

Glyn Maxwell

Drinks
With
Dead
Poets

The Autumn
Term



First published in 2016 by Oberon Books Ltd
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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

HB ISBN: 9781783197415
E ISBN: 9781783197422

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY. eBook conversion by Lapiz Digital Services, India.

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Preface

Every word, phrase or sentence spoken by the literary figures in this book is drawn *verbatim* from their letters, diaries, journals or essays.

Words have been elided here and there, or slightly edited, the better to resemble speech of the passing moment, but I have at every point sought to preserve the tone and meaning – if not the immediate context – of the written words. For the sketches are not intended to be biographically accurate with regard to appearance, accent, attire or manner. Nor do they imply any personal hierarchy of poetic importance. They are animations of how it felt to encounter particular bodies of work, each of which has had a significant influence, whether aesthetic, intellectual, or even dreamlike, on my life as a reader and writer – in fact on my life as a life. As such, they are drawn in a spirit of reverence and good humour. They, like the village and the students and their mystified professor, are works of make-believe.

Week One – September 26th

I am walking along a village lane with no earthly idea why.

I mean it, it's raining, left foot, right foot, left foot miss that puddle, I know it's a village lane because the sky is plentiful, albeit white – *it all be white* – and the cottages peter out a short way up ahead. Tiny front gardens for this pot and that pot, some tasteful wrought-iron lampposts till they end in the trees. Very few cars – actually none, not one. Looking back the way I came I have no clue where I just came from.

I know it's a village because a little corner-shop for anything's coming up right now, the cluttered glass bay window seems to bulge out over the pavement as I pass it and am noticed by two conversing figures within and now I spy a grand little pub across the road. It has a crooked chimney and a red-and-gold sign. I'm at the four-ways, I suppose, the junction, the heart of the place. The grand little pub is called the Cross Keys, and it's open, or its side door is, opening into grey-green light but I'm evidently dreaming so I may not need a drink at all.

To my right the road curves away gently uphill towards trees, brown scruffy woodland, I can't see all that far that way. To my left, now I look, the opposite way, I see a wide kind of boulevard marching off tree-lined, a broad oval green along its centre, plenty of large houses, white and pink and yellow and pale blue. A couple of hundred yards away there's the black-and-white striped awning of some kind of *inn*. So there's a pub, and there's an inn.

I breathe. I consider it to be afternoon, early afternoon. I consider it – probably – to be autumn. I consider myself to be dreaming, my clothes to be – a quick look – *on*, my mind to be sound. I wait for the place to disappear, go away, be batted away, for my dreams will never long allow me that glee of knowing the game – think what I'd get up to, I did that once! – but I'm just standing here in the drizzle.

What would you do?

*

It's a free house, a warm dark empty pub with a saloon bar and a public bar. I stop inside: it's *today*, I note with weird relief, it's *nowadays*, not a day

I saw coming but nevertheless it's *nowadays*. That means everyone I know is somewhere. I cross the floor of the saloon bar where a fruit-machine is flashing all alone by the wall, fruits hurtle, fruits arrive, nobody wins, nobody dies. The carpet reeks with old beer. There are green lanterns in alcoves in the walls. There's a fire look, someone cares.

I hear a peal of laughter around the side of the bar and some youngish people are clustered round pints and half-pints. I'm not dead then. They have bags and coats and suitcases around them, they're arriving or departing. They turn and stare at me or grin and look away as I near the bar, and it seems to me it's all gone quiet. Am I meant to be saying something?

Well I don't say hello because I'm not that sure they're real. Maybe that's why I seldom do.

At the God-given haven of *any bar on earth* I smile though no one's there. No one's – tending. So I admire the bewildering citadels of optics and my mirror-self's there too in his black coat look, he seems rather more at home, not unsatisfied with arrangements.

I will wait here till I know. Wait here till things change, till I remember where I've got to, till this bright white interlude makes sense and I can go. I scan the glossy okay menu avidly as a stocky man in green trudges up the steps from a stone realm below the floor.

'What can I get you squire.'

White wine please white wine.

'Small or large.'

Large, it's raining. Also, do you have the papers?

'No.'

Right. No worries.

'Look at 'em all just drinking in the day.'

I'm – drinking in the day.

'Students I mean.'

Right.

'£4.30.'

Right, so... students. There's a college here?

'Yeah tell me about it.'

I rather wanted him to tell *me* about it, but I liked the idea of pretending I belonged – if I *did*, maybe I *would* – so I nodded like I knew and took my large wine to a little wiped table in the corner, at the other end of a series of

tables, the last of which was the students. They weren't all young over there. There was an older woman with a gentle look and hair mildly tinted lavender, leaning forward to see, and a solemn lad with a bristly face, not a lad a bloke, throwing me a watchful look. The others, twenties, thirties, a group of – colleagues? A thin hunched boy with dark hair drooping over an eye. A tall pretty brunette with a big white woollen scarf she is turning round to look at me who cares they're all departing. I would follow them to the station. If there's a station.

One of the younger ones had cropped scarlet hair, she raised a good-as-drained pint in my direction.

'Just got here?' she demanded, both charming and accusing.

Just got here, I said, which was true, actually, and somehow sweet to say.

'Don't mind us, we're getting acquainted,' she loudly confided from the midst of them and went right back to doing just that. After which a couple of them kept clocking me and glancing away when I looked. I wondered what they were thinking, assuming they were real.

I was thinking I don't have my phone, I don't have my shoulder-bag, I don't have a place to sleep. I think I need to find a hospital and ask for help – 'Miss, sir, ma'am, doctor, I have a daughter and a life and two parents and two brothers, I was married, I'm a writer, I write books and plays, I do all sorts, my name is – I'll come back to that I live in a long peaceful flat by a canal in Angel will you call someone?'

I'll do that, I think, say those words to someone soon, so I swig my wine and head out through the door, hearing one of the nonexistent people say *Nice to meet you too, professor.*

*

It's not raining any more, it's bright and cloudy with the puddles here and there, and off towards – work it out – the north-west there's a patch of blue to be seen through the grey, white, and mauve clouds, some three whole differing races of cloud.

Down here below, where I've no earthly idea, the four corners of the junction are occupied by the pub (north-east), the local shop (south-east), and a little square church (north-west). Diagonally across from me on the last corner is a business, an office of some kind, with a smart sign I can't read from here and a lit room. The person working in there – it's a young smartly-dressed woman I can see and the sign says Student Services –

must have put the lights on when it was dark and rainy, she doesn't need them now, but she goes on at her keyboard in there, typing obliviously, tilting her head to read something she needs. I just about make up my mind to make her acquaintance when I'm aware of other movement, to my right, up the way leading north.

Along that lane that leads off between the church of St what does that say Anne's? and the Cross Keys, and a little way up to the right side, there's a long gap between houses. I assume it'll be allotments or a sports ground, it would be where I come from, but there's more of it than that as I near it, much more, in fact it's a fairly huge ploughed field stretching away from a low wooden fence. This is rather a small village, there's an end to it right here. The field rises gently, rolls and reaches the vague brown woodlands quite a way away, far enough to be misty, and at the fence a dark-haired boy in a costume – a *brunet*, I suppose – is just standing there watching.

Because he looks so ludicrous in his tall white collar and lilac cravat, so focused on the view of sweet nothing in particular, so haplessly wrong in this place at this time, I feel an instant connection, and – I don't exactly approach him, I just stop some twenty yards or so away but also leaning on the fence and I too look at the great ploughed field for a while. The fence is strangely warm in my hands as if with heat he's generating. Then I check I'm not dressed like he is. No my dreams don't run to costumes.

By the time I reach the boy he's looking at the fields again and frowning. I find this a bit stagey, but fair do's, he's in costume, perhaps he's sort of *being someone*.

'Atkins the coachman,' he says, 'Bartlet the surgeon, Simmons the barber, and the girls over at the bonnet shop say we'll now have a month of seasonable weather.'

Then he turns to me, this panel of experts having had its say.

Right (I go) there's a bonnet shop?

He nods as if of course there is. Sniffs and looks back at the fields, which clearly impress him more than I do.

'I'll tell you what,' he says, a little softer and more to himself: 'a man might pass a very pleasant life in this manner: on a certain day, read a certain page of full poetry or, or – distilled prose...'

Distilled, yes,

'Wander with it, muse on it, reflect on it, bring home to it, prophesy on it, dream on it till it becomes *stale*... when will it do so?'

When? I – don't know.

'Never.'

I guess not. Have you, um, are *you* doing that today, Master – ?

'Keats.'

Right. Right, obviously, good, so are you doing that today, the thing with the page of poetry? Musing on it? Like you say? Is good to do? John? Sorry *is* it John?

He takes out a handkerchief and wipes his nose, sniffs, makes a pouting shape with his mouth but is also nodding, until he gathers to a sneeze and explodes and recovers, 'Fifth canto of Dante. That one.'

That one. Yep, it's a good'un.

I try to remember what's in that one, while nevertheless nodding in awe at the magnificence of that one, and the boy who's trying to be Keats looks out across the fields again.

'In the midst of the world I live like a hermit.'

Okay, because I'm dreaming I may as well go for it, as the high distant trees are tipped with sunlight – though I lose my nerve almost straight away –

Season of mists and, mellow,

(He looks at me sharply) 'I can't be admired. I'm not a thing to be admired.'

Well. Me neither, man. Have a nice day.

I nod politely and back away down the lane. I'm not a little hurt. I could have rather done with making a friend by the wooden fence there.

Heigh-ho, I muse, I shall have a nice day regardless.

And I *do* have friends here, there's the barman who doesn't like students for one, there's that sceptical angel in the woollen scarf and there's the lavender lady, the pale boy in the corner, and oh there's the figure of the typist through the window in the room called Student Services. Slim pickings perhaps, but it's not a normal day. I don't need to be the pal of some frock-coated emo with his tousled head full of lines and limousines and Oscar speeches. I go striding to the office of Student Services, I am healthy, I sniff the cold fresh mulchy air and my pale old limbs are pumping, I am the captain of the afternoon, let's say, I am at least *involved* with my fate.

*

Because every day of my life it's the same.

I begin at any dawn, have done nothing at all, known no one, thought nothing, written less, left no print. I light candles at my dark window, sit amazed on earth.

I end way after midnight furred and groaning with acquaintance, banner headlines to forget, old stories, fond habits, love if there's love.

Then it all begins again.

This is not the first day in my deck of fifty-two years when I've been puzzled as to where I stood and my best guess was heaven.

*

Student Services was probably in her thirties, had quite sensible fair hair in a ponytail, had a white blouse and a neat blue jacket. She was slightly plump, and frowning. As it's a dream I could marry you, I was thinking. She stopped typing.

'Better late than never!'

I'm not late, I'm dreaming.

'Traffic was it?'

Yes. I – dreamed there was traffic.

'It's still traffic,' she said, getting up from her desk and going to a drawer she slid outward and peered in. The sign on the desk said KERRI BEDWARD.

Then I can't help asking as she stoops to leaf through some file, her blue dolphin pendant jumping free,

Your surname is Bedward, is it Welsh I'm Welsh, kind of.

'It means son of Edward.'

By blood I am, mostly.

'Pardon? This is you.'

READING LIST for Elective Poetry Module

3pm, Thurs, V.H.B. Prof: Maxwell.

26th Sept.	Keats.
3rd Oct.	Dickinson.
10th Oct.	Hopkins.
17th Oct.	Brontës.
24th Oct.	Coleridge.

31st Oct.	Poe.
7th Nov.	
14th Nov.	Clare.
21st Nov.	Yeats.
28th Nov.	Whitman.
5th Dec.	Browning.
12th Dec.	Byron.

There doesn't seem to be much rhyme or reason in the sequence (I said) which Brontës? Which Browning? Why's there nothing on my birthday?

She was sitting down again drinking juice from a green bottle.

'I wouldn't know.'

You wouldn't?

'It's what you sent us.'

Yeah right. Do you – know – there's kind of an annoying kid dressed as Keats out there on the road by the big field, is it a sort of Keats festival you're having this week?

'I'm not having anything, just my vitamin blast.'

I mean it really helps when you're teaching someone to have his zombie lookalike wandering round the place. Will there be lookalikes every week?

'You had a difficult journey.'

No. No I didn't. It was – easy. Thank you.

'Seen your digs yet?'

Ah!

'Would you like me to show you them.'

Very much. Kerri.

'You've just time before the class.'

The – class.

'It's in your hand.'

READING LIST for Elective Poetry Module

3pm, Thurs, V.H.B. Prof: Maxwell.

It says elective, I'm going to the pub.

'Elective for them, not you.'

What's VHB mean?

'You're in the village hall. Just over the road.'

VH. What's B?

'It means you're not in the hall, you're in the side room. There's a kettle. And the heater works. There's tea and coffee and there was actually a Twix but I took it and ate it about an hour ago. I'm regretting that now.'

I'm. I'm – teaching Keats in the side-room. To whom?

When she didn't reply I looked at her and she was making her finger go in circles, which I took to mean turn the white page over

H. Bannen

L. Bronzo

O. Faraday

C. Jellicoe

I. McNair

N. Prester

S. Sharma

B. Wilby

'You don't seem very prepared in a way.'

I'm always this prepared.

Upon which a young man came into the office from outside, working his wet blue anorak hood away from his beaming face.

'Professor Maxwell! Raining raining, it's me Orlando! Ollie, Ollie Faraday, remember? Remember from the class?'

Ye-es. Yes I *do*... very much so.

'I haven't seen you since that wedding, I'm in your class again!'

Yes. Why? Didn't I teach you everything?

'What? God no! Christ! (mind my French)'

But I've nothing else to tell you. I was so much older then, you got it all, I retired, I went to heaven look, I met Kerri Bedward.

'Don't mind him,' said Kerri, 'he had a difficult journey.'

*

I live in a – no I don't – I am staying in a very pleasant bright attic room with the sloping ceiling and the cute slanting shelves of dark wood and a desk and a little tartan-blanketed bed and everything! A kitchenette, a tiny

bathroom! I reach it – or have done, once so far – up a whitewashed spiral staircase, three floors. There's a bedroom on the first floor, with the door open: it doesn't look like anyone's staying there. The next flight leads to me.

This is perfect.

'Seriously?'

It's down a little lane. From the Cross at the heart of the village you walk a little way north, you leave the church with the village hall behind on your left, the pub behind on your right. The field where the kid was dressed like Keats will come up soon on your right but before you get that far you take a little lane left, not a lane a path, with grass growing through the stones, you keep to this, okay, and mine's the white house at the end, overgrown, where you can't go any further – look I don't know who on earth *YOU* is, I'm just saying there is a place I stay, and if this *YOU* were here, this is what I'd be telling this *YOU*, do you follow me?

