

‘A ROSE
BY ANY OTHER
NAME—’

POEMS
BY J. L. HERRERA



A LITTLE BOOK OF FLOWERS
—TO THE MEMORY OF ROSE BROWN—

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INTRODUCTION:

I woke one dawn with a dream escaping.

I tried to clutch it back but was left with a fading image.

Two women walking in a garden. A formal garden with plump beds of standard roses; and behind them nicely clipped hedges and beneath their feet a neatly confined gravel path.

They suggested something vaguely old-fashioned. I'm not sure what it was; the length of their skirts perhaps—or the way they suggested all the time in the world. People rush and bustle now. They carry clipboards and are called back to the present by mobile phones.

I had no memory of the women's conversation. Perhaps they were discussing roses.

Nor their identity. Friends, relatives, people I had found in books, or something mentioned in a media story. Perhaps.

I found this curious. Most dream people I can, sooner or later, attach to something. A memory. But they were like pictures in a miniature. They deserved to be pinned on lapels. So pretty. So timeless.

I tried to impose an emotion on them. Those hedges—didn't they suggest something dark and brooding in the scene? The reluctance of the women to hurry through—perhaps they knew something less pleasant waited just beyond the scene? Might it be that they had turned to me and laughed—and it made me wake? Or their worries? I couldn't bear the burden. Or perhaps they escaped like this, just now and then, to find peace in a garden.

'I always feel better,' one might've been saying when I turned from my place outside the scene, 'when I walk here quietly.'

'I know. Life overwhelms me. So many troubles. For a little while I can forget there's another world.' But they are not people grabbing ...

Silly thought. They might have returned in dreams from a different time. No longer enfolded in temporal time. Their troubles no longer those of the world around them but memories that slipped through. So why do I think of troubles? Their faces are composed, suggesting nothing but two women walking in a rose garden ...



IN A COUNTRY GARDEN

It is many years, many many years, since this garden
Knew the clip of shears and secateurs, felt the spray
And knew the sound of voices walking in the evening;
Many years since it knew the meaning of watering and care.

Many years since anyone tied up falling branches
And removed the weeds from around the thorny stems
Of standard roses; since they pruned back vines and thinned
Out suckers, cleared the paths and picked up twigs ...

And the spider-webs between the trees and tank and fence
Form a kind of pattern, like crackles on a plate, that suggest
No one has come this way in years; and if they did they would
Turn away again, daunted by the task ahead to resurrect a garden.

A family named Bryce bought the house and land, sight unseen,
A snip, a snatch, they said, truly bargain basement stuff. And moved in
Immediately. A curious family with no connection to the neighbourhood
Or any previous owners with their sad fading dreams. Clean slate people.

Though local folk were not absolutely certain about the clean. Rumours
Went around. Hippies, some said contemptuously. Smoking that
There pot, and playing guitars after dark. Pity, others said, that was
A lovely little garden there, or so I heard, but a fair while ago.

It was the fault of Mrs Bryce with her floating skirts of tie-dyed cotton,
Embroidered blouses of Indian muslin, and sandals on brown feet.
Her hair of a tawny-brown flowed down her back in curling disarray
And she had amber eyes to look out upon a disapproving world.

The menfolk there with jeans and shirts looked conventional
Enough—but people did not accept that she could ever belong,
Be one of them; they talked behind her back, they pointed and they
Gossiped ... and what they didn't know they made up instead ...

She seemed to take no notice, floating through, and if she felt
Hurt she never said; not in the local store, not when they came
To join in some local event; women gossiped, children pointed,
Men had mixed reactions to Mrs Bryce. She was rather pretty.

What she did to that garden wasn't common knowledge because
She made no friends; but it was said she was always working in it.
The men busied themselves with the land around it; and if goats
Were less conventional than cows no one made a thing of it.

There are undoubtedly morals and maxims to be drawn from this;
The women in fairy tales that bucked convention were not kindly
Treated—until the end. They too felt the whispers and the pointing;
Got called witches, were thought to be in league with demons.

The exaggerations in this were all more muted; her silence, her gaze
That was far away, looking out on things unseen by others; the way
She let her men be her mouthpiece in the world, something about
The way her hair, her scarf, her floating skirt, aroused antagonism.

‘Not one of us, no, not one of us, thinks she's—’ ... but no one knew
What she thought and felt and did. Little communities don't like
Mysteries. But mostly she stayed at home; was more rarely seen
Than her men; and that was unacceptable. ‘Thinks she's too good for us—’

Sometimes she sang to herself as she clipped and dug and planted,
Just a little monotonous chanting that had no words and kept an
Even tenor; the kind of thing people do when they're pre-occupied.
And sometimes she smiled as her hands moved in re-riched earth.

The garden, this strange woman recreated, saved from near loss,
Was like her; windflowers bent in the breeze, long strands of foxgloves,
Columbines, fern fronds, coloured grasses swayed; climbing roses
Sprawled and straggled on walls, flowers came and went, birds nested.

And if she could not hear their song she loved their lives and industry;
She felt, she touched, she smelt the fragrances that wafted to and fro
In and out open doors and windows; and if she could never engage with
Brisk country folk who had certain *expectations* in new neighbours ...

She was to her husband and her son, the centre of their universe;
Rarely intruding in their lives but always there, a kind of radiance
That had in it love and tenderness; and they in their turn believed
That ancient figures might have worked and walked as she did ...

They weren't scholars, preferring to know a world of herbs and weeds
And pleasant goaty smells; but they thought of her as their goddess
Stepping lightly on fields of thyme and herbs in a Greece of myths;
Perhaps a wood nymph, Echo, Aphrodite spreading love around ...

But what they were, and where and why they'd come was never
Known; people ceased to point the fingers, strangeness was muted
By time and a certain familiarity; someone said, 'that garden, you
Wouldn't know it now, pretty as a picture, like a place to dream about.'

That was what its chatelaine became; not quite real, part of a garden
Resurrected; something, not ordinary flesh and blood, that belonged
With roses there, that was bud and scent; that was birds, bees, butterflies,
That floated in a conjured garden, a genie in the pipe, an echo in a dream.



THE SISTER BY THE SEA (FOR RO MORROW)

A journey by train to begin the long journey of the spirit.

The way the wheels clack briskly over points, the way
The lines run over russet and golden moors, with dog roses
In the ditches. The way a sky darkens as though a storm is coming
And in carriage after carriage men are snoring.

A woman there by the tight-shut window, looking out,
Her eyes on passing blackthorn hedge and rock and heather moor,
And her beads held without her close attention, now drooping
From one small hand, while the men sleep on.

The air inside grows thick with stale breath and smoke,
Stale from heavy suits and market shoes that walked in damp;
Now the sky, window-framed, is black and low as if a storm is building;
And the last gleam of sun falls out of sooty clouds,

To flicker across her black and white and leave her eyes aglow,
Something there in the landscape that is remote and beautiful,
That shaft of light struck against the thunder grey, and the line running
Straight and stark across sighing grass and bracken.

She turns to the other passengers wanting to share
Something of that wonder, that strange beauty beyond the panes,
Not sure if it's something that every passenger might praise, kindling
Words in smoke-filled throats, or an omen.

But the men who came aboard with her, some not going far,
But cheerful in their jostling and talk of lamb and mutton prices,
Have one by one stubbed out their cigarettes, slid down, closing
Eyes, hats set aside, and then their sleeping.

