

The
Paradise
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-

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A Plain in the Land of Shinar

And there sprang a river out of Eden to water the garden...

I think of men in Shinar piling bricks
To pierce low-lying cloud. Books pile on books;
 Sophisticated scholars
Clear up obscurities with bright remarks;

Down to my daughter on the floor who tries
To make her childish letters the right size;
 Down to her frowning father
Slowly refurbishing some antique phrase –

Nostalgic for the clarity again
Of that sunshiny effortless domain
 The Source of all earth's rivers
Watered, but not for long, and not again.

Horatian

He laughs at land and lucre, gold, and even
Carved ivories imported from the East;
And he mocks men and mazy rivers
Chafing in channels they've chosen. Best,

According to this paragon, is: Balance,
Whatever batters you; drink modest wine;
And - still avoiding ostentation –
Live for the day while the day is fine.

To radiate such health when age is snowing!
To strike with unarthritic hand that lyre!
And further, Father, in time's fulness
Rise in the flame of the funeral fire!

Room for my Runes

Surely there should be still some modest corner
For modern priests of Helicon, who make
A ritual of common language?
Room for my runes with your bric-a-brac!

There are who in glass-tendrilled jars encourage
In small dark rooms the ferment of new wine,
What fume arises channelled off through
Twists in the system; some stick or pin

On bedsit walls with bricked-up windows posters
Fathered long since by Beardsley or Lautrec –
Lovers of hip baths, possessors, magic
Lanterns (our delicate ironwork

Over loud shopfronts lingers from that era);
Some cultivate an accent; some long hair;
Some hoe, trench, weed, retrench small gardens,
Taking *au pied de la lettre* Voltaire.

The cabbage-patch I keep to is this upper
Room loud with language. Harnessed lightning here
Breathes out less warmth than one wall painted
Wholly with tongues, as it were with fire.

Locked up with lots of books, the most secluded
Of celebrants may yet attract a crowd
And, happy if his crowd's a small one,
Live with his head in a rosy cloud.

Everyone to his own Taste

Some men dream of the man they'd love to murder,
Woman rape, if the laws or God allowed it.
Some build scaffolds as high as moral standards:
Scaffolds in Spain or

In the air, where selected malefactors
(Lesser men who are prone to lust and murder)
Swing and spin to the sound of pipes and timbrels,
Bloody from birchrods.

Would my dreams were as innocent as theirs are!
Old age comes at my call with pipe and slippers,
Much like Milton's, dictating to my daughters
Effortless poems,

Tough to take, but rewarding to the scholar;
Row on row of unlimited editions,
Annotated with scrupulous attention,
Stagger the student:

Scores of subtleties pass his understanding.
What's that insolent thought from Harry Heine?
All the angels, arranged in all their orders,
Singing of Heine?

To a Scholar

He whose life has been blessed or
Cursed by the random Muse,
Or disturbed by a trauma
(Call it what name you please),

Seldom shines in a bar-room
Brawl, and on crowded streets
Never looks for his name to
Twinkle in neon lights.

Still, when you (you're a scholar,
Freeman of many books)
Stoop to study his poems,
Mutter you like their looks,

Find their roots in the Romans,
Fathom their family,
Even augur descendants
Trained to the mystery,

Or, in fact, when you think them
Worthy a second glance –
Then he blesses the Lady,
Trauma, or lucky chance.

A Northern Idyll

Not for us those attractive southern landscapes
Goat-faced satyrs inhabit, hamadryads
Find so sultry they sleep around stark-naked.

Northern landscapes are bald, or, if not bald, then
Frosted over; we seldom run to satyrs;
We wrap up: the alternative is gooseflesh.

But we also – while all the uninvited
Winds gatecrash through our garden, banging bin-lids -
Rise to something that seems almost idyllic:

Reach for glasses, and fill them with Drambuie;
Roll Drambuie around our mouths, and poems
Made by men who are now more cold than we are.

Our Sundays Once

Then *Sabbath rest by Galilee*,
And melancholy hymns like that,
Made up for the Church Military
Fighting loud fights with sharp and flat...

