

Keep my poetry small.

I know some words that challenge rhyme;
Some phrases uncouth rhythms
Disrupt the pattern,
Threaten the end for a poetry that scans
And keeps its nature in a garden.

I met a man the other day
Was singing one. He carried it well
The burden of his song,
With something even of an awkward grace.

Only a faltering, a limp of rhythm,
Betrayed its weight, the effort of control.
'Disseminated sclerosis,'
He said so lightly, studiedly casual,
It was impressive.

Snapshot of Candida

Once, in a parked car,
Stretching across. A moment's still.
Constrained to be close to me,
How unaware the pose?

Yet nothing stirred more sensuous than
Delicately to trace,
With the first joint of a folded finger,
That fine, taut line
Along a fragile, perfect jaw
That marked and mocked mortality.

The gesture died, in shock
At its purity and threat of significance.
I'd almost prefer a simple lust,
The basic he and she
That hotly plays the cold percentages
To win a game that has no meaning.
Its dirty postcard snigger

Would be a fainter memory
 Than that image of beauty frozen
 And burned forever on the mind.

Why poetry?

In the whole of his life, my father
 Wrote but four lines of poetry.

On the fly-leaf of his Bible,
 Three weeks before his coming death,
 In verse that chimed with rhyme
 And was heavy with capitals,
 He asserted his Christian faith;
 And the language markers
 From the autodidact's
 Silver treasury of hymns
 Could not drag it down
 To mere banality.

I wonder that such a man
 At such a time should choose
 Suddenly to honour poetry with
 The most important thing he had to say.

Bowls.

I remember the heat of a still afternoon
 When I first watched bowls
 And my child's mind met
 The concept of bias like a revelation
 Whose meanings echo yet,
 The drifting path of indirection
 That seeks and finds a target
 Beyond direct assault.

I did not, and do not, know
 The complex laws of physics
 By which a shape defeats
 A waning speed and makes

That final trickle inwards;
 But I could sense the knowledge
 That issued instinctive from the bone
 In the old men playing,
 And as the 'heads' took shape
 In measured pace
 I could imagine the memory in the muscle
 The next bowl's course was built on.

For years I was a watcher,
 Content to grow in knowledge
 Of the pattern and the purpose within
 That summer's sense of beauty.
 Then, when I began to play,
 Came the player's obsessive joy
 In concentration and control,
 The fine adjustments of 'weight' and 'grass'
 That can sometimes - only sometimes -
 Make those tight beloved patterns,
 Patterns that shift
 With each succeeding bowl
 In accumulated intricacy.

I know a metaphor hovers there,
 A something very nearly said
 About life or love or poetry;
 But if I could state it,
 I would have missed it.

It's only a game.

My father and I had a code
 Of game-playing,
 Instinctual, never stated,
 As unwritten as the British constitution
 And as strong.

But the deep respect for the rule of law
 That is claimed to underpin
 Real life's behaviours, could never
 Be as rigid as a game demands.

Your contract with a game
 Requires adherence
 To every sub-clause,
 Fastidious and exact,
 Or the house of cards
 (Or dominoes or bowls)
 Will crumple and collapse.
 'Thou shalt not cheat,' is written large
 In letters Caxton would have envied.

But here's the trick:
 The framework once accepted,
 Supporting and restricting,
 There is then no quarter given;
 The second biggest rule is
 To concentrate on winning.
 The clash of skill and wit
 Allows the challenge and the tease
 The bluff and counter-bluff
 The subtle misdirection,
 For all are war-games that demand
 A violence and aggression.
 There is no fun if you let the other win,
 No kindness, but an insult
 That gives the game away.

What I most remember with my father
 Was our unashamed delight
 In our own high cunning,
 The double burst of laughter
 At the malicious wickedness
 Of the trap fallen into.

My mother was a sorry case,
 Who never understood.
 The mimic violence hurt her;
 She felt the wounds as real.
 Her pain was self-defeating,
 For so badly did she need to win
 That she took away her joy

By the childishness of cheating,
 Forgetting that
 What in the murky greyness
 Of real life's morality
 May be thought of as merely venial,
 In the universe of game
 Is mortal and unforgiven.

When, on so many a summer's evening
 With the air still velvet warm,
 My father bowled with me,
 The challenge was always needle-sharp.
 When we played with others, it was
 A social grace, a subtle pressure,
 Lightly to concede a doubtful shot;
 With just the two of us contending,
 We would always, always measure.
 The distinction was a statement
 That neither could have said.

Bowls - an honest bias.