Years later she mentioned to another sister who'd been home
On leave that she felt at that moment, gazing out, a strange sense
Of abandonment. It took courage to say such a thing, with it sounding

As though, at that moment, she had doubted.

Lost faith. The dark and light, the sense of home silent and still,
The homesickness that might be the lot of those who lived
On moors; that sudden need to share something that wasn't biding
Well in hope and faith or any serenity in vocation.

Because it wasn't, she always knew, for nuns to believe in omens;
A remnant superstition, yes, perhaps, but not good fortune or bad.
And yet it never quite went away, that sense it could be light-bringing
She was asked to do; and the taking away of dark.

She didn't take it seriously, not really, that young and hopeful
Girl, that one with firm commitment and a gentle sense of adventure;
Nor did she link it to old stories of retribution or revenge, the thinking:
For every effect there is another, not always wanted.

The train sped on, the rattling and the swaying in the growing gloom;
The sudden spatter of rain against the carriage windows, the eerie
Sense of a storm at dusk, with sudden serpent's tongues of lightning,
And the blotting out of familiar scenes of home.

The running in then to the terminal; the way the men jerked and rose,
The bustle of bags and cases, umbrellas and heavy mackintoshes;
While one or two slept on till a hand dropped on a shoulder, or the shunting
Wakened them and they got down, yawning still.

Years later when she looked back to that time of departure and goodbye
Those things seemed always to intervene between her and family,
The omen read into an unexpected storm and the men there, stretching, sitting,
Yawning; and she wondered what she might read into sleep.



'I wouldn't feed them if I was you,' said Sister Polycarp decidedly.
'No, I won't' ... but I cannot help a sense of pity, of dismay, every time
They cluster round, the pi-dogs of a dirty street, down on dirty docks;
But she knows best, she has been here years, dedicated years,

While I still have the blush of home about my cheeks, not the

Red and brown of tropical complexions; not the ways to let
The heat rise from under this cloying habit; I sometimes think
I'll faint one day, even in the cool of our small dispensary, even

Though I know it's only heat and a time will come when I too
Will accept it as my daily lot, just the sweep of handkerchief across
My beaded lips, the way the veil seems to enclose the heat around
My neck; I too will say it is the Lord's will, but I'm not so sure about

The dogs that starve here on the streets, surely we can do something ...
My mother always said there were some things you could do and some
You couldn't; and being kind to God's dumb creatures came into
The first of her categories; but our order is not long here and we are

Charged with souls not bodies; even if our bodies smell and our clothes ...
My mother. Sometimes I think of her when old mothers come in, widows
In white, women with sick children, women who have tried everything
And we are their final hope. I am the assistant there. I collect and mix

And hand on to Sister Polycarp and admire her skill and the way she works;
The way she knows their customs, their lives, their languages; she teaches
Me when things are quiet. Her calm repetition; *onnu, renda, munu, nalu*,
They roll off my unaccustomed tongue quite soon, and the names of things,

But she has a dislike of dogs and when I ask her for words for dog and fur
And bark she only says, 'Dirty things! Don't touch!' I understand her fear
Of rabid dogs, I understand they will always roam in packs; no, I don't.
Nothing is so set in stone. Not what they believed, before we came, not what

They'll say when she and I are gone. We came to change, we came to spread
The Word of God; and if kindness to animals is not part of our message
So be it; she and the others take the practical view. I do believe, I do love
To share the words and prayers and hymns, the hope of everlasting life.

I still think we cannot place a barrier between children's hurt and dogs'.
But time goes on. I change, I suppose I change. I become familiar
With people and places, the changing of the seasons, the monsoon
Rains, the flush of green everywhere, no russets here, no old gold, but

Flaunting scarlet, brilliant mauve. Yet there are times when I still long ...

The way the clouds hung across the hills and the rain fell as fine mizzle
On my skin; the way the corncrakes rasped and the reeds rattled in
The wind, the planing of the swans as they came serenely into land.

Someone the other day referred to me as an ‘old hand’; I’m not sure
I thought it fitted; but the years go by, five, eight, ten, twelve, more,
And I do by stealth, what I was forbidden to do by routine and harried
Help; my bleeding heart. Dogs, we always had dogs at home. Healthy,

Happy dogs, who did their work and were praised and fed and ministered
To in sickness; I cannot set that aside here anymore than I could at home.
But home grows faint. Sometimes I have trouble calling things to mind.
Our house, the grey granite of it, the way the rambling roses rioted; the firs

Behind; the moors in front. I found other people to share my worry over
Dogs, people who would talk to the city corporation, find ways to remove
The sickest starving ones, ways to find owners, ways to legislate; I’m glad
I did. Sister Polycarp, bless her soul, looked the other way, so long as work

Was not neglected; of course I wouldn’t neglect the children who come to us.
They are my family, part of, they are my reason for being here, part of, God’s
Family, infinitely expandable. And I understand them now; I can chat and laugh
And feel that home is here. Just sometimes when I have a moment to myself

Something intervenes; that person, that memory that was nurtured in space,
The faint fragrance of heather and bog; that whirring flight of grouse, that
Sense that I was made from a different clay, one that had in it roots, stems,
And flowers that can never grow here. The faint smell of old pot-pourri

In the hall made from autumn’s bounty; petals everywhere in baskets,
As set against the hot smell of clogged drains, the smell of curry and spice,
The sounds and words, the crowds and harbour noise; the dry inland, temple
Gardens, garish idols, they fascinate but they have never touched my core.

I see the days go by, each one in its ordered way, from waking prayer
To sleep in satisfaction every night; from simple bed and board, to heartfelt
Hope that our lives have helped somehow, our faith broadened out to embrace
A greater love, a deeper hope, a sense of good overpowering evil here ...



My life might have gone on quietly there; serving God in humble ways,
Doing what was expected of me, being part of our little caring order;
I might. But it seemed that God had other needs of us all, though I
Cannot think He was there when they made their wrong decisions;

Didn't think, didn't look, who now can say, what happened at the plant?
I wasn't there, nor any of us. But everyone in miles around heard
The explosion, saw the cloud, felt the gas, choked and fell and died,
Some where they fell, others in horrible burning gasps, their eyes

On fire, their lungs, and little children suffered most; their soft skin,
Their tender eyes, their milk-fed throats, their tiny hearts stopped
In shock. For weeks and weeks we had no sleep. When we were not
Treating, we were going everywhere, consoling, helping to bury ...

Not for us to lay blame; though we had all come by the plant and seen
Things that looked rusty and ill-maintained, things placed too close
To people's homes, their little patches of green growth, their hens,
And they didn't warn, didn't tell people to evacuate, didn't tell us ...

We didn't know what we were treating, what kinds of chemicals;
We worked blind, not knowing. They tried to cover it up, tried to
Pretend; tried to say people only had themselves to blame, tried to shift
Responsibility away from distant board rooms; took advantage ...

The ignorance here, the desperation, tried to say lives here didn't
Have the worth of lives elsewhere, that dying here was easy.
But my obedience to my superiors here, to Sister Polycarp and all,
Was surrender in love, not fatalism; if this was meant then I was meant ...

We all were meant to do more than dress wounds and help families
Find survivors; something more. We struggled with the way it had
Overwhelmed everything, not quite everything, our faith never wavered,
But something in the way we saw the world ordered. Something about

The way we saw lives dismissed and suffering; we asked ourselves
What we meant when we said we must do something more. More than
Governments, more than grudging compensation, more than relocation,
More than the plans made by advisers who came, briefly, and went.