'Are you alright, you're staring.'

Sorry. Kerri. I'm getting used to things. I'll look, you know, out of the window.

The view is westward, there's a patch of light behind the clouds, where the sun *would* be hiding mid-afternoon in autumn. Out beyond the village is that long grey lake in the distance. It's got a little wooded island, I wonder if I can get there. There are some larger light-brown buildings in a row before the lake, square and squat, three or four storeys. Before those there's a clear gap where that central green must be, and the inn and the coloured houses. Nearer still, the small spire of the church at the Cross.

It's still raining, but it's brighter now and I think blue sky is coming, if what's over there is coming over here.

Is what's over there coming over here?

'What's he say now,' murmurs Kerri, trying to twist the key off the ring of keys without breaking her nails.

Where's – *everything*. Restaurants, shops, everything. The bonnet shop.

'What? there's no bonnet shop.'

Keats says there is.

'He doesn't live here. You're teaching in ten minutes. After that you can do what you like.'

*

Teaching in a dream isn't that different from teaching in real life. I don't feel ready and I don't feel old enough. I won't remember their names, I'll upset someone. I want to be exonerated. I want to go home to my toys, I'm in the middle of a game with them.

Anyway there they all are in the porch of the village hall, Ollie Faraday and white-scarf woman, there's lavender lady and solemn bristly bloke, pale thin lad, scarlet dye girl and a maybe Indian woman in a pink silk headscarf who's got an e-cigarette with the weird blue tip. I look at my white sheet.

That's only seven.

None of them know who's missing, they all met in the pub or the office or this morning on the train and they've all become fast friends like folk will do in these situations. They've got three in-jokes going and what else do you need.

Finally there's a big beaming fellow in overalls lumbering up the lane. He grins apologetically, like he'd run if he could run, 'Wilby here!' he exclaims, 'Wilby here and always will!'

The clock is striking three in the little bell-tower.

'Barry Wilby!' doesn't look like he belongs with us, and he's too late for the in-jokes, but here he is among us as they all bustle forwards around me, forming a grinning or muttering crew, through the dusty village hall to a cold decrepit side-room I believe we'll be calling home.

*

First did anyone else see the kid out there in the cravat? No?

'Professor, it's –'

Well I did and he said he's Keats. Perhaps he's a teaching material. No one saw him? Okay, perhaps he's a delusion. Either way.

Dyed-scarlet girl has got her hand up. Yes what.

'Can't we all say our names?'

They have names and they're from places, what an excellent dream this is. I write them down as they say, and ask them to sit in the same seats next week. Though as I'm only dreaming there won't *be* a next week. I draw a little chart to keep from falling to bits with laughter.

Heath (☹)

Samira (ind)

Iona (scarf)

Lily (red)

Barry (big)

Ollie (😊)

Niall (ssh)

Caroline

(eld)

moi

I finish off my chart and laugh anyway, trying to make it a cough.

‘What’s up?’ Ollie wonders. He looks sympathetic, like he knows me, can look after me in a way the others can’t.

Oh I. I just had déjà vu.

‘I get that,’ say most of them.

Okay Keats.

‘Yay we’re back!’ Orlando revels to himself.

The thing about Keats is. Or one thing about Keats is. His real name wasn’t Keats. (Some of them start making notes.) No his real name was Bains. Johnny Bains.

(Ollie pauses before making this note, is I think looking at me with a tilt of the head for a moment, then bows to these strange tidings, and makes the note in his brand-new book with a floral cover that appears to be made of metal.)

The problem with Keats is *Keats*. The word *Keats*, *John Keats*, *Keatsian*. Say it, go on, say it to yourselves (two will, six won’t) till you leach all meaning from it.

‘Keats,’ says Ollie: ‘Keats.’

‘*Keats...*’ Caroline Jellicoe samples it thoughtfully... ‘*Keats.*’

Because it comes at us just groaning with *poetry*, *beauty*, *adieu*, mists of *adieu* and *what ye know on earth*, it’s high, it’s beyond, it’s untouchable, it’s *Keats*. I don’t think we can hear much else when somebody says *Keats*. So remember: his real name was Bains. Johnny Bains from Norf London...

(I wait for the scribbling to stop.)

Look. It wasn’t, cross it out, I’m saying *imagine it was*, I’m saying imagine that’s how it struck the ear, because – that’s what they thought of him, the circles, the coteries, the tall posh diffident not-needing-a-job literati. And the lad is trying to make it as a doctor, he’s gotta make it as *something* or he’ll starve, right? His folks are dead and gone, dad at nine, mum at fifteen, his sick doomed brother needs looking after, his little sister does, his other brother’s soon to sod off to the New World forever, and the Bains dosh is tied up with some solicitor who never lets them near it. Poor

Johnny, coughing little spluttering med student. He doesn't want that life. He turns away from anatomy books by candlelight and tries his hand at this:

New Morning from her orient chamber came,
And her first footsteps touched a verdant hill...

We all started somewhere. I in my aunt's living-room in a house outside Geneva. Fifteen one afternoon, sitting alone by a grand piano, wrote on a piece of paper against the long black polished lid – 'It's spring and the flowers haven't opened/ There's one too many stars in the sky.' Look we all start somewhere. Eight years later I got a poem accepted for some leaflet. I literally jumped for joy. (A quarter-century later I sent six poems to the *London Review of Books* and got one accepted. My first reaction was to wonder *what's wrong with these other five?* Don't become me.)

Anyway it was quicker for Johnny Bains, and it needed to be. Johnny mate you've got a poem in *The Examiner!*

O Solitude! if I must with thee dwell,
Let it not be among the jumbled heap
Of murky buildings; climb with me the steep –

Meanwhile in a nicer part of London: *I say chaps, have a look at this 'Johnny Bains', he's not just apprenticed to a sawbones, look he's got verses in here! I say, have a read, Johnny wishes to be alone, but not just any old way. He feels the buildings are looking jolly murky today, oh you do, do you Johnny? So what he's going to do is climb, shall we all climb with Johnny?*

They called him one of the *Cockney School*, spat it out like gentlemen, but little Johnny Bains is hiking on the slopes of Parnassus! He's going to be a poet! He has less than five years left.

*

In a dream you can teach anything, no one's watching, no one's here.

I thought maybe I'd teach poetry like I write it, try and engage anything, books, jokes and make-believe, show where it is I'm standing when I think, what the view is as I feel things, what the light's like while I breathe, because nothing I can do or say takes anything from anywhere. I'm only giving back in the light of how it came.

So, in contrast to Johnny Bains, you all have the capability to vanish right out of poetry right now. Feel free to do so. You do that by taking an almost conscious decision to cease hearing. You do that by filing John Keats and his murky buildings and his mellow autumn and his drowsy numbness away in a file marked Old Immortal Poetry – *adieu, adieu* – and filing away with it every physical *bodily* element that make his work indestructible, unkillable, *not leaving before you do*.

Then you go back to writing like you think the thing is done now. Like the thing is done since one day, phew, someone figured out life is ugly, has no beauty, needs no music, is simply *not to be risen to*.

Example: *I feel like shit, feel like I've been drugged old-school. That bird's kinda like me, making its one noise. That's all I want to do, that or maybe die. I dunno. Probably dreaming anyway.*

Just a normal day in dreamland, we can access that. But how does that feeling arrive *at the body*, when you slow time down, when you put a hand on it as it marches by in its uniform, and you bemuse it with *this?*

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
 My sense, as if of hemlock I had drunk,
 Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
 One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
 'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
 But being too happy in thine happiness, –
 That thou, light-wingéd Dryad of the trees,
 In some melodious plot
 Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
 Singest of summer in full-throated ease...

In saying this to yourself you take it very slowly, and you try to be aware what your throat, tongue, and lips are doing. Which means heeding the vowel-lengths, the consonant-clusters, because some words take a huge great while to say, they lie longer on the body, seem in no haste to leave you.

And you feel the movement of the frown on your forehead, the wrinkles and eyebrows, the bouncers at the gate – ‘what’s it like man it’s like *hemlock* – how long ago shit was it *one minute???* – plot of green what green very green kinda *beechen* green, *that* green!’ – the hairs of your

eyebrows act like the hairs up your nose, class, absorbing what comes in at you through the senses, whether it's one of the senses or all five or all seven.

Poems that stay stay because the body feels them.

I said: *Poems that stay stay because the body feels them.*

Because the body doesn't *want* to move at the pace of time. It *wants to be slowed down*. That's pretty much its only wish. *Singest of summer in full-throated ease...* Never end, never end, I am ending, never end...

The body desires to be slowed down and to be graced, adorned, with language.

It wishes, fair creatures of an hour, it wishes all its life to be at standstill.

And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,

That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the faery power

Of unreflecting love; – then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

Two years left.

So Johnny Bains writes poems to a season, to a month, to sadness, to a vase, to sleep, to stones, to *laziness* for Christ's sake, to fame, to Milton's hair, Mrs Reynolds's cat and the Elgin sodding Marbles, he addresses things, he apostrophizes, O this, O that, O, O, O is awe, the maw, the craw, the oral, O is the open mouth, astonishment, horror, wonder, and it is the stamp and seal of Old Poetry to be filed away where you file Old Folks, but think of it another way...

Johnny Bains, for his seven years of work, is telling the world *I love you*. He's ill half the time, he coughs and hauls his breath back up, so his poems can gasp *I love you*. By the time he's coughing blood on the cotton sheet he's in love with *actual* Fanny Brawne – *bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art* – so he just goes on saying *I love you* till there's no you, and no I, and no years left at all.

See, you're blushing by now. It's *oh* these days, not O.

*

But I'm dreaming, I'll say anything. I'm dreaming I said anything. I think I like Iona, she's Scots, Iona McNair, am I this old in the dream? And big

Barry's got his hand up.

Big Barry. I mean Barry. (I get away with things in dreams.)

'What is it you mean when you say he's got two years left?'

I step back to absorb this question, and you know it never does get answered, never would and never will, as right then the sun comes in, O – man alive does the sun come spreading in, fair floods our little room with gold, the low last autumn sunlight finally making it to my class. They have bronze in their hair, Ollie, Caroline, Iona, and their clean new pencil-cases glint in it and their water-bottles gleam with it, and the pages all turn yellow and some sighs and yays and murmurs mark the pleasure of having sun for the last, late, only time today. We move gently towards, like waterlife under the waves. Because soon it's gone again, wrong side of clouds or houses, and we're left with the blue-grey embers of afternoon, and eight strangers to get used to, and all these scrawled-on yellow pages suddenly everywhere.

'What is it you mean when you say he's got two years left?'

Class... people... why is the paper yellow?

'What's that?'

All these sheets of paper were white. And now they're yellow, yellow-gold...

Lily Bronzo opens her mouth: 'Is it off hemlock you haff drunk?' and they all laugh and chuckle and wait for me to. But:

No I'm serious, look, I got them from the office, from Kerri Bedward in the office it was a big sheaf of white paper it came from a box in the corner!

Ollie addresses everyone: 'He's had a bit of a rough journey, apparently right professor?'

'Is it important, the colour?' Iona McNair wonders with concern.

Yes no it's the – reading list. I gave it out at the start, did I not?

'You did!' says Barry Wilby, lifting his own yellow sheet and flapping it in the air, 'got it handy. *Reading Series!*'

Reading List.

'Reading Series,' says Barry, mournful like it's his fault.

Reading – ?

'Series,' confirms Samira, sitting back and looking out of the window.

'It really is *quite* a series,' Caroline bucks me up.

'Cool game this sir,' says Lily Bronzo.

'Why don't you look at it, mate,' the bloke called Heath murmurs from the

far end of the table as he doodles over his.

Yes. Why don't I.

So I look at my yellow page with the Reading List.

READING SERIES.

Elective 711: Poetry/Maxwell Thursday, Village Hall, times TBC.

26th Sept.	Mr. J. Keats.
3rd Oct.	Miss. E. Dickinson.
10th Oct.	Fr. Hopkins SJ.
17th Oct.	The Misses Brontë.
24th Oct.	Mr. S. T. Coleridge.
31st Oct.	Mr. E. A. Poe.
7th Nov.	Field Trip.
14th Nov.	Mr. J. Clare.
21st Nov.	Mr. W. B. Yeats.
28th Nov.	Mr. W. Whitman.
5th Dec.	Mrs. E. B. Browning and Mr. R. Browning.
12th Dec.	Lord Byron.

Just testing, I knew that, guys. Of course it says Reading Series. Poe on Halloween, I get it, a Field Trip on my birthday yay, of *course* the page is yellow...

'Sir.'

Yes, um, Lily.

'Why do you keep saying you're dreaming?'

Do I?

'I like it,' says Niall softly on my left, the only thing he's said.

I don't know, Lily. I think I'm going to stop now.

'Also it's like, we've *paid*'?

I make appointments with most everyone, three next week, three the week after, three forever I shall look at their poems, that's why they're here, to meet me one-to-one and learn how to be poets, I shall no longer say I'm dreaming as it seems more likely I'm in some sort of long-term coma, between you and me and the gatepost with which I have evidently collided, and off go all my poets through the gloomy village hall again, out to the

chilly daylight and away in twos and threes.

*

'Wasn't so difficult was it.'

Kerri Bedward's in a light brown coat, she's locking up her office.

How do you know it wasn't difficult, it was difficult.

'It's not difficult now, it's over now.'

I suppose. Where's, um.

'What?'

Where's.

'What's the matter. Say.'

Where's. Um... Oh for chrissake where's Keats.

'Who the visiting poet?'

Yes the visiting poet.

'He went past the window about an hour ago, towards where you were.'

The village hall?

'That's where he's reading. Look at the yellow sheet.'

It was white when you gave it to me, Kerri.

'Pardon? No it wasn't.'

I took it from that pile of – oh. They're yellow. Very yellow. Long day.

'Two hours, sure, exhausting. I was here at eight-thirty.'

I didn't exist then. Sorry – look I'm just thinking, Kerri, if he's Keats – of course he's Keats, / knew that – it's just I didn't remind the students, I handed out the Reading Series, do you think they'll come and hear him? He's Keats.

'Well you know, students. Also there's a Meet'n'Greet tonight, like a big Orientation? All the writing students, all the professors.'

There's what?

'A little party at the halls, white wine, sort of thing, get-to-know-you. Quiche. You should go if you're not busy. There'll be lots of folks there, it's in Cartwright 202.'

Fucking Keats is doing a reading.

'Pardon?'

Sorry.

'You know what students are like, um, *Glyn*, they've got lots of options, they're customers these days.'

