

Poems from England

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Cold District

This could be a place of lucky prospects
As I, walking on your borough's famous street
Past midnight, bereft of anything
Except meaningless bills and a dumbness
That comes from being in a new city,

Might surreptitiously collide with the glee
Of the fresh or re-minted possibilities,
Might slip into an updated outfit of self,
Or if fortunate, might avail the revelation
Of the particular in your commonplace:

Shop windows (mannequins shrouded
For the night), telephone booths made ir-
Relevant by the use of cellphones, pocket
Garden thronged with autumn leaves
Where much later, a man will tourniquet

His arm with a garter and take a hit.
Which means, I am fully invested in you,
Cold district, the hope of Europe,
The font of English. You've handed me
Myself, scrubbed free of distinction

And impermanence, in the gaze of your
Citizens, on the doors of rushing trains
(False wind tunneling), in the chimera
Of modern art. You love me enough
To watch me in your ten thousand

Surveillance cameras. You won't see me
Waving or making undue complaints
But simply walking with intent,
Appearing to belong, like how
A young man should in a foreign place.

You treat me with indifference which
Is good advice. You allow me
To slow or quicken my pace, present
My credentials to the elements
And without strategy and draft,

Acknowledge the one good thing about
My life — the dignity of anonymity
Pre-supposed of its innocence,
Untouched by government or fraud —
As I make my way to Tottenham Court.

God's Children

Across the steps of St. Paul's Cathedral,
God's children have pitched a neighbor-
hood of multi-colored tents overnight,
Intending to stay past autumn and winter.

Their faces shine even in the glum light,
Proffering leaflets to passersby and tenants
Of edifices near the vacant lots which they
Occupy. "Capitalism is crisis," they say.

"Grow the real economy." Their recalci-
trance is startling, nourished by years
Of the proper cultivation of self-esteem.
Drinking coffee, reading subversive books,

Conversing with each other, it appears
What they have hoped for is already here:
The mechanism of power, having stopped,
Has now turned to the opposite direction,

Righting the scales, creating a surplus of jobs,
Sending bankers and politicians to prison
By the truckload. You can't help but admire
Their optimism, stark and encompassing.

In this country, waking up already signifies
A demented faith in the ordinary. Here,
God's children have lived in parcels of land
They have occupied for years. It is the city

That hems them in, ready with bulldozers,
Demolition teams, their tear gas and sticks.
They resume the hunger strike they began
On a day that's already smudged in memory.

Led to believe their lives are ephemeral,
They display their defiance by dodging a car,
An extortionist cop, a bullet, stray or otherwise.
They are always compelled to sell something.

When they extend their hands to beg, they trade
More than self-esteem for loose change.
They are cured of expectation — the one curse.
Their love is the purest form of suffering.

Unless they too are alleviated, unless they too
Can join in the boldness of our singing, the wicked
Will sleep uninterrupted and God's kingdom —
The future — will be forever cratered to the void.

Sainsbury Wing

Here they are, the living streaming into
This hall, strapped with the burden they wish
To carry — backpack, audio guide, umbrella

Shaken free of rain. Their breaths are an
Unquestioning clarity in the autumnal air
As they, at eye-level, engage with the figures

In the Quattrocento paintings and altarpieces —
Mannered exultations in oil and tempera — that
Used to hang in the chancels of European chapels

As points of contemplation and decoration,
Gold-leafed and gilt-framed, the luminous
Bodies in them swaddled in pleated garment,

Haloes as medieval spotlight. Their thoughts
(The living's), however, are rapid and inaccessible,
Filling the negative space in their heads with immense

Wondering and reflectivity that you swear
They have trained in this devotion of looking
Their entire life that the allegory of the wound,

The seated lion, the promise of a city seen
From an architrave is perfectly understood.
You want to know the kind of people they were

Before stepping into this gallery's segment,
The worries and aches and disappointments
That assailed them. Now, they have all the time

In the world, conducting themselves with
Utmost serenity, in the visible absence
Of meanness and contempt, that they

Begin to resemble the holy beings
And saints in their piety and attention,
Particularly the blue, enraptured angels

Of *The Wilton Diptych* (artist unknown)
Their arms folded across their chests,
White wings tipped with indigo tint.