Because we had been riven to our collective heart by suffering; more

Than that of poverty and dirt and ignorance, more than by the touch
Of each life struggling. In this we felt we were called to heal, to pray
To love and hold, to be more than us, to be the handmaidens of our Lord ...



There came a moment when she, worn out in heat and service, came
Home to visit, to rest and walk, look around, feel the healing that comes
With home; and as she passed across those moors, faster, with more crowding
She looked out on the way the cloud shadows chased one another ...

It was home, but home no more, she was a worn and sallow stranger,
Someone who had forgotten little habits, casual expressions, the way
People spoke and laughed; the food available; the way things kept changing,
And she wondered what they thought of her.

All a little busier, people moving faster, more bustle, more change,
No one sleeping after market day, but then they'd come on good roads
In powerful cars, not in crowded carriages, not via the little moorland sidings,
And the looks she got were more curious than confiding.

But she had left behind the little memorial garden they had planted;
Each death, each missing person, each injured and burnt, a flower, a shrub
A herb, a tree, connected by winding paths, by little seats, by little charming
Miniatures of things lost; they might be plastic, but they each

Contained messages about the things people felt they must remember,
Little plaques, wooden dolls in dresses, people came with humble requests
And they found them room, they came with torn things, broken things, sighing,
But with gratitude that this garden was more than ordered charm.

And in one corner she had planted a little slip of rose a stranger
Had given her. She couldn't promise it would grow in this heat,
But she said she would try her best. Who would you like remembered, saying
It as she had said so many times before. The dogs, the stranger said.

The dogs that didn't ask to choke and gasp and die; the dogs
No one thought to shoot until they had died a thousand whining deaths.
For a moment her eyes grew sad and moist; she put a hand out, clasping
The little slip of rose, and saying with her tears, yes, the dogs ...

But no amount of remembrance can make something grow,
Sometimes. She did her best for it, she watered it and protected
It from tropic heat; sometimes she thought it looked like shooting
And she rejoiced, other times it seemed to fade and brown ...

It took months before she knew it had succeeded, that little rose,
And the next year it came out and flowered, a single pink, not unlike
The dog roses she had retained in memory all those years; and now, looking
Out, she saw them there in the ditch beyond the siding ...

The same roses, the same patch, the same scene, and she
Couldn't help a smile. Someone caught her smile and smiled it back.
Just roses, just grass, just the solid little station, no black clouds gathering,
But then she'd never been a one for omens ...



A COUNTRY IN A GARDEN

At our local nursery: sale on roses, special exhibition, talk on growing
old roses, photographic display ... I'm not a gardener,
not green-fingered, only butter ...

but while Don and the boys were out to the footie ... I said, why not?
I often say, why not? It is probably an unnoticed response to all
those years of kids saying, why?

A perfect afternoon, light fluffy clouds sailing in the blue.
The nursery has been here longer than us, but then this is a recent
subdivision. They call themselves 'The Rose Grower'. I believe
people come from all over ... I didn't. I walked up the low hill from
Carbide Crescent. No 17, to be exact.

The place had people strolling up and down the paths through their
acres of roses, all nicely set out along tracks, with signs, urns, archs, pots,
little secluded corners with well-established plants, things growing over

wood and tin to convince you that *your* shed, your fence too can become a thing of beauty.

Why not?

The cost principally. Old roses, it appears, don't come cheap.

I followed two people who were deep in conversation.
I thought at first they were French, talking family gossip, the names rolled off their tongues.

Madames in plenty; Aimée Vibert, Laurette Messimy, Adélaïde d'Orléans, something to do with history, I wondered. Then they mentioned Josephine. Maybe this place is run by ...

They talked of colours, of habits, of long-flowering.

Étoile du Hollande and Château de Clos Vougeot.
Sounded more like wine.
But no, if Louise Odier was pink with perfume and Gloire de Guilan was a damask ...

They might, of course, be showing off.
They never bent to read a label, they never hesitated over long names like Souvenir de Mme Brieul or Ghislane de Féligonde ...

Then they spoke again of Josephine but this time they called her Empress
And said how much they'd love to go and see her gardens ...

They said, I didn't think of myself as eavesdropping, they made no attempt to speak softly, that a life without a dream was not worth living.

Isn't it? I'm not sure that you need to long for something in the future to be happy.

They said something about sharing this longing.

From this vantage point I could look out beyond the nursery fences and see the dry paddocks beyond, white now with summer grass and burnt away in patches; and creeping up the slope ... our next subdivision. The big brick homes, square and substantial in their suburban solidity. Their red-tile roofs. Their high wooden

fences in between.

This place was the anachronism. The place outside time.

Old roses, old ideas, old memories ...

I bought a Nuits de Young in a pot. It came with instructions.

I turned and watched those two who'd walked and talked ahead of me.

I thought I knew their faces. I was sure I'd seen them round and about.

But not together, never together.

The girl at the counter, taking my cash, saw my glance. 'They often come and stroll and talk about what they'd like to do, something about seeing a queen's garden, I think, I never take much notice.' She gives a sly smile.

I understood then. I knew I'd seen them with other partners. I knew this was their affair. I didn't begrudge them a dream with roses in it.

I was home before my family. I put my pot out the back for planting in the cool. And I wondered if they bought things regularly, or merely strolled and talked and planned a garden they might never have.

Why? Why not? Old roses can be as sweet as young ...



THE ROSE THROUGH ...

The quiet of a study. A ticking clock.

The rustle of pages turning. The present shut out. No phone.
A scholar of an indulgent kind. A white head. A slight tremble in his hands.
And then the scratch of pen ...

Today I found, he might say over soup and crumbled bread.

And she might say, how lovely, do read—
And a third in company might sit up to their table.
Never seen but with a faint discernible fragrance—



*Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles today,
Tomorrow will be dying.*

(‘To the Virgins, To Make Much of Time’; Robert Herrick.)



But she had a fear that nothing was in sight,
That he indulged himself and sat and read;
And the book, ‘The Rose in Fact and Fiction’,
Would never come to its sweet conclusion.

She never nagged, she never pressed, though she knew
There was an advance already and they lived
On it, day by day, while the notes sat in splendid piles,
But the book ... ah, the book, remained unwritten.



*Live all thy sweet life thro’,
Sweet Rose, dew-sprent,
Drop down thine evening dew
To gather it anew
When day is bright :
I fancy thou wast meant
Chiefly to give delight.*

(‘A Summer Wish’; Christina Rossetti.)



Day after day he effaced himself and the clock ticked on,

Day after day she worried and fretted in silence,
Wondering when the axe would fall, the arriving request,
'Where is the manuscript? You signed on the dotted line.'

Sometimes she ventured a question, 'This morning,
My love, this morning was a productive time?'
Some times he nodded his wise white head, and some times
He was testy and brusque. 'These things cannot be rushed.'

She longed to say, 'It's only a book. Books come and go,
Books are as ephemeral as the roses which sit in the hall.
No one remembers the history of the books you consult,
No one asks when your most used title came out.'



Rose petal jam: Wash 500 grams of rose petals well then place in a saucepan with two-thirds of a cup of honey and 4 tablespoons of water. Simmer, then shake in one 50 gram packet of jam setting agent, stirring all the time, then bring to the boil for one minute. Then stir in 2 cups of sugar. Bring back to boil and keep at the boil for 5 minutes. Pour into hot sterilised jars and cover tightly. (As it might take a while to collect rose petals they can be kept fresh in a container by sprinkling with a little lemon juice.)



