is
so obviously paper the ink
so evidently ink the pen
so stiff: all so inadequate

there is the shade
and the brilliant gleaming whiteness—
now tell me in plain written words ,
the simple contrast of the two

not in twenty pages
for the bright light shows the paper
in its common fibre-ground
coarse aspect in its reality
not as a mind-tablet

the delicacy and beauty
of thought or feeling
cannot be inked in;
it is like the green and blue
of field and sky
of veronica flower and grass blade

take the table indoors again
and the book: the thoughts and imaginings
of others are vain your own
too deep to be written

the sunlight put out the books
just as it put out the fire
on the hearth indoors

an inexpressible thought
quivered in the azure overhead;
it could not be fully grasped
but there was a sense and feeling
of its presence

89

 before which
the weak and feeble pages
the small fires of human knowledge
dwindled and lost meaning

there was something here
that is not in books

the American crab tree
is a snowy moment
in spring; the flakes
of bloom when they fall
cover the grass with a film
a bushel of bloom
and scatters afar
the extravagance is sublime

the two little cherry trees
throw away handfuls of flowers

in the meadows the careless
spendthrift ways of grass
and flower and all things
is not to be expressed:

seeds by the hundred million
float with absolute indifference
in the air everything on a scale
of splendid waste

*Meadow Thoughts:
Life of the Fields*

90

generations to come

such noble
broadcast
open-armed waste
is delicious to behold

give me squandered
millions of seeds
luxurious carpets of petals
green mountains of oak-leaves

nature flings treasures abroad
puffs them with open lips
on every breeze
piles up lavish layers of them
in the free open air

prodigality and superfluity

grains seeds fruits animals

beyond the power of all the human race
to devour for any human being
to starve is quite upside down

let the generations to come
feast free of care
like my finches on the seeds
of the mowing grass
from which no voice drives them

*Meadow Thoughts:
Life of the Fields*

91

Big Mat

slew the grass from the rising
to the going-down of the sun—
moon-daisies sorrel & buttercup
lay in rows of swathe as he cut

I wonder whether the man ever thought
as he reposed at noontide on a couch
of grass under the hedge? did he think
that those immense muscles that broad

rough-hewn plank of a chest of his
those vast bones encased in sinewy
limbs—being flesh in its fulness—
ought to have more of this earth

than mere common men and still more
than those thin-faced people—mere people
not men—in black coats? did he dimly
claim the rights of strength in his mind

and arrogate to himself the prerogatives
of arbitrary kings? who knows what
big processes of reasoning dim and big
passed through his mind in the summer days?

why the man worked so hard
no one could imagine unless it was
for the pure physical pleasure
of using those great muscles unless

a fire as it were was burning
in his mind and drove him to labour
to smother it
as they smother fires by beating them

*

92

the poppies came and went once more

*

the harvest moon rose yellow and ruddy—
but Dolly was like a violet
over which a waggon-wheel had rolled:
the thorn had gone deep into her bosom

this was the girl who had lingered
in the lane to help the boy pick watercress
to gather a flower to listen to a thrush
to bask in the sunshine

*The Field Play:
Life of the Fields*

Greek

by night
(crossing the footbridge)
a star sometimes shone
in the water underfoot

at morn and even
the peasant girls came down to dip—
their path was worn
through the mowing grass;
a flat stone in the bank
as a step to stand on

though they were poorly habited
without one line of form
or tint of colour
that would please the eye
there is something in dripping water
that is Greek—Homeric—
something that carries the mind
home to primitive times

always the little children
came with them:
they wanted to see the fishes dart away
and hide in the green flags;
they flung daisies
and buttercups into the stream
to float and catch awhile
at the flags and float again
and pass away
like the friends of our boyhood
out of sight

Bits of Oak Bark:
Life of the Fields

the sound of summer

is everywhere—
in the passing breeze in the hedge
in the broad-branching trees
in the grass as it swings;
all the myriad particles
that together make the summer
are in motion: the sap moves
in the trees the pollen is pushed out
from grass and flower
 besides
the quivering leaf the swinging grass
the fluttering bird's wing
and the thousand oval membranes
which innumerable insects whirl about
a faint resonance seems to come
from the very earth itself:
the fervour of sunbeams
rings on the strung harp of earth