I find him sitting on the stage in the village hall, we must have all walked right past him. He has a little blue hardback volume face down on the stage and his eyes are shut. It's a low and dusty stage but then he's not a very tall chap so his legs don't reach the floor. I test the fluorescent lights a bit, good grief we're doing this here, then I go and sit down next to Keats. My legs do reach the floor.

Look John I should have asked you to the class, now I think, I'm a moron, what've you been doing?

He picked up the little book, looked at it, and closed it.

'Reading, writing, fretting. The last I intend to give up and stick to the other two.'

That's a plan. You – wrote this afternoon?

He beheld his dangling legs in their grey velvet, frowned, and gathered them up beneath him until he sat cross-legged on the edge of the stage, swaying side to side with the effort. Then he broke into something like a little grin: 'I say to the Muses what the maid says to the man: take me while the fit's on me.'

Ha ha ha! (I roared with laughter) ha ha ha ho yes ho ho brilliant John I like it he he he it won't be a *huge* crowd tonight, more of a select sort of quality crowd it's, you know, the start of term.

'I never expect anything.'

Usually wise in this line of work. Would you take some questions after the reading? Then maybe we could get a beer in the, you know. There's a tavern in the town.

His eyes light up and he raises his hand as if to remember something he heard lately: 'Stopping at a tavern they call – *hanging out*.'

They do, yes!

'*Where do you sup?* is *Where do you hang out?*'

It still is, these days! We still say – I mean it just – it is.

'Hanging out... with a cherry brandy.'

Quite possible! Anything else you'd drink if they don't have...?

'I enjoy claret, to a degree.'

Better, d'you like – whisky?

'Very smart stuff. Very pretty drink, much praised by Burns.'

Very true, that's –

'Twill make a man forget his woe; twill heighten all his joy; twill make the widow's heart to sing, tho' the tear were in her eye...'

Tear were in her eye, that's – indeed what it will do, great stuff!

The day was looking up. John's mood was buoyed by his little Burns recital, and he decided to go for a walk in the cool October twilight, though he seemed unsure of where to be quite when. I said start walking back when you hear the bells chime the three-quarters, and off he ambled up the road in the northerly direction, stopping almost straight away. He turned a full circle as if to take in everything and then confided cheerily, 'The setting sun will always set me to rights!'

*

'Small or large.'

Huge.

'Y'know the bottle's better value.'

Give me value, Norman.

'Look at 'em all just drinkin'.'

The pub's more crowded now. There are too many people to be given nicknames or epithets, I'm really just interested in boozing for a spell, but Ollie rocks up beside me, beaming as usual:

'Getting stuck in!'

Beside him is bristly Heath in a leather jacket, guy's not yet cracked a grin.

Help me out, Ollie, no one's gonna show up to this reading and it's *Keats*.

'I know, it's the meet'n'greet in Cartwright, it's really bad planning.'

Sod the meet'n'greet, you've all met, you've all gret, come and hear Keats.

'We've not met the novelists or playwrights,' says Ollie.

What novelists, what playwrights.

Ollie acknowledges my uselessness with a smile, 'The *other* writing classes?'

Am – / teaching them?

'No! They're at the Uni!'

Aren't you at the Uni? You're always at some uni.

'We all are! You're like, an elective, Glyn, an option. We don't get credits. I spread the word! If you build it they will come, or something,

who's the second glass for?'

Me again. I need to sit.

Soon we're joined at what's already The Poets' Table (give me strength) by Caroline the lavender lady, and Iona the Scots girl who says *aye*, we all say where we come from, we get through that bottle then Caroline picks one better. The women say they'll come to Keats. Ollie says he'll do his best, Heath makes a roll-up.

That's how I come to be standing in the chilly dark outside the village hall on the deserted lane in the village of Lord Knows, at roughly seven-fifty shouting out to no one:

Reading here tonight! John Keats! *The John Keats!* In person!

Well I say to no one, but I don't forget to raise my lone plaintive cry to the black and newly starry heavens, which I do think ought to hear this, plus the man himself is sauntering up the lane to make my lunatic rant come true.

*

'When old age shall this generation waste,

Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe

Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,

Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'

Twelve hands make the sound of ten hands clapping, because Heath doesn't deign to clap from his chair three rows back, he just nods alone in the dark a bit as if that helps. Then again at least he showed up, to show his tough-guy approval of the gifted little chap. No sign of bloody Orlando or Barry or Lily Bronzo. On the front row the angels clap ferociously, Iona McNair, Mrs Caroline Jellicoe, and a tall girl called Isabella I believe I know. And shy wordless Niall is clapping for all his worth, as am I, as I sit down next to John on the edge of the stage again, but that's ten hands and that's your lot.

Wonderful, John, you said you'd be happy to take some questions?

(He looks at me and shrugs and Caroline's already raised her hand)

'That was so beautiful, John. Can you tell us something about your influences?'

Influences John?

(He looks at me as if this wasn't quite what he had in mind, but he

seems to make up his mind to be agreeable)

‘I – never quite despair if I read Shakespeare.’

(The three women are all nodding in approval, and he goes on) ‘I’m very near agreeing with Hazlitt that Shakespeare’s enough for us.’

Hazlitt, yes, earlier John we met earlier remember, you talked about Dante... that amazing Canto Five of *Inferno*? (I haven’t had time to look it up but at least I got the number.)

John smiles wider than ever before, his legs give a little dangling kick, and he leans back with his hands spread behind him on the dusty stage: ‘Paulo and Francesca... I dreamt of – I’d passed many days in rather a low state of mind and I – I dreamt of being in that region of hell... one of the most delightful enjoyments I ever had... I floated about the whirling atmosphere with – with a beautiful figure to whose lips mine were joined – it seemed for an age – I was warm... flowery tree-tops sprung up and we – we rested on them with the lightness of a cloud... I tried a sonnet but – nothing.’

Did you cry to dream again, John?

He clocks my Caliban, applauds me with a bully-for-you, and says ‘I could dream it every night.’

This obviously earns a short adoring silence, which Isabella breaks by asking ‘Do you think a poet is born? Or can you learn to be one.’

I glance at her approvingly but she’s gazing on him like a moon at a planet. I’m being cold-shouldered in my own coma.

‘In the first place,’ saith the poet, ‘Sancho will invent a journey heavenward as well as anybody.’

From *Don Quixote* there (inserts their teacher)

‘No... the poetical character,’ goes John, ‘it’s not itself...’ Isabella’s already seriously nodding and scribbling, ‘it – *has* no self. It’s everything and nothing. It has no character. It enjoys light and shade, it lives in – *gusto*, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor. It has – it has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. A poet is the most *unpoetical* thing in existence, because he has – he has no identity. He’s continually *in for* – filling some other body...’

Are you talking in terms of the poet as playwright, John?

To which he pays no heed: ‘I think poetry should – surprise by a – a fine excess, not by singularity. It should strike the reader as a – a wording of his highest thoughts – appear almost a remembrance... its touches of beauty should never be halfway – the rise, the progress, the setting of imagery

should – like the sun – come natural to him, shine over him and set soberly, in the – luxury of twilight...’ He grins and looks for his water-bottle, ‘but it’s easier to think what poetry should be than to write it.’

Iona has a question: ‘Do you have a favourite way to work?’

He’s still concluding his thought: ‘If poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to the tree... it’d better not come at all.’

(I say after a silence) Iona’s asking if you have a way you tend to work, John.

‘Where you sit,’ she smiles, ‘like a nice view of something? Do you write at dawn? After midnight?’

A lark or an owl, John (I go helpfully) I’m a lark myself if anyone’s interested,

‘I read and write about eight hours a day...’ at which Iona’s mouthing to Isabella *oh my Lord...* ‘I went day by day at a poem for a month – at the end of which time I found my brain so overwrought I’d neither rhyme nor reason in it – yet... It’d be a great delight to know in what position Shakespeare sat when he began *To be or not to be...*’

He chuckles and points at himself with both forefingers, as if to say How about cross-legged like me? pretends to inscribe verses on the air and we all laugh, then he goes back to the question, indicating an imaginary room of his dreams, setting out walls and all his special places:

‘My books in a snug corner... Mary Queen of Scots... Milton with his daughters in a row... a head of Shakespeare... I should like the window to open onto Lake Geneva, and there I’d sit and read all day like the picture of somebody reading...’

‘Can we come and visit?’ Caroline Jellicoe beams for England.

‘Fine weather, and health, and books, and a fine country,’ the young poet sighs, ‘a contented mind, a diligent habit of reading and thinking – and an amulet against the ennui, please heaven, a little claret-wine cool out of a cellar a mile-deep, a rocky basin to bathe in, a strawberry bed to say your prayers in, a nag to go you ten miles or so,’ then he gestures to his tiny little audience, ‘two or three sensible people to chat with,’ then at me with a wink for dramatic counterpoint – ‘two or three spiteful folks to spar with, two or three odd fishes to laugh at and two or three numbskulls to argue with!’

John that’s so –

‘*And – and –* a little music outdoors played by somebody I don’t know... a little chance music...’

He starts engraving on the air again, mouthing the exaggerated shapes

of 'To Be Or Not To Be That Is The Question...' when the sweet quiet is abruptly broken by a loud voice from the side of the hall. I look there in time to see big Barry Wilby silhouetted by the light of the porch, only just arriving having missed the whole of the reading. He repeats himself but louder again:

'Where d'you get your ideas, Mr Bains.'

(oh for fuck's sake) You know what? Let's walk twenty yards with John Keats and bloody well get him his claret-wine and his numbskulls! Ladies and gentlemen I give you John Keats!

*

We hit the Cross Keys just before it fills up with the Orientated from the Meet'n'Greet, so we're able to colonize a little snug with some big plum-leather chairs. Those who heard him read – plus Barry Wilby, who came too late – settle thereabouts, throw coats and bags over seats to possess them, and Isabella and I go and buy the first round.

How's the writing, Isabella.

'After that I just feel like stopping.'

Don't, though. I walked to class with my old teacher once on Bay State Road in Boston. He said he'd just read four lines of Ovid and *he* felt like stopping. And he's him. If you stop, you *should*.

'I'm writing a novel.'

Oh. I said *that* to my old teacher and he called me a whore. Here comes our wine.

*

When we get back with our red and our white, a lemonade for Barry (the lummoX) and yes, why not, a shapely glass of De Kuyper's cherry brandy, John's in full flow:

'Negative Capability,' he's saying (as it happens) accepting with a nod his beaker full of the warm Netherlands, 'that is, when a man's capable of being in uncertainties – mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason. Coleridge, for instance – *incapable* of remaining content with half-knowledge!'

What's Coleridge like, I ask as I pour the white.

John downs half his brandy in response – I send Niall off with a twenty to get two more – and our poet grins into his glass.

‘Coleridge... I walked with him at his alderman-after-dinner pace for near two miles I suppose... In those two miles he broached a thousand things... see if I can give you a list...’

We all gather closer, and I wonder if any of them know who Coleridge is, know he’s dead, know he’s alive, know Keats is dead or alive, know where we are, why we’re here, what’s happening to me, I think you could possibly say I dwell in Negative Capability, anyway, our Visiting Poet is talking: ‘Nightingales, poetry – on poetical sensation – metaphysics – different genera and species of dreams – nightmare – a dream accompanied by a sense of touch – single and double touch – first and second consciousness – the Kraken, mermaids, a ghost story... I heard his voice as he came towards me, I heard it as he moved away, I’d heard it all the interval! He was civil enough to ask me to call on him at Highgate.’

‘Do you know Lord Byron?’ breathes enraptured Isabella.

John sits back and considers.

‘There’s this great difference between us. He describes what he sees – I describe what I imagine. Mine’s the hardest task.’ I hear Heath say ‘Hang on, though,’ and I step in:

Wordsworth?

‘Wordsworth... sometimes – in a fine way – gives us sentences in the style of school-exercises. *The lake doth glitter/Small birds twitter!*’

He creases up at this gibe of his, then sighs and clears the air between them: ‘He has epic passion... martyrs himself to the human heart... I don’t mean to deny his grandeur – I mean to say we needn’t be teased with grandeur... a great poet if not a philosopher. Let’s have the old poets.’

It seems appropriate to drink to that and we do, and here come the rest of my students to stand around us, and some novelists and playwrights no doubt, it’s getting pretty crowded in the Cross Keys, as a girl dressed all in black snakes through, deposits a double-shot of something clear by my right hand, says: ‘sup Max,’ and goes away again.

Hey Mimi? (I summon up too late, as Barry Wilby asks his question again) ‘Just askin’ about your *Ideas*, Mr Bains,’ and Keats, who is fair plastered by this time – ‘I should’ve been a rebel angel...’ – ‘young ladies that wear watches’re always looking at them!’ – ‘I think I’ll be among the English poets after my death...’ – suddenly *delights* in being called ‘Johnny Bains’ and reels this thing off in his best cod-cockney voice:

‘Two or three cats

And two or three mice –

Two or three sprats
At a very great price –
Two or three smiles
And two or three frowns –
Two or three miles
To two or three towns –
Two or three pegs
For two or three bonnets
Two or three dove's eggs
To hatch into sonnets!

*

At the end of the day John Keats was young, and slight, and he couldn't really hold his drink – who *can* hold that much cherry brandy? – so having thrown up pure crimson down a drain he was now propped between myself and Heath Bannen as we waited on the lane by the light of a half-moon. Lots of other people were there, it was a raucous night by now, but no one had any clear idea what we were waiting for except, oddly, John himself, who kept saying this was the place.

He confided in the two of us one by one, to this shoulder then that, confided in his gentleman supporters, out of the earshot of the mostly female crowd. To Heath I believe he said, 'See what it is to be under six foot and not a lord,' and to me, with his eyes ranging across the shrieking and bonding women all around, he said: 'I do think better of womankind than to s'pose they care whether Mister John Keats – five feet height – likes 'em or not...'

After midnight struck we heard hoof-beats and a small horse-drawn carriage came clapping in from the east, a shade late for Cinderella. The hooded coachman said nothing, the windows were black. John vaguely waved at everything from me to the moon and stars, and we helped him step up. At the door he simply slurred to the world with his eyes bright: 'Ignorant! Monstrous! I's forced lately... to make use of the term *MINX*...' And then he tumbled inside and as the hinged door swung shut with a whiff of perfume, there did seem to be someone rising in time to catch him.

*

I sit in my digs and watch the moonlight on the lake out to the west. My

head's still ringing and clanging with the time I've had. It had to break up quickly, I felt I was waking up, so I said my quick *adieux* and was off. But I didn't wake up, I walked back home and here I am at my window, dreaming, dead, comatose, mad, or wide wide bloody awake. Wherever I am it's term-time.