He dimly perceived that she worried, that she frowned,
But he refused to acknowledge she had reason,
This work, this labour, was something he had always
Wanted to do; it had in it memories he had never shared,

Couldn't share, if he were honest about it. His roses
Were his way of coming to terms with the past.
Roses that lay, fading and dying, but retaining faint scent;
Roses that recognised she wasn't his true love.

Oh, he needed her, depended on her, but didn't love;
It was that which burdened and disturbed him,
When she was the kindest most caring woman he'd ever met;
And he didn't, he couldn't, appreciate those qualities enough.

Because she wasn't ... she wasn't his rose, his bud, the one
Who had stolen his heart when he was just a boy,
And now he responded to her questions that intruded in this
With a sharpness he never intended but couldn't control.



*Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,
Are heaped for the beloved's bed;
And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone,
Love itself shall slumber on.*

(‘To—’; *Percy Bysshe Shelley.*)



He wanted, some days, to set reticence and scholarship aside;
He longed to cry out: leave me alone in my past!
But the money was spent and the book died in day dreams,
And he sometimes panicked a little and tried to forget.

She some days felt the close of his door like an echo through
All that their life together had meant; and felt tears.
But she explained away that he invariably shut her out,
That it was the natural response of the true writer and scholar.

None of the slick superficial, no cutting corners, no throwing
Material together. No use of good quotes to hide the lack
Of content; no sense of the charlatan, no doubting he had delved deep
And created a book of true worth, of lifelong love for the subject ...



“That was the hour of the Rose.”

(*The Plague Column*; *Jaroslav Seifert.*)



That hour, that day, he fell in love, was engraved forever;
He could name it in his sleep. While this wife—he often had
Problems in remembering anniversaries; and dismissed his guilt:
‘I’m getting old ... you can’t expect ... ’ She didn’t.

Or if she did she never said, but used her time in unearthing
Things he might find useful. ‘I wonder,’ she sometimes
Said, not pushing but with her quiet kind way, not demonstrating
Scholarship or certainty, but showing something he dismissed

As her unwanted desperation. Of course the book, of course
It will get finished even if the deadline isn’t met; you can’t
Hurry anything that comes with the mark of loving labour,
Not a pot-boiler, not a book to grab a fleeting market,

But something that distills a lifetime of observation,
That has in it, on every page, a love of roses, wild and tame.
But the publishers, like caring wife, will never know the tale
Of boyhood love and loss—because if they did they might ...



To make pot pourri: Collect petals which are past the bud stage but not full-blown and place them in a bowl. Choose petals from a scented rose. Add a cupful of thyme, some rosemary and the powdered outer skin of an orange, a few bay leaves, a quarter cup of crushed cloves and a teaspoon of mixed spice. Mix together and place in a covered bowl.



‘Makes a stronger book,’ editors like to say, ‘a touch
Of the personal, a sense of who you are and why this
Has been your passion.’ And a wife might say, ‘I always
Wondered who came before me, why you didn’t marry sooner.’

Or she might say, ‘I would never take your memories, never
Try to undermine and spoil them with my curiosity;
Your life before me is always yours ... just as mine before you ... ’
He’d never asked, never wanted to know, never queried ...



*‘What’s in a name? that which we call a rose,
By any other name would smell as sweet;’*

(‘Romeo and Juliet’; William Shakespeare.)



But she might, too, have regrets and memories of loss;
She too might see the past through those rose tinted glasses;
But if she did she never let it interfere with her love of him,
The thought, the care, he accepted as his daily due ...

Two people who come together late in life; was it realistic
To think that only one had a past worth revelling in?
A past rich and tragic, a past that underlay everything worth writing.
‘I’m not a selfish man, not greedy, not a monster ... but ... ’

If the study door shut sharply in her metaphoric face
He felt it too in its daily thud, its closing out of present worries,
Its chance to wallow in rose-scented yearnings that had no base
In the realities of the past as he had lived rather than longed it ...

He sat over piles and piles of paper, including slips and sheets
She had given him of things found and offered up in care.
The clock ticked. Window light fell on glossy rose portraits strewn about.
He got up, went over, opened wide his study door, propped it back.



A GARDEN IN THE COUNTRY

A country mailbox made from an old milk can turned horizontal
And set upon a sturdy post.

A passing mailcar with a long route to cover, fifty miles or more.
But a cheery man at the wheel with the company of radio.

Some places hidden from the road; their personality told only
In their box, the state of their gate and grid.

Others sociable, leaning on the boundary fence, looking out on
Passing traffic, what there was of it.

His job a simple one: letters, parcels, bread, newspapers stuffed in.
The stop, the start. The dusty road ahead.

But he had an eye for green and flowers, for flowering jacarandas,
And the way old gardens clustered round house and sheds.

He knew the people by their mail, the overseas stamps, the bills,
The number of Christmas cards, the catalogues ...



The garden catalogues he put in that old can with 'White' painted
On it; the house out of sight, the winding gravel road.

He had few mysteries in his blameless life; he never ran late,
He never peered and pried and gossiped.

He respected mail, even if he didn't care particularly for its recipients;
And he had a little garden in a country town.

A garden that struggled with the hard bore water, a garden that faced
The hot winds and dust that swept along the open highway.

A garden that gave him joy and despair, in its small demands.
A garden he often longed to share.



Those catalogues, he sometimes thought, if I sent for catalogues;
I might have new ideas, try new things.

The one shop that contained seeds had a rack of staples; lettuce,
Carrots, beetroot, petunias; things stored dustily.

Whereas what he wanted was to spread his gardening wings;
Try bulbs and shrubs and exotic fruits.

Sometimes he managed to pick up a pot of something at a fête
Or church bazaar. Sometimes on his rounds he broke off

A cutting of something growing through a fence. Once or twice
He'd dug from the verge something growing wild.

But a catalogue. Those beautiful glowing illustrations he glimpsed
Through paper, through plastic, sometimes a corner torn,

They enticed, they tempted, if he could share ... He brushed back
Temptation to widen an occasional tear.

To peer inside, to say 'Sorry, this seems to have got caught along
The way, these things happen, something sharp no doubt ...

It wouldn't take a minute to slip one out, browse through, take
The address, stick the flap down again.

It wasn't as if they didn't have to repair envelopes and parcels
Now and again; people often didn't make allowances

When they packed awkward shapes or didn't use sufficient tape;
This would be one of those occasions ...

Temptations in his life had been few and far between; fleeting
Desires to pass on gossip, knowing something held loose cash ...

Those sudden tempting moments were not hard to quash; he was
A modest man with simple tastes ...

But this ... this was different. This cut to the heart of what mattered
Most: a quiet man who loved his precious garden.



There are stories of mailmen, women too, who fell from grace;
Faced a moment and fell in, fully-dressed.

But this temptation, despite the way he held those catalogues,
Despite the rips and tears, has a happy ending.



One of those occasional meetings every country mailman
Has to liven miles on deserted country roads.

He pulled in, his dust cloud slowly settling, and saw a woman
Waiting there; just a woman about his age, unremarkable.

She smiled and came over; 'I've been waiting and waiting
And hoped today would be the day—'

'Your catalogue?' He handed over mail and paper. 'I wondered,'
He wasn't a pushy man; his work suited someone shy, introspective,

Not someone needing constant company; 'I wondered if you'd
Mind lending your catalogues—when you've finished, of course,

I love gardening ... and they look ... ' She smiled a little sadly.
'They do, don't they. Each time they come I imagine how

'I'll plan and garden; the things I'll send away for ... but in fact
There's little point in buying anything, our bore is nearly dry,

'But it doesn't stop me dreaming; my son thinks I'm mad but harmless.
Perhaps I am but I need colour to set against the drought and dust.'