*The Pageant of Summer:
Life of the Fields*

95

thunder and lightning

man alone
more senseless than a pigeon
puts god in a vapour:
though the printing press
has set foot on every threshold
numbers bow the knee
when they hear the roar
the timid dove does not heed

let us rid ourselves of mental terrors!
if but by reason and will
I could reach the godlike calm
and courage of what we thoughtlessly call
the timid turtle-dove
I should lead a nearly perfect life

*The Pageant of Summer:
Life of the Fields*

96

Bethel Chapel

John Bunyan wrote about the pilgrim:
to this chapel there came every
Sunday morning a man and his wife
ten miles on foot from their cottage
home in a distant village—the hottest
summer day or the coldest winter
Sunday made no difference they tramped
through dust and they tramped through slush and mire

they were pilgrims every week:
a grimly real religion as concrete
and as much a fact as a stone wall
a sort of horse's faith going
along the furrow unquestioning
others

came lesser distances quite
as regularly the men in their black coats
and high hats big fellows
that did not look ungainly
till they dressed themselves up women as red
as turkey cocks panting and puffing—
all with an expression of Sunday goodness:
today we are good; we are going to chapel
and we mean to stay till the very last word

this is a picture and not a disputation:
as to what they teach or preach inside Bethel
it is nothing to me

you can tell when the service
is nearly over by the stray boys
who steal out and round the walls
to throw stones at the sparrows in the road

*The Country Sunday:
Field and Hedgerow*

the elder

could make a cucumber frame
out of a church window
or a church window
out of a cucumber frame

one of the residents
on the new building estate
found his cupboard doors numbered
on the panels two six eight
in gilt figures inside:
made of pew doors
got out of some old church
the contractor had ransacked
and turned topsy-turvy
to the order of the vicar

*

the elder would have run up
a new Salt Lake City cheap
or built a new Rome
at five per cent
in a few days

*The Country Sunday:
Field and Hedgerow*

98

miracles and pilgrimages

every now and then the children
died from drinking bad water—
ditch water the women took tea
the men took beer the children drank water

good water abounded
but then there was the trouble
and expense of digging wells;
individuals could not do it
the community did not care—

does it not seem strange?
all this fervour and building of temples
and loud demands for the New Jerusalem
and not a single effort
for physical well-being or mental training

by and by no doubt
we shall have a village Lourdes at home
and miracles and pilgrimages
and offerings and shrines

the village will be right glad
to see the pilgrims if only they come
from the West End and have money in their purse:
the village would be very glad indeed of a miracle
to bring it a shower of gold

*The Country Sunday:
Field and Hedgerow*

99

the summer passes

like the shadow of a cloud
which strikes the edge of the yellow wheat
and comes over and is gone;
it does not give you time
to rub out a single ear of corn
before it is possible to gather
the harvest of thought and observation

the summer has passed
and we must bind
the hastily stitched book
with the crimson leaves of autumn

*Among the Nuts:
Field and Hedgerow*

100

camera obscura

twenty-five years ago
I went into a camera obscura where
you see miniature men and women coloured
photographs alive and moving trees
waving now and then dogs
crossing the bright sun picture

I was only there a few moments
and I have never been in one since and yet
so inexplicable a thing is memory
the picture stands before me now
clear as if it were painted and tangible

so many millions of pictures have come
and gone upon the retina and yet
I can single out this one in an instant and take
it down as you would a book from a shelf

a moving picture (like that of the camera
obscura) of wheat fields at a sunnier time:
painted on the surface of a plain set
round about with a margin of green
downs large squares of green
corn that was absorbing its yellow from the sunlight
chess squares irregularly placed of brown
furrows others of rich blood-red
trifolium others of scarlet sainfoin
and blue lucerne gardens of scarlet
poppies here and there following
so quickly in the summer days that they seemed
to be one and the same pictures and if
you'd painted them altogether on the same canvas

101

they would not have seemed out of place never
was such brilliant colour it was chalk there
and on chalk the colours are always clearer
the poppies deeper the yellow mustard
and charlock a keener yellow the air
too is pellucid: waggons going along

the tracks; men and women hoeing;
ricks of last year still among clumps
and trees where the chimneys & gables
of farmhouses are partly visible; red-tiled
barns away yonder; a shepherd moving
his hurdles; the black funnel of an idle
engine and the flywheel above hawthorn bushes

all so distant and close under
that you might almost fear to breathe for fear
of dimming the mirror sun and sky
and clouds shoulder to shoulder with man