*

*

*

Week Two – October 3rd

I woke up and it was all a dream.

I filled with relief and joy and disappointment, then soon some grand acceleration of thankfulness came shuddering through, resolving itself into the heartfelt words *To whom do I write a cheque?* now I'm back in the Angel with everyone to tell everything to, where will I start with it all, so many little details, I better get back to the banquet what banquet the banquet in the circus-tent what circus-tent?

And I'm staring at the ceiling, it is surprisingly close by.

I met Keats.

I never closed my curtains last night and the world outside is bright grey.

I am completely without a hangover, which in normal circumstances means I didn't drink, or I drink so much I'm doomed, but in this case means nothing.

Now I'm kneeling on my bed like a boy, is this some memory of prayer, some bookending of sleep – or bookending of – what? I do like my room. Tartan blanket which I needed, I gather it towards me, it's cold air beyond it, and the matting on the wooden floor, and the slanting windows out on the world, whatever world, three windows, mine, and the things I had with me when I came here are propped up there and there. My boots, they know what's what. I stumble and stride about, good god I'd started my unpacking. Somehow I had a suitcase and my wash-bag's gone where it knows to go. All these empty drawers to fill! Books open on the small desk, some closed, some open, one open at a page.

A Thought went up my mind today –

That I have had before –

But did not finish – some way back –

I could not fix the Year –

Nor where it went – nor why it came –

The second time to me –

Nor definitely, what it was –

Have I the Art to say –

But somewhere – in my Soul – I know –
I've met the Thing before –
It just reminded me – 'twas all –
And came my way no more –

Oh it's all a dream again, I knew as I deflated, standing there, and how did I know? Because I taught Keats on a Thursday, and I don't have to teach till next Thursday, so this can be only Friday, and never *in my entire life* have I prepared a class six whole days early, as I clearly have in this case. QED. Quod Emily D.

Until it's a dream, or not a dream, I gaze out through the nearest window, over the rooftops of the cold quiet place out to the strip of lake in the distance, the only bloke on earth as usual, I am at my address.

And so: my – *Address* – *What are you telling me? What did I do wrong where I was? What did I need telling?*

You are telling me something. I've seen things like this, I end up a better person. Do I? How? Will the same things keep happening and I understand them more? Or different things keep happening and I somehow learn to love it? What work are we engaged on here?

Then I feel a lightness, as if the beloved of my life are reachable, close, as if they know I'm off somewhere, at my work in some strange way, know I'll be back from where I'm gone.

So this day's like every other. It feels like I can call them all – but my bird-yellow phone is dead now, and I didn't bring a charger, it slipped my mind to be omniscient.

I have to work, but I can't. I never do my work when I feel I can. Work starts helplessly, I find myself *At It*, the body leads me there. Not this time.

The books are open, I open the windows, the wind will turn their pages. I need to eat instead. Having mastered the physics and acknowledged the biology I shall go out alone and explore – and it's this preposterous Faustian *hubris* that makes some terrible person start battering on the door downstairs.

Maybe it's not battering, maybe they're not terrible, maybe it just strikes me like battering because I do not feel like talking. I tiptoe to the window and peer down.

I see the path, a needless zigzag through the tiny garden, am relieved there's no one on it, wait too long thinking that, which lets a lady back right into view, stare up and clock me before I can hide. *Shit shit shit* runs my

little birdsong.

I hear nothing, I stay gone. I sidle through the long little room, leaning inches to see till I do see – who, *Caroline* of the tinted hair walking away off my domain. I didn't want to be wanted for anything. I will see off invaders. I will run away, to show I can, there's money in my pocket somehow, there always is these days – comes of saying yes and working fast and saying *right what's next?* – there is money, I'll be back in time to eat a triumphal breakfast.

*

'Teacherman! Señor!'

That went well.

The big man in overalls is calling up the lane. I was heading north away from the Cross, to where the great field stretches from the fence where I met Keats but I didn't get that far, there was Barry Wilby, drinking milk beside a milk float.

Hey there. Barry.

'Taking a walk eh, *were we.*'

We, no, I was yes, wondering where *that* leads...

'Oh it's a super quality stroll, that one.'

Yeah pretty much why I was taking it (but, you know, standing by a milk float's good too) what are you up to on this grey day Barry.

'Doing my rounds.'

You're a milkman.

'No,' as a sleeved hand waves from the driver's window and Barry nods his big head, 'she's the milkman, I'm her pal. I'll be seeing you later.'

You will?

'Professor!'

Pincer movement, my pursuer Caroline, emerging from Student Services with a wave and a puzzled look as she marches on my world.

Catch you later Barry... *Caroline is it Caroline?*

'We had a ten, did we not have a ten?'

Did we not what did we what (oh I want to be alone)

'One-to-one at ten! You didn't come so I went to your place! Kerri Beds told me where you are! I saw you in the window.'

Was that me.

‘Eh?’

Yes that was me, I was, sorry, difficult phone-call.

‘You have a signal? No one has a signal on a Thursday. How do you have a signal?’

I – it’s gone. (Note to self: can’t fib in a village)

‘Kerri Beds said she had *no clue* about your plans.’

I look over at Student Services and there’s Kerri in her office, talking to a young man in an anorak.

Caroline says ‘Schedules are posted in her office.’

Sorry did you just say it was Thursday?

‘The Academy tutors do that – what’s that? Yes you teach at three. I know it’s three because on Tuesday at three I have Material Poetics with Gough Slurman he’s tremendous.’

(I really hate this coma now, what Academy)

‘Eh?’

What happened to the damn week.

‘Oh, I see, well yes, good damn question.’

*

We walk west along the verge of the oval village green. So I stood her up – but she’s not *real*, I don’t have to teach her. But evidently she *thinks* she’s real, so I really did stand her up, so I really do have to teach her. But it won’t affect the world in the end so it’s not worth my time. But it will affect how I feel right now so in fact it damn well is. It’s no contest. My philosophical default has always been not to offend, which is maybe why you don’t know who I am or haven’t noticed I’ve vanished.

‘This is my first time, you know, so be kind! But don’t go pulling any punches please, I want to know what you think, but how about you go easy on a rookie.’

(I haven’t read her poems, I haven’t got her poems, I’m not here)

‘I’ve made duplicates, in case you mislaid them, I can see you’re a typical chaotic poet. But before we *do* sit down, what do you reckon to ‘em?’

They’re – you know what Caroline they’re forceful poems. They’re full of... force.

‘Are they.’

But they also have a – a sweetness.

‘You think? And there’s me thinking they were brutal.’

Oh don’t worry they’re brutal, but somehow the sweetness – *offsets* that.

‘Offsets it, I should be writing this down, shall we wait till the caff it’s right here...’

(Caff? Caff won’t cut it, do you know who I am? I see the heavenly sign of an Inn, my sign, about fifty yards further, it is called The Saddlers Inn, I shall join the Union of the Saddlers, I shall fight in their ranks) You know what, Caroline, I’m going to Buy You Brunch! (makes up for this morning, I can speed-read her poems while I *down some dry white anything*) and I won’t take no for an answer!

*

SOUTH HADLEY SEMINARY

Nov 2nd, 1847

Bill of Fare

Roast Veal

Potatoes

Squash

Gravy

Wheat and Brown Bread Butter

Pepper and Salt

DESSERT

Apple Dumpling

Sauce

Water

Isn’t that a dinner fit to set before a king?

*

‘Are you all right?’

Yes. Miles away. Something I read. Back here and now (I read six sheets of poems in the time it takes to say so) I’m remembering these yes yes there’s clearly an anger.

‘Yes there’s a bloody anger mind my German.’

(Forlornly I await my eggs florentine) It's like the speaker can't see beyond this *You* figure who betrayed her.

'You mean me and my ex-husband. The betrayer is called Ronald. The speaker is me. I'm the speaker.'

There's a language we have to use (I shuffle her six pages) we never assume identities ha! sounds like a spy movie.

'Of course, I know the game.'

If anger doesn't sing it's just anger.

'And what if I don't feel like singing?'

Then no one will hear her – I mean you. Least of all this man called You – I mean him.

'Ronald.'

Ronald.

'Why would I want him to hear it?'

No reason.

'He doesn't deserve to.'

No. Ronald doesn't deserve to. Here comes your croque monsieur...

Like most poets of the day and age when we set about teaching, I am haplessly cast as counsellor, shrink, trainer, mate, provocateur, Fool in the Lear sense and fool in the fool sense, and I see Caroline, having paid her money and taken her choice, might deploy me in any combination at will. I find that if I keep my eye on her line-breaks (for the play of nerves) her vowels (for the swell of emotions) and the scope of her vocabulary (keep it small and tight if you're pacing round your garden) I can help her find the sound she wants. In this game I've been calmly, hopefully passed first-hand accounts of rape, war, grief, schizophrenia, child abuse and terminal illness, I can handle a rough divorce. The duty is to the poem, I have to address it almost *independent* of the poet, gently bypass the suffering human and talk straight to the creature, like a dog-lover might do in the park. Now I'm telling it: *Help her. You and I can help her.*

Caroline sees some young students go by outside the window.

'Kids and their shiny faces. They'll learn.'

And I remember that in this life, as in life, I have no idea how old I look. I don't think they're kids at all, or if they are I'm one too. Maybe Caroline wants me for her generation. She has a point but I will stand my ground. My soul is thirty-seven, I'll be a-sitting on that gate when I'm the aged, aged man.

The Inn door opens with a jingle and it's Kerri Bedward. Great, a coma with recurring cast, everyone cheer. A side of the bar is also the Reception, she's heading there when she sees me.

'Just the man. Can you meet her at the station?'

What? Yes. The station (and let us state it while we may) you mean can I meet the nineteenth-century poet Emily Dickinson of Amherst Massachusetts at the railway station?

Kerri pauses by our banquette waiting to see if there's anything funny or wrong about that, but according to her clipboard there isn't: 'Ms – *Dickinson*, yes, she's on the 18.30.'

1830, of course she is. Where's she coming from, Kerri?

Kerri looks at me. My habitual cluelessness was funny the first four times.

'The agent didn't say. She's staying the night though.'

(Caroline's scribbling on her poems: *offset the brutality???*)

Are you coming to hear her read her work? (but they both hope I'm addressing the other one and Kerri's moved on to Reception. I face Caroline) You could write like our visitor.

'Eh what now?'

Find a single form forever. Write no other way.

'Would that not be monotonous?'

You *are* a single form forever, Caroline, arms legs head heart hands feet etc. So write in a single form forever. Full-throated like a bird.

'Yes. Well. Glyn. Dealing with what I'm dealing with? Sheer malice of Ronald. Mother who thinks I'm *her* mother. Son who doesn't give a damn who I am. Right now I'm too – full of what I need to say.'

Yes. Of course you are. You need a thousand forms, that's just what the monotonous blackbird tweeted me this morning, he needs horns and scales and udders and a mane and a tail and a sting and to really improve his English.

*

This is later, of course, I mutter that alone, when I'm walking back to the Cross, when my posh brunch has been paid for, and I've been told I can get it next time, as if there was a next time ha!

To stop in the Cross Keys is obviously foolhardy, as my usual practice for one-to-ones is to set them up in threes, so I'm banking on a double

ambush, and I don't even reach the bar before they catch me, first of course Orlando.

'Overdid it last night, did we?' he goes, beaming like it was all his Plan.

Don't really know, mate (which is nice to say, being true)

'It's actually Lillian Bronzo next, not me, so...'

We reschedule. I offer several days on which I don't expect this realm to exist or at least I won't be corporeally present, but he means twenty minutes from now, 'we can squash it in before class!'

Oh yes. Class.

'What you got for us today?'

We're. We're going to play a game called Hots For God.

'Ha! Like it!'

I don't mean game I mean exercise.

'Totally. Bring it.'

Up comes Lily of the scarlet pixie hair. 'Oi, listen you: I heard a fly buzz when I died, right. The stillness in the room was – hang on, I know it –'

'In *the air*?' prompts Ollie,

'*Shut it* – like the stillness in the air before the heaves of storm. Yesss. Learned it. You said to.'

I did? I did. All of it? Or just – just the one stanza.

'Jesus, slave-driver or wot.'

Ollie says: 'Superb stuff, but it's *between* not *before*.' He sags with regret and continues: 'The eyes around had wrung them dry –'

I feel such tenderness towards Lily, Lillian, as if she's the first person ever to have memorized lines of Emily – she may believe she is – that I thoroughly tell a lie:

Depends on the edition, Orlando. There's a version with *before*.

'Oh there is? Fair enough. It's a folio thing.'

Totally, man, it's a folio thing, it's a folio thing, Lily.

*

Lily's thing is she's homesick. You'd never catch her using the word, but it's there in her scratchy voice. We're sat down at a corner table and she has to top the lunchtime hubbub.

'In Camden I'm like on the scene, right,' she coughs, 'I got mates, the shit we write is *about* each other, it reacts, it's like it's, mess with me I'll

mess with you, or sometimes you're the bomb no *you're* the bomb, I dunno, what the crap do I write about here?'

Don't write about here.

'It's the space here, man, it's too far *between* shit.'

Don't write about here. Write about where you come from. Map it in your mind. Don't write down anything. Map the evening you want, how you get there, where it is, who's there, what happens, map how drunk you get, map it by the second, bus by night bus, map it so strongly it can't be forgotten. Rhyme and rhythm and shit and don't write down *anything*.

'Cool. Seriously?'

If it sticks in your memory it gets in the club. If it doesn't too bad. Your ears are doormen – door-persons.'

'No they're doormen. They're called *Saul* and *Gregor* actually, they're evil.'

*

Ollie wants to know if I think he should write poems to his girlfriend:

Depends who's your girlfriend. No, probably.

'You know. Mimi, from the ol' class.'

Mimi. You're in a thing with Mimi (I knew that)

'I know! Part of me thinks – result! It's full on, though. Or also not at all sometimes. She's such a. We got together at that wedding.'

That's what people get at a wedding. So why isn't Mimi in this class now?

'She's on the acting module.'

The Academy.

'Yeah.'

So she's not doing any poetry class?

'Not doing any writing class. / am, I'm doing Textualities of Now with Suzi Judas, she rocks, but no the problem is – my work's got kind of, a bit more, y'know, now-ish, like I don't so much do that moonlight and roses thing any more like I used to?'

Chocolate boxes.

'Totally! I've gone more, like, like postmodern? Arguably postpost.'

No more heroes, all gold, black magic, so you want to tell her sweet things but you don't *do* sweet things any more.

'I totally don't in a way.'