He felt her sigh, her regrets for things that perhaps can never be,
And said, 'My garden's only small, just old favourites,

'But if you're ever in town and can spare the time, drop round,
I'd love to share what I have, what I dream of doing ... '

Two weathered people standing there, understanding limitations,
And the joy in sharing garden plans, understanding dreams ...



A VERY SECRET PLACE

Rhodes Chemical and Pharmaceutical Company Limited.
The board out front was large, named vacancies and puffed the co.
It never mentioned the sweet-sour smell that was its sly gift.

It never mentioned the way it expanded over once green land,
The way it crammed sheds and boilers, vats and chimneys
Into a vastly crowded site. It was a law nearly unto itself.

The way to go. Coining money from substances that were
Mostly inert powders; the world demanded more, or ads made
The demand more specific: We want Rhodes, Rhodes must be good,

We see it in their posters everywhere. Got a headache? Take a Rhodes.
Not a Bex or Vincents APC, no, Rhodes was spilling into traditional
Market spheres. Solvents, strippers, bases for cosmetics; a Rhodes.

Their shareholders were smiling all the way to AGM and bank,
Their workers weren't quite ... but they consoled themselves with
Knowledge of a job for life, well, here's hoping. CEOs smirked.

Householders were hardly wild about their big new neighbour;
They grumbled over grog: don't know what it's done to prices.
But the Council took no notice, didn't bring down their rates,

Said, if not in those words, cannot look gift horses in the mouth,
Depressed suburb, glad of investment, will help the youth with jobs,
That big co there is a boon to us—so what's a little whiff or two?

Just one group there had a deep regret: those who knew the area
Before it was industrialized, remembered the old farm with its house
And secret walls and banks and ancient cultivars and uneconomic fruit.

A place which long ago had filled the imaginations of local children
With a sense of awe and mystery. Rhodes Farm it had been called
When it was a farm with dairy cows and pears and eggs and plums.

A place made by someone who was never seduced by space but marked
Out his land in little squares and cubes, and walled each section and grew
Vines over every line of bricks. A strange place of maze and mellowing,

A place of secret gardens, protected from fierce sun, cold wind, dry breath,
Litter, wire and weeds. A farm like no other, its acres carefully blocked out,
A hundred gardens, rich in satisfaction, quiet in the busy world encroaching;

A place like no other, a place of peace, but it was not so clear what the
Economics of Rhodes Farm might be and how they compared ... And yet
The place was sold not because of bankruptcy but because there was no heir.

There was some disquiet when the place went up for auction; a vague sense
That something unusual, eccentric, not found anywhere else, was about
To go under the impersonal hammer, be lost and destroyed for good ...

Jobs, it was said with relief in many new developments; places where

Families had come because the houses were new and had yards and
Weren't too dear; houses ordinary people hoped they could afford.

Young children, playing happily in those big houseyards, grew and grew;
Mooched around the streets, complained of boredom, took to petty crime,
Had to go away for jobs, or do long journeys to and fro on trains ...

Jobs! They fell upon the changing face with something deep and sincere;
What's an old farm compared with jobs and income and youths off the street?
Put like that, those who had some jostling secret doubts, sighed and sat back.

Not for them to take hope from the next generation. And it brought hope,
Promotions, chances not on offer before the bulldozers moved onto the farm.
But as someone said in sorrow, we could have had both ... couldn't we?

Something from the past ... while there's room still out there to find a place
For chemicals and cooling towers; a place to wander in the leisure times;
A place to work. But the company had a proven philosophy: go in hard.

They were in operation almost before people had a chance to mourn
The falling bricks and bulldozed trees, the smashing of the old homestead,
The destruction of a way of life that's beyond recreation in the modern world.

Employees who had heard the old stories, the regrets of grans and gramps,
Knew the old farm had been in someway different, sometimes noticed
The few remaining signs that showed the lines of walls and paths,

An old stump here, a rambler that refused to die, the way lupins came
Up in carpark corners; and a little area beyond the massive steel-frame
Warehouse that wasn't yet overbuilt but had its walls, its secret sense.

Something waiting, living on long borrowed time, if boardroom memos
Had any resonance at head office; something that held in it a lingering,
A tumbled clinging past. A reminder to Rhodes that everything has its day,

Its moment, its necessity, and then it peaks and declines again; something
Like this, built with the bottom line always in mind, not the far future;
Not like the Mr Rhodes who seemed to've had a love affair with brick.

It wasn't much, these last remaining walls, of that old brown-orange brick,
Something not quite sharp and oblong in their shape, something a tad unusual;

Each and every one made by hand. But their fellow-bricks long dumped.

Times change; even men who carried briefcases and accepted as a right
Their place in Rhodes Co, a seat in boardrooms, a vote, a chance to be heard,
Felt a vague disquiet. Solvents, thinners, strippers, all very necessary ...

But something had been lost. It was as though the last Mr Rhodes sat there
With them, a gnarled browny face and hands, a man who loved his land;
And they felt something of his secret anger: I made this place, I loved it.

They felt, incautiously, something of his hurting back, something of his
Blistered hands, they felt the curious way he intertwined his cows and trees;
The little hidden places where birds still nested; not heating thumping tin.

Mr Rhodes, if it was him, and not a general sense of new-found conscience,
A sense that the past is sometimes worth preserving, grew more and more
At home in every part of that monstrous complex, with its great bubbling vats,

Its toxic mixtures, its hissing gases, its bottling section, its sales department,
Its PR desks, its admin corridors, its executive carpark and restroom; nowhere
Was guaranteed free from him. People began to miss days to avoid him ...

Someone christened it 'brick fever', someone else asserted they didn't believe
In ghosts then backtracked; someone in the office felt he was a constant
Disapproving presence but was afraid the others would laugh at her ...

Head office sent back a carefully-reasoned letter from an on-site manager;
They, they said acerbically, had never heard such nonsense and they expected
Profits to go up not down. Strange things began to happen there, a prank,

Some said, a hoax, just something in the air. Spillages. Things breaking down
Conveyors belts stopping for no apparent reason, delivery forms mixed up,
Wages overpaid, supplies under-ordered. A new noisy anti-pollution group

Coming round to placard and spray the massive gates, throw mud at the sign.
People don't know what side their bread's buttered on, said head office,
And demanded that the creeping disaffection in the ranks be tracked down ...

It went on like that. Little things mostly, a sense of things not quite right,
A sense that Mr Rhodes had power to annoy but not the ability to close them
Down. A disembodied man who was blamed for everything; from absenteeism

To a downturn in the market for home renovations; Mr Rhodes was now,
To hear the conversations round the plant, as real to most as any critical superior
Elsewhere. Mr Rhodes lived right on site. Mr Rhodes had ceased to be a joke,

A vague sense for workers on night shift, a spectre that could be blamed
For inefficiency and waste, for late arrivals and forgotten maintenance; for
Obsolescence setting in and discontinued lines. Mr Rhodes might have uses

But they were outweighed by the permeating belief that nothing would get
Better, the plant would get worse and worse, with profits falling faster
If Mr Rhodes was not found somehow and placated, appeased, firmly sent

On his way in whatever world old farmers with bulldozed farms inhabited.
Yet he hadn't asked for much in life, his beloved walled-in yards and gardens;
His bricks that were his own production, his trees and his cows, the hidden

Things that made his farm a strange place of inward-looking joy; of security,
And he asked for even less in death. Just the sun-warmed walls; the little knots
Of cows, in one space today and another tomorrow, secure from fierce sun

Sheltered from storm and hail, turned away from dust and drought, these cool
Spaces with their alternating shade and sun; and with the cows long gone
For sausages, his trees turned root-over-crown, his pasture concreted over,

He put his remaining spirit faith in brick, that last line of earmarked brick,
That brick to go, that little hidden space at the very back, not yet expanded
Into; his mind often drew him there, an unseen presence, not quite reconciled

To total loss. In life he'd been an optimist. But then a man surrounded by
Handmade brick has more reason to welcome the future in, knowing
Handmade brick is worth retaining; he hadn't quite understood modern life.