*Walks in the Wheatfields:
Field and Hedgerow*

102

the Venus Accroupie

sitting in a gallery of stone
cold marbles cold floors
cold light from the windows

outside the city of Paris
far from woods and meads

here came back to me
the old thought
born in the midst of flowers
and wind-rustled leaves
with which the statue before me
was in concord: the living original
was the human impersonation
of the secret influence
which had beckoned me on
in the forest and by running streams:

she expressed in loveliness of form
the colour and light of sunny days
the deep aspiring of the soul
for the perfection of form
in which it is encased
for the perfection of its own existence

the sun rolls on
in the far dome of heaven
now day and now night sweep
with alternate bands
over the surface of hill and wood and sea

103

the sea beats in endless waves
which first began to undulate
a thousand thousand years ago
starting from the other rim
of Time

 the green leaves
repeat the beauty
that gladdened men in ancient days
for themselves they are not for us
wholly careless and indifferent
to our fate: then is the valley
incomplete and the void sad
its hills speak of death
as well as of life
and we know that for man
there is nothing of earth really but man;
the human species possesses nothing
but its species seeing this
I turned with threefold concentration
of desire and love towards

*Nature in the Louvre:
Field and Hedgerow*

insert penny

looked at us
eating the beech-leaves steadily
but would not answer

but Audrey the little
would not speak—
in her hand she began to move
and made off for home
with the treasure

105

I drifted like a leaf

detached from a tree
across to a deep coombe
in the Quantock Hills:
the vast hollow is made for repose
and lotus-eating; its very shape
like a hammock indicates
idleness the days go over
noiselessly and without effort
like white summer clouds

Will's Neck stands out
in black shadow defined and distinct
like a fragment of night
in the bright light of day

the dim line of Dunkery
winds along the sky not unlike
the curved back of a crouching hare

the weight of the mountain
is too great—what is the use
of attempting to move?

the blackbird as he springs
from the apple-tree bough
shakes down flakes of blossom

*Summer in Somerset:
Field and Hedgerow*

106

brown dots in the air

everywhere above the distant plough
its share polished like a silver mirror
by friction with the clods
reflects the sunshine
flashing a heliograph message
of plenty from the earth

brown dots: each a breathing creature
larks ceaselessly singing
unable to pour the notes fast enough
to set forth their joy:
as a shower falls from the sky
so falls the song of the larks

every crust of English bread
has been sung over
at its birth in the green blade by a lark

*An English Deer Park:
Field and Hedgerow*

107

John Brown of the hayfield

John Brown is dead: came
home from his work in the evening as usual
and fell forward on the floor dead

he must have come down over the crown of the hill
with his long slouching stride as if his legs
had been half pulled away from his body

by his heavy boots in the furrows when a ploughboy—
he must have turned up the steps in the bank
to his cottage and (touching the threshold) ended

he is gone through the great doorway and one
pencil-mark is rubbed out: if a man's
work he has done all the days of his life

could be collected and piled up around him in visible
shape what a vast mound there would be
beside some; if each act or stroke

was represented by (say) a brick John Brown
would have stood the day before his ending
by the side of a monument as high as a pyramid

if (in front of him) could be placed the sum
and product of his labour—the profit to himself
he could have held it in his clenched hand like a nut

and no one would have seen it

*My Old Village:
Field and Hedgerow*

the ghosts die

as we grow older—
they die
and their places are taken
by real ghosts

*My Old Village:
Field and Hedgerow*

109

Job

had a way of shaking hands
with his right hand
while his left hand
was casually doing something else
in a detached sort of way

Job had a lot of shut-up rooms
in his house (and in his character)
which never seemed to be open to daylight:
the eaves hung over and beetled
like his brows and he had a forelock
a regular antique forelock
which he used to touch
with the greatest humility

there was the long bough of an elm
hanging over one gable
just like the forelock
his face
was a blank like the broad end
wall of the cottage which had no window—
at least you might think so
until you looked up and discovered
one little narrow slit one narrow pane
and woke with a start to the idea
that Job was always up there
watching and listening

*My Old Village:
Field and Hedgerow*

110

Job's house

the front door was always open
in summer and the flagstones of the floor chalked
round their edges; a clean table clean
chairs decent crockery an old
clock about an hour slow
a large hearth with a minute
fire to boil the kettle without heating the room

tea was usually at half-past-three
and many well-to-do persons
as they came along the road hot and dusty
used to drop in and rest and take a cup:
very little milk and much gossip

two paths met just there
and people used to step in out of
a storm of rain a sort of thatched
house club