You don't know how to say *You're lovely like a rose, Mimi.*

'Finger down throat or what!' Let me think about it, squire.

'Or more like a black rose? She might go for that do you think? I'm struggling here. Thing is, I already sent one, it's gone.'

You already sent her a poem?

'I wanted to ask you first, I couldn't find you, I didn't think of a black rose, I went with a starlight/ocean vibe.'

Nice. Yes I think you should send her love-poems, Orlando.

'You do?'

Obviously don't say you asked me. Then you'd look like a –

'God no! What happens in the Cross Keys stays in the Cross Keys!'

Drink your drink, man. Let's play Hots For God.

*

I died for Beauty – but was scarce

Adjusted in the Tomb

When One who died for Truth, was lain

In an adjoining Room –

He questioned softly 'Why I failed'?

'For Beauty', I replied –

'And I – for Truth – Themself are One –

We Brethren, are', He said –

And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night –

We talked between the Rooms –

Until the Moss had reached our lips –

And covered up – our names –

*

Heath

Samira

Lily

Ollie

Barry

Caroline

Niall

Iona

moi

Why can't you all sit in the same damn places every week?

'I can't *all* do anything,' Lily points out like some stroppy punk Alice.

Okay let's not use cards, let's use dice. Write down the numbers 1 to 6. Five of the faces are people in this room, you can include me if you want to, also yourself. And the 6 is God. You include Him whatever. What? Yes. Or Her. Or Them. Or It. Look the sixth face is something beyond these walls, you name it yourself. Fate, time, the stars, the weather.

So let's go round the room. Say 1 is me, 2 is Niall, 3 is Barry, 4 is Lily, 5 is Heath, 6 is whatever God is to You, okay?

That's my version, do your own.

Now write another 1 to 6.

1 is *Love For*. 2 is *Hatred Of*. 3 is *Pity For*. 4 is *Envy Of*. 5 is *Fear Of*. 6 is *Hots For*. Are you getting the picture?

As these dice are enough for the game, these four walls and floor and ceiling are enough for the world. This is all there is. The black-dots-on-white die: people. White-dots-on-black die: emotion.

Samira raises her hand and asks: 'Are these going to be poems, professor?'

Of course. They're going to be four-line poems, rhymed ABAB.

(A communal groan)

'Nursery rhymes,' Heath says.

Yeah for nursery slopes (I say because he's getting on my nerves)

Samira puts her hand up again: 'It's hard enough having to falsify an emotion about someone you don't want to write about, but – formal constraints as well?'

You're right. Let's make it harder. Mention only what's in this room.

Consternation: 'Nothing's in the room!'

Nine chairs, table, kettle, mugs, fridge, clock, windows, pen and paper and the trace-memory of a Twix wrapper. Oh, and not forgetting that Nothing's in the room.

I weather the groans like a port in a storm. You can't teach the poet I'm teaching.

*

Exactly one hundred years before I lived, a woman in a small

Massachusetts town came across an article in *The Atlantic Monthly* and realized that it was, in theory, addressed to her.

It was asking her for poems.

LETTER TO A YOUNG CONTRIBUTOR.

My dear young gentleman or young lady, – for many are the Cecil Drexlers of literature who superscribe their offered manuscripts with very masculine names in very feminine handwriting, – it seems wrong not to meet your accumulated and urgent epistles with one comprehensive reply, thus condensing many private letters into a printed one. And so large a proportion of “Atlantic” readers either might, would, could, or should be “Atlantic” contributors also...

At considerable length, a literary critic named Thomas Wentworth Higginson sought to explain to all the aspiring writers out there – you, me, and so forth – what kind of poetry might make it into the pages of *The Atlantic Monthly*. He urged the young hopefuls to ‘charge your style with life’ and weeks later there came in the mail, from that same woman in Massachusetts, four odd little poems and a note: ‘Mr Higginson, are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?’

*

You can’t teach Emily Dickinson, you can’t write like her either. You no more have to write in her stanzas than you have to write limericks or clerihews. But you do have to absorb that she wrote about *everything she could think of* – herself, others, life, death, God, Time, being here, being gone – in little quatrains shaped like hymns, rhymed or half-rhymed, mostly four beats then three beats, four, three, stanza-break, and she barely left her bedroom.

She finished her chores, had lunch, went upstairs and sat down at a desk about the size of a tea-tray. She had two windows overlooking the one town she lived in. That was pretty much it, give or take a term in South Hadley and a short trip to Philly. Her only niece, Mattie, had a childhood memory of entering that room with her. Aunt Emily closed the door behind them, mimed the act of locking it, and said: ‘Mattie, here’s freedom’.

What you should be asking yourself is this: what is there so mighty and demanding in *you* – by which I also mean *me* – that calls for such a vast plenitude of forms? Are you more complex, do you see from wider angles,

have you solved her questions?

What you owe to such a poet is a true pause for thought.

Face the wonder of her narrow choice before you run bewildered from it.
For it's narrow like a ray of the sun.

And when you've finished running, from rhyme, from form, from repetition, from silence or stillness or the abstract nouns that some vague sense of the Modern has told you you can't use any more – as if your use of concrete nouns is the last word in exactitude – when you've finished running from all that and are panting with your freedom, or sweating from the demands of your so complicated life-scape, at least sit down at your own tea-tray and try writing *the present second* –

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air –
Between the Heaves of Storm –

The Eyes around – had wrung them dry –
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset – when the King
Be witnessed – in the Room –

I willed my Keepsakes – Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable – and then it was
There interposed a Fly –

With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –
Between the light – and me –
And then the Windows failed – and then
I could not see to see –

Yes we can note the glories – do it – her infinite narrow way of *I* along which all things travel – evoking the Wonderchild *to whom it occurs to write* 'when I died' – the vast *O* in *Onset* as the mouth's one option when the last breaths are gathering – the words that forlornly spread themselves, entreating the moment to slow: *Keepsakes*, *Assignable*, *interposed* – the use of *Be* in 'King/Be witnessed', which falls outside of mortal Time – try 'Was' or 'Is' to see what I mean – those last brave shots at aural infinity:

Flyyy, Buzzzzzz, meeee, faaaaailed – and, above all, the profound humility of the dashes – removing from the poet the grand assuming cloak of power to begin or end *anything* – stick a full-stop at the end and you’ve shot the thing like the Fly who killed Cock-Robin.

So much for the glories. Higginson, shaken, wrote her back with guarded encouragement but found it hard to see ‘what place ought to be assigned in literature to what is so remarkable, yet so elusive of criticism.’ He couldn’t make her out at all. Eventually he had to go to Amherst just to look her in the eye, for she wouldn’t travel. At the door she gave him two lilies and said: *These are my introduction. Forgive me if I am frightened; I never see strangers, and hardly know what I say.*

He knew he was in the presence of the unique. Later he would say he’d never met ‘with any one who drained my nerve power so much. Without touching her, she drew from me. I am glad not to live near her.’

And yet to Mattie, the niece, ‘Aunt Emily stood for *indulgence.*’

Despite Higginson’s interest she had virtually nothing published. That which was was altered for the worse to match conventions of the day. Bullet-hole full-stops. You can still find those versions, it’s like trooping to the churchyard to stand by her grave, as I did with my Amherst students in the small hours on her birthday. But read her as she meant you to and she’s standing right beside you.

She left her bedroom for good in 1886. Her sister Lavinia found eighteen hundred little poems locked away in a chest.

*

Let’s lock *you* in a room with your freedom.

Like in all my games and exercises, cards or dice stand in for fate and circumstance, and you play the role of Human Item Stuck on a Shred of Time.

So go on, shake. Shake.

- | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Niall: Hatred of Caroline. | (‘Got it.’) |
| Barry: Envy of Glyn. | (‘How now, brown cow?’) |
| Lily: Pity for Samira. | (‘Really?’) |
| Heath: Love for Caroline. | (‘Oh Jesus...’) |
| Samira: Hots for Lily. | (‘Mm-hm. I see.’) |
| Ollie: Fear of God. | (‘Woo, terrified!’) |

Caroline: Hatred of Lily. ('Oh no must I?')

Iona: Pity for Ollie. (smiles, starts writing)

Is everybody happy? You bet your life you are. Express that one emotion using the form I gave you and the things inside the room. Amaze yourself. Bother me. Leave them in my box in Kerri's office. I won't share them with anyone, this is you against a dice-throw. In all my exercises the benefit is half in your resentment and three-quarters in your effort, it doesn't matter how I think you did. If you do it you win, if you don't the – Windows – fail –

And with that I'm off to the station.

*

It's at the south end of the village. I've always assumed I came by railway because I was walking north from it when I began here. It's a very small station, an old green stone building by the line. There's no name on the name-sign, just room for it. There are benches on some paving-stones and that'll do for a platform. There's a path on the rails to the other side, then a wild-flower meadow sloping away and some little patterned cows far off against the autumn mist. Sunlight never came today, the lightest clouds are low and dull in the sky to my right. I can just make out the lakeshore in the distance. To the left the ground rises into wooded hills, and I see a tunnel entrance over yonder in the distance, blue on the grey hillside. I sigh and then in silence a tiny train appears.

I like to see it lap the Miles –

And lick the Valleys up –

And stop to feed itself at Tanks –

And then – prodigious step

Around a Pile of Mountains –

And supercilious peer

In Shanties – by the sides of Roads –

And then a Quarry pare

To fit its sides

And crawl between

Complaining all the while

In horrid – hooting stanza –
Then chase itself down Hill –

And neigh like Boanerges –
Then – prompter than a Star
Stop – docile and omnipotent
At its own stable door –

I await a small frail lady in white as the train slows down and grinds and stops. Then when no one descends at all, why would they – *one* does, slender and straight, from the very last carriage in a dark blue shawl and with her hair tied up. Once on the platform, some forty yards along, she goes on looking at the train, and then watches it pull away and leave her all alone. She seems so intent on doing this I stop walking, and we wait until the train has quite curved out of sight behind me, as if we can't begin until we've ceased to dwell on how we came.

I resume walking towards her, and am suddenly proud to be dead, or in a coma, or in a dream, and must resist saying so, must resist saying so,

Miss Dickinson it's a dream to make your acquaintance!

She is pointing at her little feet: 'I resolved to be sensible, so I wore thick shoes,' and I burst out like an idiot:

/ lived five years in Amherst! I lived on Dana Street! I taught in Johnson Chapel!

She raises her eyes from her shoes, not quite so far as to catch my eye, and says: 'Old Time wags on pretty much as usual at Amherst.'

The pleasantries I spout next I'm embarrassed to relate even here, but I manage to remember to take her little round suitcase, and enquire about her journey on the train.

'The folk looked very funny. Dim and faded, like folks passed away.'

Weird that.

We're walking along the lane, myself and Emily Dickinson, who focuses mainly on her walking feet in their sensible shoes, with occasional glances up ahead.

'The world's full of people travelling everywhere.'

Tell me about it!

'Until it occurs to you that you'll send an errand, then by hook or crook you can't find any traveller to carry the package.'

Totally. I mean I know.

‘It’s a very selfish age, that’s all I can say about it.’

There’s a spark in her voice that suggests she might be kidding, and I steal a glance at her but don’t receive one back.

You’re staying at the Saddlers Inn, Miss Dickinson. They do a good eggs florentine I mean they do eventually.

While I resolve to jump in the lake later, she sighs: ‘I could keep house very comfortably if I knew how to cook!’

I know. Me too. Totally. You can see the inn in the distance there...

We reach the Cross and she stops, turns and looks all four ways like I would.

‘October’s a mighty month,’ she says. Then she asks where there’s a library.

(I don’t know where there’s a library) Let’s get you checked in, yes, then I’ll see if the Library’s open. The reading’s at eight, in the village hall. There’s some other stuff going on tonight, usual things on a Thursday, but my poetry group will be there, heigh-ho, so a small keen high-class crowd!

*

We jingle through the door of the Saddlers Inn, whereupon Kerri stands up smartly from a table to escort our Guest to Reception. I get to sit down for a second, stare clean out of my mind through the windows and find life’s splendours too bright to bear. I actually do this in Angel too, and the Garden City and New York City, not just in dreams and comas.

My vacant stare can’t help but fill up with strangers, and a group of several walk by the Inn, interesting faces, various ages, a rag-tag bunch, and one who stops, frowns, peels off from the gang and here she comes, Mimi, in her black suede jacket with tassels, a death-stare to the closing door for jingling in her wake.

‘Why aren’t you teaching, Max, Orlando’s at your class.’

Collected our visitor, look.

Mimi sits down opposite and glances over at the small woman stooping to sign the register: ‘Woo. Legend.’

You remember her?

‘You taught me, didn’t you. *Zero at the bone*. When’s her reading?’ Eight. Can I ask you, why don’t people drink in here? it’s nice and peaceful.

‘Answer supplied with question,’ she goes.

Cross Keys is a bit grim.

'We like upsetting Norman. He hates students and he hates drinking so we pile in and order cocktails on account.'

Fair enough. Who were all them?

'*Who were all them?* Glad I took a course with *you* Max. They're the actors from my course. I don't mean actors, they're just freaks doing what I do.'

Why don't you take *my* course again? Killer reading series, look.

'Nah I want to try acting. Anyway I can always come to your stuff, it's not like it's official, we don't get credits.'

You *can* come, are you *going to*?

'To her? Hell yes. Money penny wants you.'

Over at Reception, Kerri's quietly beckoning. The boy at the bar is querying something, while Emily has drifted off to peer at the cheap prints on the walls.

She's signed herself in *Mrs Adam, Amherst*, which got the desk-boy confused.

It's fine, (I say) she can say she's who she likes. Right, Miss Dickinson?

We wrongly assumed she'd heard none of this, instead of all, and she turns again with that downward smile not quite meeting our eyes: 'I've lately come to the conclusion that I'm Eve, alias Mrs Adam.'

Neither Kerri nor the boy understand why she'd say that, but Mimi snorts with appreciation from across the room, so Emily waves this cheerfully her way: 'You know there's no account of her death in the Bible. Why am I not Eve?'

Mimi grins in support, while Kerri offers to show our Guest upstairs to the Bluebell Room. As they're ascending out of earshot I slide in opposite my former student rolling her roll-up.

Not going to smoke that in here, are you?

'Not going to say that in here, are you, so look I have this problem,' and she takes out a piece of pale blue paper, flattens it face up. 'Been sent this valentine that's just a fail in three ways. First I don't do valentines, second it's October, three it blows.'

(I read it and well yes) Why do you think it's a valentine, it doesn't say it is.

'Alright it's just a poem, but still Max, come on, it's got *love* in it look.'

Is it from Orlando?