But it wasn't Mr Rhodes who saved that last small stretch of handbuilt wall.
No, it was: Got a headache? Take a Rhodes. Because years down the track,
It was found to have unexpected side effects. And untold millions had done

Exactly as they were told on billboard, theatre advertising, catchy TV jingles,
Advertising hype that hit the spot, a handy thing to slip into the wallet
Or the purse; you should never be without a Rhodes readily to hand ...

Brought them to their knees, took the heart out of the co, left it a small thing
With a market still in stripping paint, but no longer willing to step into your
Bathroom cabinet. A place that no more covered acres with round-the-clock

Noise and bustle but was reduced to a simple operation, even selling off some
Sheds and vats and scrap, renting half the carpark to a local go-kart club.
Still smells but not the operation that brashly saw expansion as unstoppable ...

Or was it?



THORNS AND BRIARS

A book for children to explain what's wild and tame;
To separate weeds from garden flowers; to set apart
Those that are poisonous, those that scratch and burn,
A book that distinguishes a rose from a blackberry cane.

“I have always thought that roses are much over-rated,” a friend
said and was overheard by children. “I never could
understand why Beauty’s father bothered with a rose. It would’ve
been drooping, dead, petal-less by the time he got it home.”

A book for children to tell them of enchantment in a castle garden,
To remind them there’s things to believe and things to hold briefly
Then let go as part of childhood; not part of an everlasting truth;
Unless kindness is worth telling in any simple if scary disguise.

“And Rose Red,” she went on, “would not have wanted to be
as red as any rose I’ve ever seen. Poor girl,
they’d have her taken away, tested, treated, assumed to be at death’s
door, unless you’re thinking of her now in our overworked wards.”

A book for children that has morals pressed into its little tales,
Good and evil playing out their natural enmity inside little bowers
And up-so-high swings, or on the painted seesaw and slippery slide.
Little tales of sharing bouquets, waiting turns, being kind to one another.

“I had the most sickly stories given me in children’s annuals as a girl,”
she reminisced, “where the rich spoiled girl smashes
the little rosebud teaset given her by another little girl who’s saved
for months to buy it. Being rich, she’d probably had her fill of roses.”

A book for children to tell them how things grow and fruit and seed,
A book about pollen and sex and bees and bright gaudy lures;
With no explanation for how dull-coloured weeds take over.
A book to introduce roses to children as botanical specimens ...

“And the way we cut up rosebuds in class,” she went on, “and were
supposed to tell a calyx from a petal though our teacher
did not like to spell out the nature of rose sex, and left us to assume
roses, like virgins, were a law unto themselves in our gardens ... ”

A book for children about secrets and about clearing out wilderness,
Of turning the neglected, after back-breaking labour, into a place
Of neat plots, tied stems; of scythed lawns, and deadheads removed,
A place that takes mystery and mulches it into an everyday walk ...

“I couldn’t bear it—the way those children turned that secret place
into a mere garden to show off. I wondered what
happened to little birds nesting in wild brambles and ladybirds safe
in tangled-up vines and clustering weeds. I never read more than half way.”

A book for children replete with the symbolism of common flowers,
A book about carvings and rose bowers, about petals at weddings,
And thistles on crystal; about violets on hankies and wattle in parliament;
About ladies’ slippers, the story of shamrocks, the making of attar of roses ...

“But when all’s said and done,” she ended up on a judicious note, “I’d
rather see children in gardens, reading fairy tales,
enjoying the world all around us—than stuck indoors killing everything
that moves on their computers. I’d much rather have them love roses ... ”

One little child in the group that'd been listening to an old lady grumble,
Who hadn't heard or understood what it all might mean, went away
And came back with rose buds she'd picked from public plots marked
Keep Off ... That old lady accepted, thanked, and said "Oh, how nice!"



THE MOON SHONE DOWN

A painting on a vase, of a vase, by a vase.

My grandmother wrote in her small notebook. 'Today I ... ' and she would mention her sketches, her beginnings, her endings, the final framing.

But of all things she loved to paint a dark blue vase, with mottled glaze.

We looked, we all looked, when it came time for her to move ...
It must be somewhere here, we thought, and took out dozens.
Lustreware. Crystal. China. Pewter, silver, even wood and plastic,
like many many wedding anniversaries. But not that one.

Did it break, we asked ourselves. A favourite, with a crack that wouldn't stay glued.

Or one seen in a shop window, in someone else's house. One willed elsewhere.
One wanted, one longed for, and forever beyond her reach ...

Never the same picture. But always the same vase.

Roses overblown. Great flaunting reds and yellows,
big lush pinks, soup-plate whites, flecks and scrolls and strawberries mashed in
cream ...

Petals about to drop, petals spread across a gleaming table, petals

on a window-sill. Stalks set out, not yet arranged. Roses backed by ferns, placed amid the turning autumn leaves.

We always saw her as kind and quiet and cheerful.
A little old lady who loved to paint. How nice, people said, that she's got that.
Others pine, others forget. Others sit staring out the window or watch
the flickering screen, or say silly things.

She always had a busyness about her. Right up to her fall.
when she was reaching out to snip deadheads ...

How fine and fragile each line in each sketch,
a spider-webby line, always clear and definite but fine.
So fine. So thin. And something in those sketches held up
against the brilliant window light. Lines there to connect things
that were later painted over.

Now we might talk of webs-of-life or wonder if she knew
of mandalas. These intricate woven patterns that underlay each
finished still life. And with a magnifying glass we can see at each
join there appears to be something else, a knot, as though she
knew the final picture must be done on, over, this firm framework.

The bigness, the boldness, of what's painted over, seems to
contradict the cobweb lace, the fairies' nets.

Freud, we say, not sure if it's appropriate to smile or cry,
something Freudian in our grandmother's life; and we don't
know what we mean.

The colours, so bright, so pure. Do they represent happiness at last;
or putting on that brave face?

And the vase. Something lost. Something gone. Something never had.

Grandmothers are just grandmothers; occupying the space of a chair,
rising with a stick, bringing out jelly beans or some other little treat.

Grandmothers have their little interests: some knitting if their hands
are supple. Their memories of old songs played on the upright piano.
A way with scones. Old stories of what happened seventy years ago.

The way they like to pick over old family ‘stuff’ that never interests children ... until it’s too late ...

But our grandmother, we now know, was different. She had ... what we’re reluctant to call obsessions ...