Once, on a rich, warm August evening,
 I remember a game so finely shaped
 Towards perfection that its telling
 Raises an eyebrow against my honesty.

With easy confidence
 My early lead extended
 And the game seemed mine,
 Until the first arrived
 Of his supporters club of cronies.
 Their presence jolted my father's pride;
 The spectator comment, finely judged
 And placed with perfect accuracy,
 Disturbed my concentration.

End by tight end
 He crept back,

Playing far above himself
And favoured (I claim) unfailingly
By the fickle 'rub of the green'.
The watchers grew in number
And their applause swelled,
Acceptably partisan,
For their generation's champion
To strike a blow for them.

I've never swallowed those stories
They tell of another sport
Of 'last man in and six to win'
And all that kind of rot,
But at twenty all, believe me,
My father's final bowl
Nestled against the jack
And left me one to play.

It was not in our code to let him win:
If guessed, the wound would hurt;
Less than my best a betrayal of
The game's essential truth.
My own last was an equal,
Almost too fully fulfilling
The finely judged intention
Of a little added weight.

Through the only gap it trickled
To rest beside the jack
Leaving just the thinness
Of space to let me shake
His winner's hand in honour
And share the glow of his glory,
The warm delight of his friends.

It was a moment of golden memory
When you could hear above
The flutter of life's sparrow
In the high rafters of the great hall -
And were glad that you still could.

Bowls - the Last End.

Now on this rich, warm August evening,
I savoured the familiar comfort of the park,
The straight lines of its careful neatness,
Trimmed and clipped and edged.

Time (become so important now)
Flickered uncertain in my head,
The present a distorting echo
Of so many evenings past.

This last half year,
Shared in the knowledge
Of what was still to come
And the ever-sharpening guess
At its limit of time,
Was drawing to a close.

I had not thought my father
Would ever play again.
Tonight's insistence on
A ten-end game
Was some kind of statement,
An assertion of normality
Against the shrinking narrowness
Of a life that was going.

But as end succeeded end
The weakness and the effort
Broke the rhythm of his style,
The precision of control.

Desperately I tried,
Used all my cunning,
To help him win without
Revealing my betrayal.
But every careless looseness
Released instinctive skill

And every precise misplacement
Trickled to the jack.

Until his strength was gone
And only the will was playing,
Our conversation dying
Into a silent battle
To complete a promised task.

As he turned and shook
My winner's hand,
I could have believed it was
The customary observance
Of a formal etiquette,
Had I not known
It was our final end.

Loss of momentum?

Have I reached the age
When the mind's patterns set
And the imaginative leap
That shakes the kaleidoscope,
Destroying to reform,
Is just not on?

On so many questions
I've just given up,
Or found it easier
To settle for a working answer
Than keep on thinking.
For making up your mind
Is making up a story
To limit the uncertainties
Of the principles you live by.

Largely innocent of formal knowledge
I've lived so far in Newton's world,
Content with what has filtered down

Of its billiard ball causality.
 But recently I've heard strange tales
 Of an unmapped microworld
 Where my clear, precise reality
 Is lost in a murky fog
 Of fitful probability.
 Standing on my shoulders, my clever son
 Impersonates my periscope;
 But the words he says keep sounding
 'Here be monsters,' to my dull ears.

Though the hardening mental arteries
 Do not yet require the comfort
 Of the old man's armchair
 That runs on gliding castors
 Downhill all the way
 Under the serious gravity
 Of even Newton's universe,
 I think just the same
 I'll leave others to explore
 The agnostic paradoxes
 Of the quantum world.

The Serial Killer.

Incessantly, restlessly moving,
 At random through the land,
 He culls the females of the flock;
 For months on end he feeds his habit
 On a junk food diet of easy hookers,
 Trolling the lower reaches of the cities
 For the marginal, throwaway people.

But ever and again the need arises
 To gorge on tortured innocence:
 The young wife's laundered neatness
 Stirs a sudden visceral squirm,
 The first exciting promise
 Of that final, defiling shudder
 As the knife thuds in.

Such misbegotten shape of mind

Should shuffle after its prey
 In expected ugliness,
 A slavering, shambling beast;
 Not appear the stranger beside you
 Brisk in a business suit
 Or tanned and casually smiling
 In shirt-sleeved charm.

Diversity and Difference.

Sitting in the Light Bite
 I watch the human faces,
 Munch my bacon roll
 And listen to their voices;
 And I relish the variety,
 The rich and tangy flavours,
 Of man's particularity,
 The diversity I share in -
 Until my son rebukes me
 For the impertinence of staring.