'Yeah alright four ways.'

Why don't you ask him to stop?

She licks along her liquorice rizla, 'I want him to know he ought to.'

How will he if you don't tell him?

'If I tell him it's too late.'

Like you say, you have a problem. What can I do?

'Not your circus, not your monkeys. Can I smoke this out in the world?'

Sure Mimi. You smoke it out in the world.

*

I forgot to ask Mimi where the library was – like she'd know – but it didn't matter for when Kerri brought our Guest, now all in white and looking much more like herself, treading down from upstairs, round about the tables and out through the jingling door, the Library's where we were heading.

Kerri asked polite questions on the way:

'How long have you been away from home, Miss Dickinson?'

'Been nearly six weeks,' she said briskly, then I felt her voice begin to clot with sorrow, 'a longer time than I was ever away. Kind of *gone-to-Kansas* feeling.'

Not over the rainbow then (say I).

We're walking east we three, over the Cross, leaving the pub behind on the left, and then upward on a slight gradient, curving into trees. It's getting quite gloomy by now, more blue than grey, and I'm pretending I know there'll come a library soon – but everything else is real, and the small voice I hear is even running with my thoughts.

'I was very homesick for a few days, but I'm now quite happy. If I can be happy when absent from my... I have a very dear home. Love for them sets the blister in my throat.'

That'll do it for sure.

We seem to have passed the outskirts of the village now, the last houses, a barn or two, and I'm wondering where this library is, where the signs are, what the time is, when we reach a little collection of stalls set back in a leafy space all carpeted with coloured mats. There are old books on every stall, twelve stalls, volumes and volumes, and great swathes of canvas thrown back behind the hardwood frames as if to protect them when needed. They'll be needed soon, the day is ending and there's dampness in the air.

This is all the library is.

I mean to say that aloud but don't know if it's a question, or a horrified question, or a sad statement, or a sigh of the times. The reaction of our visitor sends all those four packing, for she just stares, palms raised, in on a miracle, quoting in delight: 'And *I saw the Heavens opened...*'

She advances on the first stall and starts to trace her finger along the spines, as Kerri murmurs to me discreetly 'Keep an eye on the clock...'

We've got a good hour, I say cheerily, we've got a *wondrous* hour.

'Wondrous forty minutes,' goes Kerri, doing up her coat.

'An hour for books,' says Emily, absorbed.

She starts finding things of interest: eight big black volumes of Shakespeare – 'why clasp any hand but this?' – a battered blue book she takes and weighs in her palm – 'of Poe I know too little to think' – a tattered Byron with the spine gone – 'I've heard it argued that the poet's genius lay in his foot, as the bee's prong and his song... are you stronger than these?' – right at me, making me stronger from foot to forehead – then a dozen hefty red titles – 'Father gave me quite a trimming about Charles Dickens and these modern literati' – which of course we all three smile at for different reasons, especially when she wags her finger and sounds an old soul's Yankee voice: 'nothing compared to past generations that flourished when *I* was a boy!'

She reads for a while and I try not to stare at her reading. Kerri shuffles her feet a bit to show it's cold and time's troops are marching by. I ask Emily if her parents encouraged her to read, and she closes the book she was reading. 'My mother doesn't care for thought, and father...' She sets the book back neatly where it was. 'Too busy with his briefs to notice what we do. He buys me many books but begs me not to read them, he fears they joggle the mind.'

The wind gets up and dark leaves blow about her ankles. She watches till they settle.

'No one taught me,' she says.

I feel a drop of rain. It's too dark to read a thing now.

She asks how one may borrow from this library and we both simply spread our hands to say *do what on earth you please*, so she chooses a dense little brown volume from the shelf, comes over and drops it straight into Kerri's coat pocket. I could see the name on the spine in golden, GEORGE ELIOT, but not which one it was, and I'd forget to ever ask. But 'a little granite book to lean on,' was what she said to Kerri. Then she insisted on joining in with us pulling the covers over the stalls, and tying

them in place with all these frayed black ropes.

*

‘My life closed twice before its close –
It yet remains to see
If Immortality unveil
A third event to me.

So huge, so hopeless to conceive
As these that twice befell.
Parting is all we know of heaven,
And all we need of hell.’

Her voice doesn't so much cease as disappear and she sits down between the tall lit candles in the chilly hall. We burst into acclaim, I start musing on whether it's possible to rig up applause on a loop, which I could maybe control from a switch at my seat. For this will never bloody suffice. I make do with clapping like a loon, nobly supported by my tiny class (or most of them, Barry's not turned up again, nor has Samira, nor Ollie) along with two or three *Academy* girls at the front including long fair Isabella my one-time student. The desk-boy from the Inn came, bless him, but I see him creeping out now the reading's over. And a portly bearded man in a hat I noticed earlier in the pub. Mimi slid in at the back about halfway through, the worse for wear I thought, and loudly requested 'that one with the fly' to which request the poet politely acceded.

I'm afraid the applause will stop if I stop, so I twine my arm through a chair-back to carry it to the stage and keep clumsily clapping away. When I lower the chair down nearby the poet I'm still at it, last man standing, then I sit.

A quite incredible reading, Miss Dickinson! I'm sure you all have questions before we adjourn to the Saddlers Inn? So, any questions...

This, as in all poetry readings, silences Creation.

How about I start us off... Um, Miss Dickinson, this maybe sounds silly, well it does now – ha! – but what do you like to have *around* you when you write?

‘For companions?’

I nod and she smiles downward as if she'll say nothing... Then:

‘Hills, and the sundown, and a dog as large as myself, that my father

bought me.'

The audience love this, and she looks right at them. 'They're better than beings, because they know but don't tell.'

A dog person not a cat person then (I play safe to the pet lobby) and Emily shudders to confirm the impression: 'My ideal cat has a huge rat in its mouth, just going out of sight.'

Some dog-lovers sway with vindication as she adds: 'though going out of sight in itself has a peculiar charm,' which leaves everyone blankly smiling. 'Carl would please you,' she tells the front row, 'he's dumb, and brave.'

One of the Academy girls asks with biro poised: 'Miss Dickinson whom would you regard as your main influences.'

She smiles: 'For poets I have Keats, and Mr and Mrs Browning' (and Lily happily hisses '*Keats!*' along the chairs to show them she remembers life a week ago) 'for prose, Mr Ruskin, Sir Thomas Browne, and the *Revelations*.'

'What about Whitman?' Heath asks flatly, as if she had it coming.

She puts her hands together in her lap. 'Mr Whitman, Mr Whitman...' she ponders, only to reveal with quite a fierce little smile to no one, 'I never read his book but was told it was *disgraceful!*'

Her new devotees laugh who've not read him either, but Heath has, and sits there. She notices his stillness:

'Perhaps you smile at me. I had no monarch in my life, and can't rule myself.'

Heath looks uncomfortable and nods by way of support.

'Could you tell me how to grow?' she asks him, innocent of mischief.

Blindsided, he looks grave, stares away, quits the field.

'Or is it unconveyed,' she says, looking up at the rafters, 'like melody or witchcraft... I've no tribunal.'

All smile amiably as she passeth understanding.

Breezily I ask if she follows world affairs, and she makes that clear as day: 'Won't you please tell me who the candidate for President is?'

We all mention names you know and the candles cringe with shame.

'I don't know anything more about the affairs in the world than if I were in a trance. Do you know of any nation about to besiege South Hadley? If so, do inform me – I'd be glad of a chance to escape, if we're to be stormed.'

Out of the laughter Caroline ventures: 'Emily, if I may, when you say your soul selects its own society, do you mean you rather prefer your own company to, well, to company? Do you think you have a tendency to avoid

people?’

I don’t expect her to agree quite but what do I know? ‘They talk of hallowed things, aloud, and embarrass my dog. He and I don’t object to them, if they’ll exist their side.’

Lily digs it and ventures ‘How d’you like *know* good poetry when you see it?’

Emily shakes her head slowly, then breathes in sharply – ‘If I – read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that’s poetry. If I feel physically as if – the top of my head were taken off! I know that’s poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?’

The consensus murmurs there is not, and then she closes her eyes and sighs from memory: ‘Though earth and man were gone, and suns and universes ceased to be, and Thou wert left alone, every existence would exist in Thee.’

(There’s a space for mooring in awe which is duly filled, while I find some recklessness to hand) Is that a new poem, Miss Dickinson?

She smiles sadly, and it hits me too late, not hers at all –

‘Gigantic Emily Brontë...’ (We all nod, we knew that) ‘Of whom Charlotte said: *Full of ruth for others, on herself she had no mercy.*’

Caroline is nodding wisely, and Lily pipes up: ‘Bit random but: when you say about hearing a fly when you died right? which is *mentally* good, and about life closing twice and that? like, what is it you *mean* if that’s not moronic.’

Emily frowned, then thought, then said she’d tell a little story, of a woman who came to her door in Amherst one morning, ‘an Indian woman with gay baskets and a – dazzling baby, at the kitchen door. Her little boy *once died*, she said, death to her – *dispelling* him. I asked her what the baby liked, and she said – *to step...*’

Lily devilishly shivers, when a husky voice from the back inquires: ‘You ever send a valentine?’

The audience frowns and giggles and turns, enjoying that question, and I notice both Caroline and Heath staring back curiously at unbothered Mimi for longer than they need to. I assumed everyone knew everyone, as we do when we know no one.

Sure she sent a valentine:

‘Put down the apple, Adam,

And come away with me;
So shalt thou have a pippin
From off my father's tree...'

She may not have meant to but she says this straight at Niall, who visibly freezes in the beam. His eyes are wider than I've seen them. His shy paralysis seems to slow the atmosphere, and though she's no longer looking at him, the expression on his face is *you and me in the dark together* – out of which she mines a gem for him and him only: 'I work to drive the awe away. Yet – awe – impels the work.'

*

On the short walk to the Saddlers from the village hall – Emily suggested we prolong it by walking the long way clockwise round the lamp-lit oval green – several of her listeners made their private move towards her side, but I noticed that the one she sought out and found was Heath. By the time I reached them, rather fearing he might be indelicate or rude in some way, they were parting most politely: 'I've read nothing of Turgenev's,' I heard her say, 'but thank you for telling me – I will seek him immediately.'

She then walked some slow yards with Iona McNair, who said she liked that bracelet very much, and the poet, having touched Iona's white scarf and wondered at the material, said gaily: 'Santa Claus was *very* polite to me last Christmas. I hung up my stocking on the bedpost as usual – I had a perfume bag, a bottle of otto-of-rose to go with it, a sheet of music, a china mug with *Forget me not* upon it, a watch case...' she couldn't remember for a moment and now everyone was listening... 'Abundance of candy! Also two hearts at the bottom of it all, which I thought looked rather ominous.'

Lily came up explaining why last Christmas in Camden Town was a *total mare*, then asked her, before I could do anything, how she went about being published, to which Emily cheerfully pronounced: 'Two editors of journals came to my father's house and asked me for my mind, and when I asked them *why* – they said they'd use it for the world.'

She chuckled at this sufficing answer, so Lily did, actually I did, then one of the Academy girls quickened her pace and asked if Emily enjoyed a bit of – we couldn't catch what – to which she said: 'To live is so startling, it leaves little room for other occupations!' and all wondered and jested as to what had been asked, and all jingled and jangled into the inn so pleased they'd chosen to attend.

*

We'd lost a few by now. Niall, who had shied away – *shying* was Niall's active verb – Heath, who parted from the poet with a stiff male bow from some bygone century in his mind, the Academy girls who'd got all their answers, and Mimi, who'd had her fun. Lily, Bella, Iona and Caroline sat down around a table set for tomorrow's breakfast. The desk-boy listened from Reception as he doodled in a ledger. Our company was briefly augmented by Barry Wilby, who dropped by to make his apologies – 'duties, Teacherman, beaucoup de duties' – and wanted to ask 'Mrs Dixon where she gets her ideas' – but at that point I called a halt, for the lady looked fatigued and on our time not hers.

All four women rose to escort her upstairs, and Barry cried 'Another day!' and though I summoned up the speech to tell her how I felt, by the time those words came in their nervous Sunday best I stood alone, in the cold on the lamp-lit village green, watching her one amber square of light go on in the wooden roof of the inn. I'd done all I could do with a smile. I didn't expect to be here in the morning. I waited till her room went dark.

*

On the way back I swing by Student Services – Kerri's given me a key now and I can pick up what's there. These are.

Samira Sharma: 'I Have the "Hots" for Lily'*

If we all spent a night in here
I would stay awake until you sleep
and then I would overcome my fear
and cut a red hair for me to keep.

(*I do NOT have the hots for Lily.)

_____ (I. McNair, Poetry/Maxwell)

I collect them, as if I'll need them, if I'm dead I may well need them, and I lock the office behind me.

*

At the end of his *Letter to a Young Contributor* Thomas Higginson wrote the following, and I thought I'd tape it to my bedroom wall before turning in for the night. He couldn't figure out anything either – and with his one great Young Contributor he both grasped and missed his chance – but he sensed there was a place where it would matter to have tried. He was a famous abolitionist.

War or peace, fame or forgetfulness, can bring no real injury to one who has formed the fixed purpose to live nobly day by day. I fancy that in some other realm of existence we may look back with some kind interest on this scene of our earlier life, and say to one another, – 'Do you remember yonder planet, where once we went to school?'

*

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Week Three – October 10th

I'm wondering why the sky is blue.

I always know why it isn't when it isn't but I've woken and it is, I'm looking at it.

Or I was looking at it, now I'm *gazing into* it, sky did that to the verb, blue did that to the preposition, bequeathed it time and sweetness and reach, not bad going for empty space. I'm gazing into blue sky.

With the deep breaths I concede: it's October, autumn, fall, falling, landing, landed. Thursday again. I'm alive in the sense of being where I was, I'm still contracted, *hired* in some shape or form – there'll be a class to teach.

But since something brought me here, thought why to, chose when to, there must be a reason it was cloudy before and now it's perfectly fine. What chose me for this – didn't it choose the weather too? Now *there's* a way in. Tap the void on the shoulder, see what turns around.

The void has personality or not, is present or not. Give it a capital V and it's *The Void!* that V lights out for the visible horizon, the *oid* is deep enough for aliens to swim in, see? on speaking terms already –

But small v, the void? doesn't want to be talked to.