And we’re reluctant to dive into a quiet and private life; reluctant to dig, reluctant to question, not comfortable with asking ... because she kept a little space around her that she called her ‘painting space’ and no one liked to bother her in the middle of her work, her absorption, her dedication, her immersion of her self in each painting, each sketch, each preparation, each setting out of watercolours; each time she chose to use her oils, even crayons ... each time. And now we wonder how she felt as she picked up her sharpened pencil to draw fine lines across her paper, each time she transferred this underlying design, each time she bent over or sat back. Our grandmother with a brush thick with that deep rich blue.

We read many things into many things.

Her love, the one great love of her life, drowned at sea. We decided. We gave him names and faces, we waved his hair and firmed his chin, we curved his mouth for one last kiss before his ship slipped its mooring.

Words said there on that dock. Words of undying love. ‘Wait for me.’

Her fine lines might be a map. All the routes her life might have taken. All the forks. All the junctions. All the roads travelled or left unexplored.

And each rose has a memory encased, like stamens hidden in a bud.

Yellow might be bright moments, happy times, that come regardless Of a breaking heart. Red might be for blood. Or anger. Pink for fading hope. White that she was left a virgin after all ... when she had planned, had seen their children in her mind.

And all the colours in between are moods, are fickle changing hopes and dreams.

And we are here, each one of us, flesh and blood and baby curls, to be sat on a lap and told old nursery rhymes with clapping baby hands ...

Those buds laid out beside the empty vase; those buds arranged with supportive greenery, those buds to fill the vase, those buds to open wide. Those buds in middle age. Did she mean to make us over-blown and blowsy?

Because we were not the children's children of that lost but ever-present love?

We kept everything, every unfinished sketch, unused waiting 'page', every dried-out colour, every stiffened brush. every finished piece, rich and glowing in its reflected tints and gleams. We shared the paintings round. Two in this house, three in that. They lost some inner simmering awkward intensity that way. Our grandmother, we each could say to those who asked, loved to paint, was talented, had a thing for roses. We never mention blue vases, though they gleam out softly everywhere.



A GARDEN BY THE SEA

We saw it with a caravan in tow. We mentioned it sometimes; Just the vague 'remember that time we came through there—' Even its name faded under the press of life and making livings, But it refused to completely disappear; just that single image.

A little place perched round rocks and cliffs and secret coves, Not yet found by big hotels and tour itineraries or TV shows, Just a quiet place with time to stand around and talk and feel The sea breeze bustling up against the shops with plastic strips.

Nothing special in the architectural, no brilliant yachts or piers That say nostalgia with their puppet shows and ice cream vans, No perfect crescent beaches of unsullied sand; no line of pines,

No rowing boats lined up for men who boasted of some prowess ...

Just the sense of a homely place that perches like a friendly sparrow,
With bead-bright eyes and a quick sense of what is food and what
Isn't worth alighting for in the street; a place to stretch small wings,
A place that maunders slow enough for little picnickers to feel safe.

Our kind of place we sometimes said, after a day no rat would own;
Our kind of dream; one of those small cottages perched on the steep
Road out; with that lovely view of blue, with a pleasant cove beneath
And steps down; and pigface in bright pink and orange spilling over.

Don't buy, our friends warned us, don't move, think of the long term;
Think of getting old, getting slow, needing chairs and sticks, no proper
Care, no up and down that slope, no friends nearby, no bowls, no deli,
No people to know what you've done and shared, the people you are ...

You'll be strangers, oddities; it won't be half as nice in mid-winter there.
You'll regret ... and it's hard to buy back in once you've packed
And gone; they were at us when we mentioned, just the thought
That we might, we could, wouldn't it be nice, something calling us ...

Their wisdom worried us; their good sense resonated but we knew
That if we never took the chance, never tried it out, never found
A house like the one we'd hankered after there with salt-hardy plants
Out front and the lovely arches of vines and roses and clematis behind

We'd always feel the lack. We'd ask ourselves why some day we put
Sense before a sudden intake of breath, a sudden forgetfulness of
The staid people we are, have always been, the conventional, just so,
Just adventurous enough to buy a caravan and take it on that curving road,

Not the people who keep their friends and colleagues on tenterhooks,
Not the sort of people to lecture others on how to live their lives,
But we've found within ourselves something we hadn't factored in:
A kind of unspent longing for a life that is not merely more of the same ...



We couldn't get the house we'd dreamed about; its owner wouldn't sell.
But it was our lucky day, we got another down the road we liked as well.
We walked to and fro, the 'Italian stucco' of the ad was in good condition,
The fences, the built-in fittings, but the garden suggested a need for care.

We loved almost immediately; we couldn't imagine why our friends
Had fed us doom and gloom; their lack of enterprise, we soon thought,
Their lack of get up and go, their willingness to stay put and deride us—
Till we sent out invitations, said, come and share, said, we won't rub it in.

Did we need anything, they asked, living in the sticks, well, not precisely,
But we said, bring a plant for our garden; it's got rather overlooked of late;
So they came bearing all kinds of things in plastic pots; roses, pelargoniums,
Ferns, mock orange, succulents; they dumped these things on our patio,

Saying, didn't know what would grow here, all that salt sea air that strips
Paint, kills lemons, rusts cars. We could see they were still pitying us ...
But the visits went off well, we put some inside, some in our caravan still
Parked in the concrete drive; we felt we had seduced them with our view

Even if we had not convinced them with our arguments. No doctor, they said
Aghast; not nearer than twenty kilometres away. No mechanic at the station,
Nothing but greasy takeaways to give you a break from cooking for yourselves,
Nowhere really good for fishing. For a moment there we wondered that we

Hadn't seen the things they saw immediately; but as each lot moved on
We discussed their complaints and asked each other: does it matter?
And each time we knew the answer. No. We came to be the two of us,
The two people who'd been as ships passing in the night in two careers,

In two ways of looking at life but rarely having time to share—and now
We had ... Time. That's why we'd come. It didn't matter if we gardened
Gently late or early, it didn't matter if we walked or shopped or stopped
To say hello; it didn't matter if we sat on sand and said: dare we dig ...

Whatever we'd been and done, what we'd become, we both had that strange
Sense of something snatched away; something that was birthright and genes;
Children on a beach, children with spades and pails, children picking up
Shells and bladder wrack, children knowing birds and fish, children from

A coastal place. We'd never shared it with our friends. We'd never shared
It with each other beyond the recognition of a secret longing, a fleshed-over
Pain. We were both children snatched up and sent across the world; because
This country wanted more, wanted white with curly hair, wanted children

That would understand work, that didn't require language lessons, children
That could be browned and moulded, calloused in market gardens or shearing
Sheds, children who didn't know to ask the questions: am I truly an orphan?
What about my Mum? Children who were expendable, children who would fit.

We came together in that sudden recognition that something had been stolen
From us; the sense of who we were. But bitterness is not always the best
Foundation for a lifelong love. We worked hard, harder than those who'd
Tricked and brought us here; if we couldn't have family we would have ...

But we never thought of it quite that simply. Two careers. Two driven halves.
Too busy to think on it deeply in the quiet hours. Two people planning.
Two people with ambition. Two people riding up the corporate ladder; and
If one rose faster than the other that was the way of things and didn't let us

Pause. Till we sent out to find the people who had given us away, or been
Bullied into relinquishing slum children, fatherless, and found there was
Nothing beyond those bleak institutions that couldn't wait to send us on;
We felt shortchanged from go to whoa and didn't know if anyone had ever

Loved us for ourselves. We didn't know if in the midst of success we'd truly
Loved, truly felt that we belonged beyond the surface sorrow, the sense of
Lifelong regret. This was more than retiring from a dog-eat-dog environment,
This was us finding us, getting to know at last, the person beneath the success

And pain; the person that was more than the stuff of searing documentaries;
The person that lived beneath the smiling face, the person that was waiting
There for a sudden flowering in these later years, like the burst on autumn
Roses, the flowers that don't come as neat and tight as any springtime bud,

But have their fragrance, entice a bee or two, get a little woody in the stem,
Stave off blackspot a little longer, form large glistening orange hips that have
Their own special beauty that carries into winter; wonder how severely they
Should cut and prune; gaze out over browning lawns and first ripe berries ...