Job should have been
rich: such immense dark brown jumbles
such cheek-distenders never
any French sweetmeats or chocolates
or bonbons to equal them jumbles
are eternal if nothing else is I thought then
that there was not such another shop
as Job's in the universe I have found since
that there is a Job shop in every village
and in every street in every town
with a window for jumbles and rubbish

Job did not flourish in his old age he is gone

*My Old Village:
Field and Hedgerow*

they turn their faces away

nothing is ever quite rigid
or complete
that is of man;
all rules
have a chip in them

the pickaxe and the spade
have made almost a full round
to every door—
I do not want to think
any more about this:

some gone out of sight
some have crossed the sea
time has shuffled them about
from house to house
like a pack of cards

in a few ticks of the clock;
I think I have heard
that the oaks are down:
it matters nothing to me
(let us never go back lest we too die)

there are no such oaks
anywhere else none
so straight and tall
and with such massive heads;
the brooks have ceased to run

112

there is no music now
at the old hatch
where we used to sit
in danger of our lives
happy as kings

on the narrow bar
over the deep water
the barred pike
that used to come up
in such numbers
are no more
among the flags;
the sun shone there
for a very long time
and the water rippled

and sang and it always
seemed to me
that I could feel
the rippling and the singing

and the sparkling

back through the centuries;
the brook is dead;
there used to be clouds
over the fields white clouds
in blue summer skies

113

I have lived a good deal
on clouds they have been meat
to me often they bring
something to the spirit
which even the trees do not

I see clouds now sometimes
when the iron grip of hell
permits for a minute or two;
they are very different clouds
and speak differently

I long for some of the old
clouds that had no memories;
there were nights
in those times
over those fields

not darkness
but Night full
of glowing suns
and glowing richness
of life that sprang

up to meet them:
the nights are there still
they are everywhere
(nothing local in the night)
but it is not the Night

114

to me seen through the window;
there used to be footpaths:
one went through meadows
every step was among grass
beautiful grass and the cuckoos

sang as if they had found
paradise—a hundred
years ago a little old man
with silver buckles in his shoes
used to walk along this footpath

once a week in summer

taking his children
over to drink milk at the farm
but though he set them every time
to note the number of fields

so busy were they with the nests
and the flowers they could never
be sure at the end
of the journey whether
there were eight or nine:

to make quite sure at last
he took with them
a packet full of apples
one for each field
so they came to know

115

for certain that the number
of meadows was either eight
or nine (I forget which—
the great experiment
did not fix the faith of mankind!)

another footpath led
along the water
to bluebell land
another into the coombs of the hills;
all round the compass

you could still step on sward
(this is rare)—of one other path
I have a faded memory
like a silk marker
in an old book

I don't want to remember it
except the end of it
where it came down
to the railway where
I used to go

specially in time
to see the express go up
with such ease and power
to London I wish
I could feel like that now

116

they are all faded
these footpaths
I planted myself everywhere
under the trees in the fields

and footpaths by day

and by night—I would not
go back there: nothing but
my own ghost to meet me
by every hedge I fear
lest I should find myself

more dead than all the rest:
no one else seems to have seen
the sparkle on the brook
heard the music at the hatch
or felt back through the centuries;

no one seems to understand
how I got food from the clouds
nor what there was in the night
nor why it is not so good
to look at it out of the window—

they turn their faces away
from me: perhaps after all
I was mistaken
and there never was
any such place

117

or any such meadows and I was
never there and perhaps
in course of time I shall find
that as a matter of fact
there never was any earth

*My Old Village:
Field and Hedgerow*

118

epilogue

the whole south burned with stars
there was a roar in the oak like the thunder of the sea
the sky was black (black as velvet)
the black north had come down
and the stars shone and burned as if the wind
reached and fanned them into flame: large
Sirius flashed vast Orion
strode the sky lording the heavens
with his sword; a scintillation rushed
across from the zenith to the southern horizon
the black north held down the buds
but there was a force in them already that must push
out in leaf as Arcturus rose

in the east

—I should like to go straight to the real
great sea like the wind

—we must go to the great sea
look at Orion!

the wind went seawards and the stars
are always over the ocean...

Bevis