Here I am, perched on the bed upon my tartan coverlet, my trusty flying carpet that sailed me here through the galaxy. I pat it like my dog. I give *everything there is* a personality, I decide to meet them all, I place them all along a zodiac of character and yet the void's a void? *My own heart let me have more pity on...*

Everything is someone. Colours, cutlery, capital letters. A's complacent, B indignant, C tricky, D worthy, I can't help this, never could. The hot tap thinks the cold tap's common, the cold tap thinks the hot tap's precious. I back out of my small bathroom peacemaking – *you're both right* for pete's sake – my fingers are clannish brothers with a secret, my toes a mum and her babies, my slippers hush me: *pipe down they're trying to sleep*, and yet the void's a void? Perhaps that's all that humans do, fill the space with folks to meet... *My own heart let me have more pity on...*

Something brought me here. Or an accident befell me and while I wait to be *well* – well what? – something keeps me here. While it keeps me here I do this work. Why should I do it? Do I grow old if I don't? Do I grow old if I do?

The sky is blue. If it stays like this all day I will have to respond, lead my students out of doors, start walking and not stop, breast the horizon like a tape and keep running, seek and find the trail of what brought me here, ask questions till it's black and even *I've* been left behind.

I have to start considering how one departs this place. Ah:

My own heart let me have more pity on; let
Me live to my sad self hereafter kind,
Charitable; not live this tormented mind
With this tormented mind tormenting yet...

Look whose books are open on my desk in the grand old sunlight. Father Gerard Manley Hopkins, of the Society of Jesus. He is coming here today, *Hopkins*, which he furthermore can't be, so I had better prepare some questions.

I cast for comfort I can no more get
By groping round my comfortless, than blind

Eyes in their dark can day or thirst can find
Thirst's all-in-all in all a world of wet...

Where I'm from I don't believe a *word* the little priest believed. Not a word, not *The Word*. And yet to subtract *what that was* from his work leaves the poems still immensely standing, gold, white-gold cathedrals in splendour, numberless cathedrals throng an infinite sunny common. There I worship daily, hurrying through shadow. How do I believe?

I remember, from where I'm from, sitting in a bedroom while my small child was trying to sleep. It was Christmas Eve in England at the turn of the century. She believed what children do. Make-believe, made to believe. A great old red-and-silver stocking was draped at the bottom of the bed. Her mouth was open on the pillow, her breaths trembling, mine were steady, eyes shut. *I must organize the magic in an hour or so, stay awake to sort the miracle, get in costume, play the part...*

I am Father Christmas, and so is Father Christmas. She and I knew different worlds, worlds that *couldn't both be so*. Between them something poured and streamed – *belief* one way, *compassion* the other, and now they both flow both ways, poor believer, poor nothing...

Soul, self; come, poor Jackself, I do advise
You, jaded, let be; call off thoughts awhile
Elsewhere; leave comfort root-room; let joy size
At God knows when to God knows what; whose smile
's not wrung, see you; unforeseen times rather – as skies
Betweenpie mountains – lights a lovely mile.

These words are still surrounded by what surrounded them. It surrounds me too, and it wore blue this morning, cloudless, all its mountains moved, I need coffee, I need orange juice – I

want my *betweenpie* – I have three appointments, I am not where you still are, I have quietly shut the door and am off on my zigzag path.

*

The Saddlers is busy with breakfasters, I see the clock says eleven-twenty, these are brunchers brunching. I take a little table in the midst of it all. There are two couples, one with a child, three young men in anoraks, a grave old chap my age who smiles, ha! the old ones are the best, it's only me in a gilded mirror. All except he and I are busy and chatty with the clement weather, its – clemency? Its mercy? If it's mercy, what had we done?

I find myself at the Reception desk, leafing through the Book.

Mrs Adam Amherst Massachusetts October Third.

So she was here, I knew that.

'That's not her real name, sir,' points out the desk-boy.

Oh is it not.

'Doom is the house without the door, it enters from the sun,' he adds, evidently changed for life in his black ring-neck sweater.

Very much so (I say). Dust is the only secret.

'Parting is all we need of hell.'

I guess. If you work on Reception. (He looks hurt and I smile to heal) Your own self you should have more pity on.

'I've not learned that one, sir.'

That was me. I'm a poet too.

'Sounds good. At the Academy?'

No, I teach in a room off the village hall. There's a kettle, d'you have a Father Hopkins staying here tonight?

'I'm checking that, sir... no, sir. Actually there's no one.'

*

Samira meets me at the Cross Keys. I suggest we sit in the garden but she has allergies, so I watch the blessed morning through a porthole window, then turn as she's unclicking a poem from a ring-binder. She's wearing a turquoise headscarf. She sits back, enlaces her fingers in conference, and waits till she herself says:

'It's a sonnet.'

Which is its problem.

'Explain?'

A sonnet doesn't have to know *exactly* where it's going, Samira, but it's aware it's a sonnet. It's put its good shoes on, has stood up in them. Whereas in this – emotions crash in, thoughts crash in – you didn't *mean* them to – there should be white space they come to fill, and gaps of bites they leave behind. The creature of this poem is being buffeted, assailed, it's not in control of matters. It didn't *choose* to write this, it got *chosen to by you*. I'd break it up into couplets or three-liners, you can keep it bound with your rhymes and that, they can reach across the drops. Whoever it's about –

'It's not about anyone.'

Then, the, *You* in it – the *You* in it doesn't know or care it's a sonnet and shouldn't be helping it to set like –

'It's not about anyone.'

– cake. Fine. Good.

'There isn't anyone.'

Then – *be afraid there's no one* (I do the scary voice)

‘There isn’t no one either.’

Fine. So *show* me no one. Can I meet him? (whoops)

‘Who says it’s a him? Not that it matters, it’s not.’ She takes the poem back: ‘Can I ask when you will return our last assignments?’

What.

‘When we were made to hate someone, or pity them, or have *the hots*.’

It’s just an exercise, you don’t need it back. Jump a hurdle, tone a muscle.

‘I don’t have the hots.’

Did you like that exercise?

‘I don’t trust dice. I can’t write things I don’t feel. I don’t want things out there that may be used against me.’

*

Heath doesn’t want to sit outside either so he slides in where she was. He already has a beer but didn’t bring any poems.

‘Working on something major.’

I look forward to it.

‘Not for you, for format.’

Oh right. What’s Format.

‘Rupture equals structure. Monday afternoons. Me and Bronzo take it.’

Lily, I’m with you, The Academy. Rupture equals what?

‘The equals is an equals sign, it doesn’t say equals, it’s *rupture = structure*.’

And Format is – the subject?

‘*format*’s the professor. Small f, italics. He’s cool. He doesn’t self-identify as female or male or anything. He says he has a

first name but we have to solve it, he's left clues all round the village.'

I think you'll find it's Wayne.

'Excuse me?'

Nothing. Why are you taking my course if it doesn't get you any credits.

'Why? *format* said you're old school. Good to know what I'm up against.'

Up against? You're not up against me, Heath.

'That's not your decision, is it.'

Guess not. What else did *format* say.

'He said you only know three things but you really fucking know them.'

Way to go, *format*. That does sound like me.

*

Niall sat watching us through his fringe for a while, leaning by the bar, then when Heath stood up he came over. The two of them did some three-part fist thing, 'sup...sup,' men have to do nowadays, and then Heath moved off and Niall sat.

What *is* up? I wonder.

'I like it here,' he mutters, surprising us both.

It's hard to tell if you do.

'No, because if I didn't I'd leave, I'd go somewhere where I did.'

Somewhere where, where would you go, Niall.

'Away.'

Away... (I have to ask, and you have to blame the blue sky)
Niall I don't want you to take this the wrong way but I don't know where I am or how I got here.

‘Oh I know.’

You *know* where we are and how we got here?

‘No I know you *don’t* know. I know that about everyone.’

Sure. Do you know when we can leave?

‘At the end of term, I suppose.’

So will we be home for Christmas, Niall?

‘I thought you’d know, at your age.’

I thought I’d know at my age.

‘Also,’ he falters, ‘I don’t – much want to be home for Christmas.’

Oh. Okay. Okay if *I* am? Feel free to join us. Mulled wine, trimmings, Monopoly, Triv.

At a loss, he rubs his chin as if testing for stubble. There isn’t any, I back off the poor soul:

Guess you don’t know anything either.

‘I know every picture on the walls of this pub and could tell you them if you asked me.’ Though I don’t, he shuts his eyes. ‘Left of the door: horses streaming over a hedge. Next a lady in Edwardian costume. Then a high mountain scene painted by a local. Behind me a map of the clans of Scotland. A white cow with three brown patches – ’

Show me a poem eh man.

He sighs like he’d hoped I’d forgotten. Digs two out, stares, disowns them as he passes them over.

But they’re damn good. Short lines trying to be free, blown back in on themselves, blown back at line’s end to fail and fray and try again, with the white space crying *stop there little sailor* till Niall hears it and has to.

I am about to tell him I think he’s really good at this *lark*.

And I tried not to, for as long as ever. There’s no going back

once someone's told you you're good at this *lark*. I looked right in his eyes through his fringe and still wouldn't tell him, I was grieving at my power.

*

Jackself will do this class outside. This may be the last blue day of the year, the last blue day of my life or the world's, we are going to find a field for it, a tree to shelter by, and the poets of all time can come and find us, maybe tell us where we are.

*

July 22 [1872]. Very hot, though the wind, which was south, dappled very sweetly on one's face and when I came out I seemed to put it on like a gown as a man puts on the shadow he walks into and hoods or hats himself with the shelter of a roof, a penthouse, or a copse of trees, I mean it rippled and fluttered like light linen, one could feel the folds and braids of it – and indeed a floating flag is like wind visible and what weeds are in a current; it gives it thew and fires it and bloods it in.

Hopkins' journals are rich and painterly – he painted – they bubble with his vivid scrutiny. In the spontaneity of the prose – the 'I seemed', 'I mean', 'indeed' – you hear the creature striving to set it all down *especially*, there's not usually much time for reflection, very little 'how this makes me feel', not even that much God – except when Wales looks so amazing from a hill he feels the need to convert it – anyway all his breath is taken up transporting beauty into words.

It was a lovely day: shires-long of pearled cloud under cloud, with a grey stroke underneath marking each row; beautiful blushing yellow in the straw of the uncut rye-fields, the wheat looking white and all the ears making a delicate and very true

crisping along the top and with just enough air stirring for them to come and go gently...

This isn't today's exercise, do it when I'm away, but you should stop right where you are and stare at something, not move until it's turned to words. Until it's turned to words so truly the thing itself floats home to heaven. You'll be crouching there forever but I *will* give you an A.

'An A means nothing these days,' Ollie calls out from where he's stretched in the grass.

An *A star* then.

'Got four of them already,' says Lily equally sadly.

An *actual* star then. I dunno, Polaris. Alpha Centauri.

'Keep talking,' and I do: Look, how bluebells make you *feel* isn't part of describing bluebells. Praising God isn't either. This is:

In the clough / through the light / they came in falls of sky-colour washing the brows and slacks of the ground with vein-blue, thickening at the double, vertical themselves and the young grass and brake fern combed vertical, but the brake struck the upright of all this with light winged transomes. It was a lovely sight. – The bluebells in your hand baffle you with their inscape, made to every sense –

Samira has her hand up.

We're sitting in a yellow-black meadow, by an oak tree. We walked twenty minutes south-east from the village to get here, Iona said she'd lead us like a nursery class, in a crocodile, she smiled and took the register, here miss, here miss, some of them held hands. On the way we passed a complex of sandy-coloured buildings, grassy squares and water features, which she saw me peering at.

‘The Academy,’ she said. ‘No dawdling.’

We left it behind us and walked over and over the meadow through the longer and longer grass to the greatest of seven trees. From here if you look back you see the long bored roofs of the student halls, the indignant tower of the church. To the east on the hillside I can see the far tunnel where the train appeared that time. The landscape is yellowy bright and peaceful, an autumn surprise.

I and Niall and Heath are in the shade of the oak, the rest spread out in the afternoon sun like they couldn’t go another step. Ollie’s lying face down and is not his cheerful self. I presume Samira is about to mention allergies again.

Yes Samira.

‘Hopkin says *It was a lovely sight*. That *is* how it makes Hopkin feel. That’s not pure description, which you implied it was.’

Good. Yes. Well. He’s taking a breath. Is Hopkins.

Lily looks up from her infinite daisy-chain: ‘You always have an answer.’

Yeah weird that.

‘And what does he mean by *inscape?*’ says someone, obviously.

I was waiting for someone to ask that.

So I find my place in a book I’ve had since school and boom out like a bird reminding all souls what we’ve come for:

I caught this morning morning’s minion, kingdom
of daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon,
in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and
striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing

In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,

As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the
hurl

and gliding

Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding

Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

'A-B-B-A-A-B-B-A,' Niall notes to himself: 'the rhyme
scheme.'

'You're havin a laugh,' says Lily.

'He's right,' says Ollie.

'Who asked you,' asks Lily Bronzo, and Heath says 'what's
inscape.'

I was sitting on the grass to read, now I'm kneeling and alert.
This is where poetry brings me, *upward* to my knees:

So three brand-new things you'll meet when you meet
Hopkins. *Inscape! Instress! Sprung Rhythm!* You can ask him
about the first two, they're his own words, or if you're shy go
and look in the books in the wood. I'm more interested in the
third.

'Should we be taking notes?' wonders Caroline from behind
great Jackie-O shades.

'It doesn't feel like class,' says Lily, poking a straw in her
juice-carton, 'it feels like coming outside for a story. It's too nice
to take notes guys.'

She's right. I tell them:

Newsflash, it's not October it's July! It's not autumn it's still
summer! I forbid any mention of coldness or darkness, the
colours *brown* and *orange* are not to be entertained!

'At least say those *in*-thing words again,' Caroline pleads, 'I
have *no* idea what they are.'

No!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a
billion

Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

The accents are for stress. They differ between editions, and he's not consistent with them, but we keep Emily's dashes so we keep Gerard's accents. Odd punctuation's always a signpost that something's not bedded down in the culture, something's bristling, woken up. For you don't have to read much Hopkins to see that – as with Emily, sixteen years older and three thousand miles away – the style stood in almost total isolation from the traditions and conventions of the time.

They went unknown. Emily left barely a mark on her day. Gerard wrote poems at Oxford, burned them all, trained to be and became a Jesuit, and after seven years' abnegation started writing poems again. But, apart from the odd glimpse in little journals, Father Hopkins S.J. saw nothing in print. His great friend Robert Bridges is now perhaps as well known for getting a volume of Hopkins published as he is for being one of the Poet Laureates. Poets Laureate. Whatever.

By then it's 1918, twenty-nine years after Hopkins. At last his lamp could shine as it should and now he stands where he stands.

'How's he getting here, do we know?' asks Caroline, and I don't. I haven't checked anything with Kerri, for damn the village hall I just wanted to be in the sunshine while it lasted.