Some weeks we'd gather in the porch
And wait to hear a baby howl.
We'd see our minister's mere touch
Wash that baby once for all...

I most indelibly retain
Hard benches in an upper room,
Hard words some corner of the brain
Hides, palled in dust till kingdom come...

The day thou gavest, Lord, is ended.
As darkness fell (*at thy behest*)
The sanguine of the sun ran blended
With terror of eternal rest...

That day about to go to glory,
My childish prayers went much like this:
'Give banal days, O Lord, and bore me;
But give the Four Last Things a miss.'

Under the Weather

Non isperate mai veder lo cielo

These bleary windows, tear-streaked by the rain!
They've been like this for days and days. No star
Will ever show its face here any more.

Do not expect to see the sky again!

We let the usual wisdom have its run:
'This gloom? Small price to pay for living where
No Fujiyamas overheat the air,
No *terremoti* turn us upside down!'

Yet still I feel uneasy when I read
Of souls I'd like to think worse off than we:
Those most despicable of Dante's dead,

Whom Virgil would not speak of but swept by,
Rejects of heaven and hell, unvisited,
Walled and whirled round by anguish and ennui.

Out of this World

There's Peel, its setting suns and slaughtered herrings,
Its castellated island just offshore,
The tiny tilting-ground, the slender
Tower on the island with just one door

Some eight feet up, where anxious ancient Christians
(Celtic, and so unworldly) climbed and hid,
Hoping to live a while – their final
Refuge and strength in a Viking raid.

There's (barren but for cromlechs) Holy Island
Where we last summer found unusual heat
Bronzing us like Sicilian shepherds
Casting around for a cool retreat.

With such apparent Islands of the Blessèd,
Why am I glad to be still rooted here,
One wonders, to be warped and weathered?
Drizzle so much of the dreary year!

Bells clanging through the fog upon the River!
Such creakings of the landing stage! Such wind
The pilot-boat bobs hawsered! Even
Ferries are hard put to cross and land

Voyagers venturing on a mile of water
To lose themselves all day in busy streets
Where but two birds unknown in nature
Rise through the mist on their metal struts.

We shuffle through the cold in sheepish clothing;
With much consideration move our chair
 Out of the draught; we ring for doctors
 Raising bacterial civil war.

That way each little kingdom seems to settle
Until revolting time insists on flight
 (Flight for, we hope, some holy island)
 Out of this world in the dead of night.

Towards the Millennium

Der zeiten flug verliert die alten namen

*The year one thousand. Aachen. Widespread fear.
Wild hope of who knows what from Charlemagne.
They found him dead still, upright on his throne.
Their jaws and torches dropped. The sepulchre*

*Was straight resealed... So runs the chronicle.
Such scenes, or something like them, will occur
Some years from now; then everything once more
Go back to what it was, as usual.*

Except for you and me. We'll feel a pang
At reaching finally three score and ten;
But then remember Adam lived too long,

And saw his language out, his distant kin
Start work on Babel. So we shall not weaken:
At least some sort of English will be spoken.

Resurrection

Reading letters we find by chance is hardly
Comme il faut; as for blowing safes apart, or
Prising open an escritoire and running
Through the contents – we know where that would land us.
Death brings changes: with *politesse* we publish
Lives and letters with crowds of little footnotes
Hissing details far better undiscussed. Just
Wait some time, and we burst the graves like resur-
Rection men, the police behind us holding
Crowds away, as we lift gold armbands, bracelets,
Bowls, and buckles, and hold them to the daylight.
I have trespassed against the dead to stare at
Twisted serpents from Sutton Hoo, stone razors
(Man first spoke, I am sure, to curse a cut), and
Odder oddments, but, most of all, one corpse (black,
Bent, and bound) in an elegant glass coffin,
Glossed by experts in gorgeous golden Gothic,
All on show, like a fish inside a tank, like,
On a hilltop exposed to wind and weather,
Snow White waiting until the Handsome Stranger
Robs her tomb, and they steal away together.