The diversity of humankind
 Is a blessing to be cherished:
 It is the soil from whose richness
 The sense of self is nourished;
 It allows the sports of talent
 And makes beauty possible.
 But among the implications
 Of a variety so ample
 Are all kinds of inequalities,
 And I surprise myself in saying
 They must be accepted as
 A price worth paying.

But it's hard. And as I say it
 There flash across my mind
 Pictures of a wounded
 Scarred humanity,
 A newsreel of disfigurements,
 Inborn or self-inflicted,
 Of minds that puzzle to think

And warm souls trying to shine
 (And almost giving up)
 Through gross deformity.

Forgive my logic if I don't allow
 This conclusion to my premise;
 Forgive my anger if I rage against
 The hand that threw the dice,
 Or fail to see a pattern of sense
 In a game that breaks the weak;
 Forgive me if I put tight limits
 To the joy in difference of which I speak -
 To accept the price that some must pay
 Requires a theology more grand
 In sweep than I can compass,
 With my only human mind.

Polarities. I

Despite the wounds of childhood
 Only partly healed, I will
 Admit social difference as
 An aspect of the diversity
 That we must value in mankind
 And only doubtfully suppress;
 For the individuality
 The random accidents that
 Compose us, of character and skill,
 The chance heirlooms of parentage
 That are more than economic,
 Will find expression - and this is one.

Better that than either
 The bound feet of tradition's
 Immobility of structure
 Or the equal distorting lie
 Of boiler-suited sameness.

Indeed, its graded subtleties
 Are silly foibles we forgive,
 Harmless as the sudden rash
 Of porches and period doors

That proclaim and prettify
 The new-bought council houses.
 If only all the differences were so
 Scaled within a range of tolerance,
 I could embrace within my joy
 A myriad distinctions of the social kind,
 Could learn to quell residual envy
 And take pleasure even in their shifting
 Dappled shading, dark to light,
 Their muted tints of graded Watercolour washes.

But what offends the eye is the glare
 Of the harsh polarities, the extremes
 In contrast of the sick society,
 That stretch the range of shading
 From dark and light to black and white,
 Making division from diversity.
 And these we need not have,
 For this is a game where we
 Can make the rules to be
 Gentler and more loving.

II

A memory stays with me
 And will not be forgotten:
 Of a wall that was all map,
 With colour-coded pins
 Recording the what and where
 Of my town's social work -
 And in one corner someone,
 I saw,
 Had spilled a tube of Smarties.

My region that straddles the Clyde
 Writes it large again,
 This geography of apartheid -
 The enclaves of leafy comfort
 And the barren council wastelands,
 No-go areas of division

That multiply our deprivations.

Pebbles.

The beach was a sloping bank of pebbles,
A treasure store of roundnesses
Infinitely varied in size
And muted subtleties of colour,
Warm and smooth to the palm
Under a summer sun.

I began to pick up those
That caught and pleased my eye,
Following some principle
In selecting and rejecting,
But only slowly seeing
That my ever stricter standards
Were refining an elite of those
Most closely adhering to
An idea of abstract, rounded
Geometric forms.

It became an obsessive game
To seek the perfect sphere,
The disc that was a circle,
The symmetric flat ellipse -
As childishly regressive
And doomed to failure as
Trying to pattern in balance
Steps on a pavement's cracks;
For my collected tiny hoard,
My best of approximations,
All had some deviation
Imperfectly applying
A theory's ideal shape.

The tightening tension burst,
Sudden in admiration
Of their thrown resistance
To the sea's entropic mill,
Their stubbornness of will
That, even in the losing of

Attrition's grinding war,
Insisted on retaining
Some message, however faint,
Of what once they were.

Imperfection.

I once thought of beauty
As a standard we all miss,
A kind of sum of all our bests
Averaged to a smoothness -
But just a little taller
And a shade more finely drawn.

But the beauty we can love
Adheres to no heightened norm,
Is not the incarnation
Of some Platonic form;
And in our secret hearts
We love its deviation,
Its quirk of surprise
That defeats prediction,
With a fetching, crooked smile
Or lopsided, winning grin.

A generation later, across the gap,
The only memories of a former love
That still can catch the heart
Are the weakness of a voice
That sometimes cracked,
And the stylish placement of her feet
Self-consciously disguising
An ungainliness of gait.

Homage.

Amateurs like me when they're learning
Nearly always go for oils,
Working from darkness towards the light

In layers of opacity that allow
 A continual touching-up and tinkering,
 Always adding just another stroke
 And never knowing when to stop.