Prosody lecture. Short. What I just read you, the first half of 'The Windhover', is clearly not iambic (da-DUM) or trochaic

(DAD-um) or dactylic (DA-da-dum) or anapestic (da-da-DUM) – which brings us to the end of my Prosody Lecture – but at various times it's any of these. It just deploys them where it needs to.

Hopkins – like me, as it happens – thought Greek rules of prosody were useless for English. What he wrote in he called Sprung Rhythm, the sources of which were alliterative Old English and rhyme-rich Old Welsh. Each stress is followed by one un-stress ('MOR-ning') or two un-stresses ('MAS-te-ry'), or three un-stresses ('RUNG up-on the'). These endlessly varying forms are deployed wherever Hopkins feels them or finds them.

Another word for this is, arguably, *prose*.

If you – like me again, as it happens – find it physically uncomfortable, literally nauseating – to apply rules of prosody to poetry, you can at least hear that the inner rhythms of a Hopkins poem change incessantly *like prose*.

And yet there's no major poet in English who sounds *less* like prose:

Summer ends now; now, barbarous in beauty, the stooks
rise

Around; up above, what wind-walks! what lovely
behavior

Of silk-sack clouds! has wilder, wilful-wavier
Meal-drift moulded ever and melted across skies?

I walk, I lift up, I lift up heart, eyes,

Down all that glory in the heavens to glean our
Saviour;

And, éyes, héart, what looks, what lips yet gave you a
Rapturous love's greeting of realer, of rounder replies?

Not prose. Well spotted. Stanzaic patterns, outrageous rhymes – how about *behaviour/wavier/Saviour/gave you a?* in your face, Byron – the alliteration, assonance – all these are strung too tight for that – but it's the *rhythm* we're looking at. Trying to make a *thing* of Sprung Rhythm, God forbid trying to write in it – feels like missing the point. Some poets want to know *how* they're doing what they're doing. I don't, Hopkins did, he was a skilled draughtsman.

Here's the creature turning its head, scratching and gasping as its scribbles in a journal:

(Hey look) ***Summer ends now; now, barbarous in beauty, the stooks rise around;*** (look up there) ***up above, what wind-walks!*** (oh my) ***what lovely behavior of silk-sack clouds!*** (I wonder) ***has wilder, willful-wavier*** (what's it like?) ***meal-drift moulded ever and melted across skies?***

That seems to me like his journal *on fire*. As if he retrospectively named something that burst from him like water from, well, a *spring* – ecstatic heightened *prose* that he shaped into verse-forms.

What would a poet look like if he or she wrote in ecstatic heightened prose that *wasn't* shaped into verse-forms?

For the lands, and for these passionate days, and for myself,
Now I awhile return to thee, O soil of Autumn fields,
Reclining on thy breast, giving myself to thee,
Answering the pulses of thy sane and equable heart,
Tuning a verse for thee...

I wait a bit. When the wind blows and chills us I remember it's October, but am damned if I'll be cold. The sun is shining and I'm listening.

Heath is sitting there cross-legged, head down, head up:

‘Whitman.’

Go, Mr Bannen. The most interesting poet to compare Hopkins with isn't Alfred Lord Tennyson, or Master Robert Browning, the garlanded superstars of his day – or Dylan Thomas, an echo down the valley – but Long Island's Walter Whitman, another spring, arguably the wellspring of American free verse, and ours too.

Most of the canonical poets I grew up on set their souls to verse, in forms that existed already – sonnets, songs, ballads, pentameters. They stripped and breathed and stepped in a wide running river. Not Hopkins and not Whitman. Hopkins' forms are strained into existence to bear the force of his spiritual joys and miseries, Whitman's to carry the surge of his awe at earthly plenty. One verse is highly formal, the other seems in flight from any form at all, but they strike me as kindred powers.

For neither poet are the resources of the poetry of his day *enough*.

When I read the best free verse I hear eddies of this feeling, declined perhaps, but echoes of its force – *I need this fresh form of mine to carry what I feel alone*. This is why so many of the great free verse writers, the originators, seem gnarled and unique, often hard to fathom as people. It's not a small thing to cry this into the Void – let alone the void – *there is nothing YET BEEN MADE to carry my goddamned song!*

People are staring.

Of course Hopkins is not a writer of free verse, come on, and only I would claim him as one of its forebears (and only when teaching outside in a field in a dream in a coma) but while you listen to some more – he may not want to read us any poems, he may be shy, he may not come at all – maybe bear in mind *these* things: rap, performance, hip-hop, their

ingenuity, their bravado, the babble of close sounds, one word helplessly hatching its neighbour, see if anything strikes you as cousin to this work.

And before that will someone please open the Pimms, we are here to pretend it's summer.

And they do, and Iona's sending round cloudy plastic beakers blue pink and green, and Lily's pouring the Pimms in a jug, and Caroline's adding the chalky lemonade, the fruit dropping in in a clump with a splash, and everyone moves from one posture to the next to accept the gift in the long dry grass, though Barry Wilby mumbles, frowning at some private mishap, 'Got me dandelion'n'burdock,' and the breeze comes, leaves flutter and fall and no one says so, and I can't stay here forever, I'll be off soon, I will find out where I am and be off soon, get back to my dear life but in the meantime...

How to keep – is there any any, is there none such, nowhere
known some, bow or brooch or braid or brace, lace,
latch

or catch or key to keep

Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty, ... from
vanishing away? O is there no frowning of these wrinkles,
ranked wrinkles deep, Down? no waving off of these most
mournful messengers, still

messengers, sad and stealing messengers of grey?

No there's none, there's none, O no there's none,

Nor can you long be, what you now are, called fair...

There is a pressure from above – the direction from which a believer feels a Presence – a divine downward pressure on the language. This is why the words can't move far, or change much, it's like the Presence forcing time into stone into minerals into jewels – *bow brooch braid brace lace latch catch*

key keep – bursting chrysalises into butterflies – *lace latch catch key keep back BEAUTY BEAUTY BEAUTY* – there is a religious gladness in succumbing to this pressure, a bliss in *undergoing* it, *undertaking* it, I shall inch from word to word like an insect, feeling every one though it pleases me or pains me, I shall let each word be heated by the Light as it passes, glow red and glow no more, harm and hurt and heal and help me!

After seven years of poetic silence, when he thought verse incompatible with his calling as a priest, two things happened to Hopkins. He dwelt on the work of the medieval scholar Duns Scotus, which made him think again, then the drowning of five nuns in a Thames estuary shipwreck forced *this* from the dark –

Thou mastering me
God! giver of breath and bread;
World's strand, sway of the sea;
Lord of living and dead;
Thou hast bound bones and veins in me, fastened me flesh,
And after it almost unmade, what with dread,
Thy doing; and dost thou touch me afresh?
Over again I feel thy finger and find thee.

I did say yes
O at lightning and lashed rod;
Thou heardst me truer than tongue confess
Thy terror, O Christ, O God;
Thou knowest the walls, altar and hour and night:
The swoon of a heart that the sweep and the hurl of thee
trod
Hard down with a horror of height:
And the midriff astrain with leaning of, laced with fire of

stress.

The frown of his face
Before me, the hurtle of hell
Behind, where, where was a, where was a place?
I whirled out wings that spell
And fled with a fling of the heart to the heart of the Host.
My heart, but you were dovewinged, I can tell,
Carrier-witted, I am bold to boast,
To flash from the flame to the flame then, tower from the
grace
to the grace.

I am soft sift
In an hourglass

So am *I*, grace or not, and I will attest in purgatory, in hell – failing these when I make it home to Angel – that the reason this poem is 280 lines long, far longer than anything else of his and way longer than it needs to be, is his boundless joy at *making verse again*. Any true poet will tell you that, the believers and the non: it's the joy of mastery fused with the bliss of being mastered, and if not by God by language, by the creditors of oxygen, by time that's stopped to listen.

*

'As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;

Selves — goes itself; *myself it* speaks and spells,
Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came...*

He didn't come by train or carriage, he was suddenly there far-off on the hillside, a slight figure resolving as we chatted and watched into a short fair-haired gent approaching in the trim, fastened clothes of his day. By that time Kerri Bedward had hurried here from the village, from the opposite direction, escorted by the beaming stranger in his anorak, saying nothing. Kerri was wondering where on earth we'd got to, so of course I said:

On earth we got to here.

'The reading's in the village hall.'

No it isn't, it's right here in the village field (I told her with the late-summer freedom of the dream I'm having).

Then the beaming guy in the anorak saying nothing said politely: 'Academy property, this meadow as it goes, but you're more than welcome to use it, Mr Maxwell, just inform us next time.'

I'm informing you by being here. And there is no next time, there's only time. Here comes Father Hopkins.

The beaming guy mislaid his beam, reset it, then turned to face wherever it was needed next. Kerri walked forward in a sulk to meet our arriving guest, and Iona, a better lady than me, passed me lemonade to offer him.

*

'I say móre: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: thát keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —
Chríst — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his

To the Father through the features of men's faces.'

He lowered his book down and we clapped. He'd said he'd read for ten minutes but he read for almost twenty. Barry unzipped a big blue sports-bag that turned out to be full of rolls and fruits in paper bags, and we sat around all lunching, *dining*, the sun was lower now than summer, it's autumn, *fall*, it was trying to say it kindly.

I didn't know how to address him, so I plunged in at the height: Father Hopkins, would it be all right if my students asked some questions?

Of course he'd just taken a big bite of a roll so we all laughed as he nodded and waved with a muffled yes, and Iona started out with the understatement of the ages: 'It's so lovely to hear you read your work.'

He'd sat down in the shade but his eyes were in the late sun now and he shielded them as he sought her in the blaze:

'My verse is less to be read than heard,' he began politely,

See? (I hissed to Lily who was nearby) he's a *performance poet*...

'It's oratorical, the rhythm. I don't write for the public...'

'Their loss, eh!' Barry chortled, and I cut in before he could ask Dr Hoskins where he gets his ideas –

Wouldn't you *like* people to read you?

He smiled and shrugged, 'It's the holier lot, to be unknown.' He meant to leave it at that but couldn't quite: 'it always seems to me that poetry's unprofessional,'

You mean it isn't a profession?

Far off towards the village I glimpsed the Academy chap crossing the field with Kerri. To do what instead of *this*? Hopkins went on:

'That's what I've said to myself, not others to me. No doubt if

I kept producing I should have to ask myself what I meant to *do* with it all – but I've long been at a standstill, and so the things lie.'

Samira had her hand up, but Lily advanced, blocking his view of her, and wagging grapes at him: '*After* you've had some grapes, can you say about what it was like to burn all your poems that time cos I could never do that even when they're rubbish I do like burning things just not my own shit right?'

He lowered a branch of grapes to his palm, and said nothing for a moment.

There's nothing you have to answer, I said: Samira what's your question?

Lily glanced round with scorn and Samira's eyes flashed back in retort:

'I want to know what Sprung Rhythm is, it's not been properly explained at all.'

At this the poet looked up, put a grape in his mouth and thought a little, said this, as if trying to remember, as if trying to piece together, 'Winter of '75... the *Deutschland*, in the mouth of the Thames... My rector said he wished someone would write a poem on the subject. I'd – long had, haunting my ear – the echo of a new rhythm. Which now I realized on paper.'

Samira scribbled in shorthand, looked up, ready for more.

'It consists in – scanning by accents or stresses alone – without any account of the number of syllables. A foot may be one strong syllable, or many light and one strong. I don't say the idea's new – there are hints of it in music, in nursery rhymes. *Ding, dong, bell; Pussy's in the well, Who put her in? Little Johnny Thin.*'

Someone snickered and he broke off shyly. I rushed to his aid:

Got that, everyone? *Now* it's explained.

But it wasn't, for he added:

'It's the nearest to the – native, natural rhythm of speech, the least forced – the most rhetorical and emphatic.'

Ollie spoke: 'Where did you sort of – get it from, Brother Gerard?' ('Get *it from*,' Lily scoffed, 'like on eBay')

'So far as I know,' said Hopkins, reaching for his lemonade, 'it existed in full force in Anglo Saxon verse... in great beauty. In *Piers Ploughman* –'

A fine work (I told them) I studied it at Oxford –

'– in a degraded and doggerel shape.'

Oh. He ploughed on as the students giggled and he brushed away old Langland: 'I'm coming to the conclusion that it's not worth reading.'

'There's *you* told, chief,' Lily gleefully whispered, and Gerard, sensing, said kindly to me: 'Of Oxford I was very fond. I became a Catholic there.'

You were Balliol (I ventured) I was Worcester (as we do) hey we were neighbours!

Heath couldn't give a shit: 'What d'you reckon to Whitman.'

'How about Dylan Thomas?' piped up Ollie and I said stick with Whitman.

'He don't *know* about Dylan Thomas,' said Barry Wilby out of the blue.

Whitman (I said again), what do you think *he's* up to?

Gerard sighed at length and got comfortable on the rug.

'I can't have read more than half a dozen pieces. Enough.'

'Enough for what,' said Heath the way Heath does.

'To give a strong impression of – his marked, original manner. In particular his rhythm.'

Do you think it resembles yours? (I wondered.)

He had the last of his grapes and threw the sprig off in the meadow.

‘I always knew in my heart Walt Whitman’s mind to be – more like my own than any other man living.’

He let that take its course. Then he smiled around our rapt assembly: ‘As he’s a very great scoundrel this isn’t a pleasant confession. Also makes me more desirous to read him – and more determined that I won’t.’

‘Ha! Why’s he a *scoundrel*?’ Lily wanted to know, and Hopkins shook his head as if he’d gone too far and let’s not stray from the work. He leaned and took a piece of Dutch cheese Iona had cut for him and held out on the cheeseboard.

‘There’s something in my long lines like his. That the one would remind people of the other. Both are irregular rhythms. There the likeness ends.’

‘D’you *rate* it though,’ Heath pressed him.

‘His – his *savage* style has advantages, and he’s chosen it, he says so. But you can’t eat your cake and keep it. He eats his offhand, I keep mine. I notice a preference for the alexandrine.’

Long line, six stresses –

He nodded: ‘I’ve the same preference. I came to it by degrees, I didn’t take it from him.’

(Enough on Whitman) You know, Father Hopkins, I once found a form I couldn’t stop with, like you, I mean, with sprung rhythm, for me it was terza rima – it seemed infinite to me.

He looked puzzled.

‘English terza rima is – so far as I’ve seen it – badly made and tedious.’

Well (I said, nettled into the following nonsense) it maybe was, then, before, I mean but that was before, I mean, who knows, I’ve not done it yet oh and Shelley, Ode to the West