Do the gallery-goers transform into
The subjects they behold, or at least by virtue
Of proximity, are completely overcome with points

Of divinity, the stiff flames fanning
Open into auras, signifying their split-
Second conversation? O how you want

To break into their reverie, exclaim that
Angels have long bled their majesty,
Demons and saints are conspirators to regimes

And religions, every piece anchors a time
Of superstition, meant to break the observer
Into supplication and guilt. Fra Filippo Lippi

Boticelli, Bellini — dead for five
Centuries — are insistent with their dogma
Of grace: bear anguish, be interior, avert your gaze.

Two Lakes

Not twins but distinct,
On separate continents,
Their nature similar, evident:

Reservoirs cupped by
Deep roots, earth, systems
Of drainage, containment.

Lidless corneas that blur
And clear, you are both
Hospitable to fowl and fish,

Repeat the commotions
Of the given, offer resolute
Models to human attention.

Dark panes under which
Pinpoint entities
Blossom and then die,

What do I choose
Between the two of you:
You high up

In the mountain,
Geographically elect, cleft
By a wall of stone,

Or you the one in the park,
Entirely man-made,
Glossed over by autumn?

Clutching you
In the mind like a pair
Of hand-held mirrors

Reflecting each other,
Unlaced of sky,
I cloud my breath

On both of you —
Balinsasayao, Leybourne —
In English.

Manor Event

(The Knole House, Sevenoaks, West Kent)

Even God can't hold a candle to this
House which, in its battlemented
Towers, inner courtyards, mazes
Of halls and rooms and staircases,
Disarms the charging light ready
To blast open its dungeons and
Secret passage, ignite its pillastered
Windows and ribbed ceilings,
Pillage its damask furniture and
Paintings. Withering the light's
Potency at first touch, this country-
Side manor asserts the virtues
Of something terribly man-made
And beside the point, displaying
Its capacity to flourish when it is,
In fact, stolid, unmovable, a bid for
Immortality amid the change-
Fulness of the season and scenery:
Copses of oak and elm and haw-
Thorn, and of deer flitting through
The estate or nosing the cars in
The parking lot near the west gate.

Nothing in your commoner life
Has prepared you for this:
The discomfort feathering your nape
As you pass through the hall lined
With men and women in mill-
Stone collars and capes and furs
Judging you from their gilded
Frames, their ghosts mincing
No words in their sheer irritation

At your presence as you pretend
To get the meaning of all this
Opulence, leave fingerprints on
Surfaces, bear upon this space
Your rather paltry taste. Should you
Smash a teacup, how would
They gasp? The house comes
Close to what you have imagined
The foreign to be: assured pro-
Venance and good bones, heraldic
Symbols, a model of fine taste
Articulated through fabric, silver-
Ware, no square inch unornamented.

It's the Venetian ambassador's room
That captivates you, where satyrs
And minor gods frolic across
The tapestries spanning the walls,
Their mythological roots explained
In small rectangles of text. The four-
Poster bed, tented in Genoan velvet,
Invites all manners of fantasy —
But only in your head as the sheets,
Eloquent and unruffled through
Centuries, will chastise any form
Of contact; the docent's stare reminds you
Of this. Emblematic of everything
Tight-lipped and wrong-headed
About the house, this room that is
*frail as a shell, as iridescent and as empty,**
Admits, as you pivot toward its
Window, a sliver of the world in its
Savage heft and spectacular un-
Purpose which tolerates this kind
Of sweet monstrosity for hun-
Dreds of years then topples it.

**frail as a shell... : Virginia Woolf, Orlando*