Watercolour is more difficult,
 Allowing at its purest just
 Three one-shot washes
 Before it dulls and muddies:
 A general impression of tone and light,
 A shaping and shading towards solidity,
 Some touches of detail, but restrained
 Or too much is lost for what is gained.

You can't go over, you can't correct -
 It either comes off or it doesn't.
 But when it does, it lives
 In spontaneous, vibrant joy
 Beyond the reach of oils,
 Catching the mood of a moment,
 The sudden flash of seeing,
 Translucency shining with light.

Norman MacCaig never painted -
 The book was wrong I read,
 But he wrote in watercolour,
 In a single continuity
 Of flowing washes merging,
 The last stroke added
 While the first still shines with wet.

The Nearly Man.

Behold the man who's made it:
 How well he fills the role,
 Plumping out to a roundness
 Of shining, smooth urbanity,
 Until the clothing of authority
 Is worn with the easy comfort
 Of suiting made to measure.

But don't look at the nearly man -

Ten years older than his boss,
 And the last five spent in shrinking
 To fit the role that's left,
 His promise drily withering
 To the pale, dyspeptic gauntness
 Of sour efficiency,
 Until he almost fits
 His ill-cut, off-the-peg
 Administrative grey.

January, 1985.

Dancing.

I still retain a liking
 For the traditional, formal dance;
 There was comfort in the framework
 Of rigid simplicities
 And identical, repeated patterns.
 For a slow, ungifted learner,
 The mere achievement
 Of almost getting them right
 Was good enough for a time.

But soon, outgrowing competence,
 I imagined their restraints
 Imposed a chafing harness
 On individuality,
 An irksome, stunting sameness
 Restricting its expression.
 It was thus I chose to learn
 Those that we called modern,
 Rejoicing in the swoop and glide
 Of a freer patterning
 That allowed variety
 Within adherence to some idea
 Of shapefulness and order.

In today's pragmatic pluralism,
 Even the subtlety of this control
 Is everywhere abandoned,

And a hard-won skill is left
Redundant
To atrophy unused.
I look, but all I find
Are fitful, broken fragments
Of a pattern of sense,
Scattering into an abyss
Of frightening freedom,
The spasmodic body-jerking
Of stroboscopic epilepsy
That stirs a yearning
For earlier, simple certainties,
That I might dance again

Dream Comfort.

I was walking with my father
Down a familiar street,
Just at a spot precisely
I could take and show you now,
Bleak and drab in the greyness
Of a low and sunless sky.

Intent, I leaned towards
His thick-set roundness, wrapped
In a half-coat's bulky warmth,
Struggling against the deafness,
The barrier that age was building;
But he looked ahead unseeing -
And did not hear.

Suddenly it was elsewhere
A place not far but different,
With a sun that had some heat,
And a sloping grassy bank's
Pillowed mounds of long
Dry, trailing softness.

We lay on our backs to rest,
Content to absorb the warmth
And slowly be soothed to ease.
We did not speak or need to,

But I moved to place an arm
 Below the breadth of his shoulders,
 Supporting and protecting,
 Pleased with their burden of weight
 And that he did not reject
 This reversal the years had brought.

I woke and thought to tell him
 Of the strangeness of this dream,
 Slow, but slow, to remember
 That he was dead long since.
 It did not, and will not, happen -
 I know it had no truth;
 But something remained of the comfort
 That had taken so long to come.

Face to face.

Seen through a glass darkly,
 A fitful impression of sense
 Shimmers momently
 At the blurring edge of vision.

The morning after is the bleaker,
 When discontinuities
 Disconnect again.

Infidelity

And let us now praise man for false effects:
 For ready-pasted rolls of tile and brick
 And Cotswold stone that's only hardboard thick;
 For slates and corks the eye inspects
 To see the joining line it now expects,
 The flaw in lino's not quite perfect trick;
 The marble worktop's smoothness that's too slick;
 The woodgrain's shine that just too well reflects.
 Although my house is full of phoney things
 That mark my poverty of purse and taste,

It's not to hymn the mock-creator's praise,
 But just the shame that human weakness brings,
 Whose love for one unreachable and chaste
 Embraces her likeness in a cheaper face.

But for the grace of God.

For him the world was a poem that rhymed,
 Sounding to the rhythm of a singing joy;
 And he danced to the beat of a distant tune,
 In touch with the music of mysteries.
 He could abandon himself to its pattern
 And move in the sureness of given grace.