As they peel again out our gate, those shining corporate cars, with success
In their every line, and turn right, back to city life, we stand and wave, say:
So good to see you again. We wonder if a part of us returns with them or if
We're truly settled here at last. We turn back. A last rose there bordering

The road, just an iceberg, a little pink in age about the gills, but still itself;

A branch of asparagus fern to join it in a simple vase. The sound retreating,
The latest cars, while we stayed with what we have, lost the desire to compete,
Felt a final calming, a long time coming; a sense that at last we can forgive ...

It's only four. (They wanted to be back before dark and traffic.) We could,
We might, shall we, there's time, a walk in the cove below, with sand and
Gulls; with curling waves and pigface on the descending steps, with the tide's
Latest leavings, the little things that should've been a child's inheritance ...

We walk slowly down; stopping now and then to enjoy the scene around us,
The first intimation of winter dusk, the light reflected on a great calm sea,
And the little crescent of glowing sand empty of other walkers, other folk.
Me, you, you and me, just us; reclaiming, hand in hand, what we never had.



WILL YOU COME INTO MY GARDEN?

Children reading of Beauty and that Beast: the breathless question:
Did he roar? Oh, yes, you never heard a louder dreadfuller noise!
That roar woke pigeons dozing and hens asleep in farmyards far away;
that roar was more than that poor dad could take. He thought
he was quite a brave man, as brave as most, but this sent him cringing
backwards, apologizing to that awful beast: I'm so sorry, sir,
you always call a beast sir, you never take chances with big beasts,
and certainly not when they can talk as well as roar ...

It sets us up for life, does it not? That story, like all fairy tales.
The idea that happiness will prevail, that the brutal beast is under a spell,
that love and kindness, and beauty, will break enchantments ...

Oh what terrible things fairy tales can be!

Each tyrant, each philosophy, each sect, each idea,

has both roar and mighty garden; has roses in the last light of dusk,
has this possibility that it isn't real.

My fingers tremble over those words. Not real.
Because that isn't quite what we take from fairy tales.

Their *not realness*.

We take a different message:
All will be well. Good will triumph.
The ugly skin will be shed.
The swan will fly.
It only takes love and patience.

It catches us out again and again. This trust.

But then these tales are written with a touch of magic.
A sense that things are never everyday.

There's that faint sense that the garden never dies
even when the beast is too sad and sullen to water it.

That the witch may screech but she is not truly evil.
She is not Hitler.

She does not receive her mail addressed: Jim Jones.

She is not Caligula nor Nero. She does not sacrifice maidens so
she can bathe in blood. She is only old and ugly and has our (passing) pity.

She has her faults but she is not schizoid nor paranoid.

Sometimes we laugh. Sometimes we forgive. Sometimes we dress up as her.



The rose garden that life promises in a million ads, and election speeches;
it has its thorns but we are seduced by the richness in the image.
We ask about costs, of goods and promises. We do sums in our heads.
We bathe in the picture summoned up. We forget the hiding beast,
until he leaps out to roar and rage. And then we're hurt.
We weren't ... we didn't ... we were just ...
stealing a rose, an orphan rose in an empty garden.

We didn't know, we say in injured tone, the rose was owned.
We thought it all, the garden, the winding pond with waterlillies,

the tumbled ruin beyond the trees was empty, was unowned, unused, stood idle in the evening.

And as for title deeds!

They know, those promisers, how eager we are to be hooked and reeled straight in; they know how we set aside any sense of doing wrong when the prize is worth having. They know we will overlook their economy with truths, if the garden is sufficiently easy to enter in. They know we have come to value image over substance, those sleek writers of modern fairy tales, they *know* ...



Children reading of that Beast, that Beauty: they ask another question: What if she didn't love enough to kiss him? What if the spell went wrong and she turned big and ugly? These children are not so willing to trust in happy ever after. They've heard the news too many nights.

They've heard of heat and drought and rising seas, a thousand times before they're ten. They doubt, they wonder, they know that trust is misplaced.

They know that if their dad promises a rose, he's only placating, only diverting, only letting them hope till he's back again, empty-handed.

The roses, he will say, the Beast ran out of water, and all his tears were not enough. Something they see through, but the alternative is only marginally better. I did see a witch, he says perking up, saw her plain as day beside the road. Worse than witches in any fairy tale.

There was something dismal and dried up about her; like someone who's run dry of spells. Doesn't matter about the kiss ...

She just stood there watching me and coughing in my dust.

I'm not sure that I felt comfortable, knowing her eyes bore into my back. But I'm home again, all is well.

No Beast, the children asked, no Beauty. No Rose?

'Fraid not. Real roses belong where childhood trust ...

And then he coughs and peters out. A moment's thought.

Always fix dsappointment. Never let it fester. It's in the guides to Happy Parenting ...

But there's *lovely* plastic roses in Woolies now; never die, even

have a perfume in the plastic. Much nicer.
But the children knew
they'd been cheated. No Beast. No Beauty. Just a modern facsimile.
Even the witch had coughed and died.

It was our land, the place where myth and legend grew,
and you pulled it out from under us; but we were firm in our resolve.
If we couldn't have roses
(this was much later)
they said: we will find
other things to love. Even fierce and dangerous things.

Because love, as Beast and Beauty knew, matters most.



CONCLUSION:

It came to me much later; that at least one lady in my dream of a secret garden had a name: Champernowne. I thought 'how strange' when it came back to me. Why should I dream of that?

But dreams know no boundaries.

Dreams take little things glossed over day by day,
And make of them something that is never quite of this world.

I remember now, though it wasn't recently, I was reading of Kat Champernowne and the little Elizabeth the First; Kat, good-hearted if naïve in the dog-eat-dog of Tudor power; a sucker I suppose we'd say for a handsome face; didn't understand the vaulting ambitions of those brothers, the Seymour 'boys'. Or it might've been, reading somewhere,

that Sir Walter Raleigh, he of gallantry on puddles, and tobacco as a curiosity, had a mother called Champernowne. But what a strange name, half-way between champagne and 'known', something known, or did it have a strange French meaning?

It might even be, as I browsed in a book of antique roses and noticed many with old-fashioned names, French names, people's names ... champagne yellow never a bright dandelion. There might've been ... something similar, just hung trembling at the edge
of consciousness as I drifted down into sleep.

That's the thing about dreams. They pick and choose with wild abandon. They take secret fears and mix them with unannounced delight. They Might be messages, omens, secret symbols. My dream might be a hint to go out and pick and study, plant and love some roses ... or it might be some past, some history, waiting to be unearthed. It might be none of these. It might be something I saw somewhere, a picture in a book or on a documentary set in a house with famous grounds, or gardens in a tourist brochure, or ladies painted onto china in an Old Wares shop. It doesn't matter. They walked and talked. Their faces, if I tip their large-brimmed hats up a little, were warm and kind. And in that scene was something I want for everyone. For me. For you. For everyone. This deep sense of peace.