I've learned to live in a songless world,
 Managing just to stay erect,
 To hold by vigilance a shifting balance,
 Adjusting and correcting stumbling steps,
 Inventing little local tunes -
 Transient crutches of purpose

Officer material.

Walking home of an evening late
 At a brisk but measured pace,
 The Captain of the Boys' Brigade
 Cuts a clean-cut, dapper figure,
 Still erectly on parade
 And glowing with a heightened vigour,
 With an assured assertion
 Of limited perfection
 In the crisp, resounding peel
 Of each steel-tipped heel.

From a straggling group of casual youths,
 Untidily parting to let him pass,
 The merest imagined hint of a snigger
 Bursts a fury in his head,
 A flash of fantasy whirling sudden
 Fists and feet at rib and groin,
 Pulping their blood-gouting faces
 In a joy of retribution.

The pace does not falter
 Nor his carriage alter;
 The hate stays unspoken -
 But his grace is broken.

Knowing the names.

In the brightness after rain,
 the shock of joy in greenness,
 that sudden rush of love
 for the shapes and shades of trees.

I know those shapes so well
 their every difference;
 I can separate their mingled
 subtle colours, so varied
 within a narrow palette.

But I do not know their names
 and the few I know
 are words without pictures,
 interchangeable.

Does it matter that
 I do not know their names
 if I love them,
 and can I love them
 if I do not know their names?

Fatherly advice.

You bring us, Audrey, a gift of light
 Brightening our darknesses;
 Your hair aflame plays its metaphor,
 Aureole of burning glory
 Framing a face, pale in repose,
 That flashes sudden in animation
 To glow with welcoming warmth.

Don't ever lose your joy in others
 Or learn the caution that would hide it.
 Show it always and watch them blossom,

Turning to meet the sun of your smile
And open for you their love and beauty.

The edge of things.

I live so near the edge of things
always craning to catch a glimpse
below
shuddering back to safer ground
then inching forward again
unwisely.

I look to see in other's eyes
my awareness of fragile footing.
They can't all be dwellers far inland
huddled for safety round tribal
campfires and their rings of light
singing old songs and denying
rumours of distant crumbling cliffs?

Have they never spent an hour
unwillingly awake and staring
down at blackness
or do they only dream asleep
of falling?

In Inverkirkraig bay.

There we were, two townies, seated
in the stillness of an evening
on a dedicated bench
in Inverkirkraig bay
staring at everything and nothing
after a day of scenery
that stunned the senses.

A splash at the edge of vision was not
a god throwing rocks in the water
but a salmon jumping clear.

Again and again it happened

within a narrow compass
 the same fish always different -
 once, we would swear on Bibles,
 running along on its tail -
 and you bubbled a giggle of pleasure
 at each shock of expected surprise.

It required an explanation
 but my logic could only lamely
 fill the gap of ignorance
 and you insisted it was playing
 from an excess of joy in life.

It seemed the best of reasons
 until our landlord later told us
 it was getting rid of sea-lice.

Ingratitude.

(A poem for Nora Whyte)

Suburban trees are a generous gift:
 Their deciduous leafiness softens the skyline,
 A sheltering backcloth to our human habitation;
 Or, seen from the high braes, quilts
 The patchwork of roofs, blurring and gentling
 The contours and corners of man's construction,
 Their merging roundnesses countering
 The rigid straightness of his squares
 With a patterned shapefulness
 Beyond such regularity.

Some narrow souls resent
 Their presumptuous pride in growing tall
 Beyond man, assuming a grandeur
 Of age and scale that outgrows
 His garden instinct to subdue,
 Confine and edge and border.

Some such injured pettiness must dictate
 The hiring of mercenary, alien firs
 To invade nature's fastnesses

With their marching armies of obedience.
The serried ranks of cellulose,
Of apprentice, upright paper, make
A fetish of uniformity greater
Than Frederick's Prussian guards.

The wounded, ditch-scarred hills of Arran,
Drained of more than water, are witness
To the limited geometries of the human mind
In the wilful blinkers of a false economy.
Remove them once and the shock
Would sweep down the glens
In a chain-saw squeal
Of ululating horror.

She made a garden

She made a garden of her life -
Not squared in rigid regularities
Or crowded with the cliches
Of artificiality,
But a generous, spacious landscape
To live and breathe in.
Hers was a creative art
Submerged in its medium,
An understated patterning
You could forget to notice.

At times she could herself forget
The exclusion and control,
The wild tangle outside her wall
Of unmeaning and invasive growth
Waiting for her spell to weaken.