

Pied Beauty

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

Glory be to God for dappled things –
 For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
 For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
 Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
 Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;
 And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.
 All things counter, original, spare, strange;
 Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
 With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
 He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
 Praise him.

pied . . . dappled . . . couple-colour] of different shades of colour; two-tone
 brindled] streaked with different colours
 fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls] falling chestnuts as bright as glowing coals
 counter] opposite, duplicate
 fathers-forth] creates, engenders

continues
 privets]
 demiurg

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A Birthday

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

My heart is like a singing bird
Whose nest is in a watered shoot;
My heart is like an apple-tree
Whose boughs are bent with thickset fruit;
My heart is like a rainbow shell
That paddles in a halcyon sea;
My heart is gladder than all these
Because my love is come to me.

Raise me a dais of silk and down;
Hang it with vair and purple dyes;
Carve it in doves and pomegranates,
And peacocks with a hundred eyes;
Work it in gold and silver grapes,
In leaves and silver fleurs-de-lys;
Because the birthday of my life
Is come, my love is come to me.

halcyon] idyllic, calm

dais] platform

down] soft feathers

vair] squirrel fur

eyes] i.e. the circles in a peacock's tail

fleurs-de-lys] three-petalled flowers

The Woodspurge

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

The wind flapped loose, the wind was still,
Shaken out dead from tree and hill:
I had walked on at the wind's will, –
I sat now, for the wind was still.

Between my knees my forehead was, –
My lips, drawn in, said not Alas!
My hair was over in the grass,
My naked ears heard the day pass.

My eyes, wide open, had the run
Of some ten weeds to fix upon;
Among those few, out of the sun,
The woodspurge flowered, three cups in one.

From perfect grief there need not be
Wisdom or even memory:
One thing then learnt remains to me, –
The woodspurge has a cup of three.

at the wind's will] wherever the wind blew me
Woodspurge] a wild plant, whose flowers form in groups of three from a cup-like stem

Summer Farm

NORMAN MacCAIG

Straws like tame lightnings lie about the grass
And hang zigzag on hedges. Green as glass
The water in the horse-trough shines.
Nine ducks go wobbling by in two straight lines.

A hen stares at nothing with one eye,
Then picks it up. Out of an empty sky
A swallow falls and, flickering through
The barn, dives up again into the dizzy blue.

I lie, not thinking, in the cool, soft grass,
Afraid of where a thought might take me – as
This grasshopper with plated face
Unfolds his legs and finds himself in space.

Self under self, a pile of selves I stand
Threaded on time, and with metaphysic hand
Lift the farm like a lid and see
Farm within farm, and in the centre, me.

plated] i.e. as if comprising sections of metal plate
metaphysic] concerned with the nature of abstract or transcendent truth

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Pike

TED HUGHES

Pike, three inches long, perfect
Pike in all parts, green tigering the gold.
Killers from the egg: the malevolent aged grin.
They dance on the surface among the flies.

Or move, stunned by their own grandeur
Over a bed of emerald, silhouette
Of submarine delicacy and horror.
A hundred feet long in their world.

In ponds, under the heat-struck lily pads –
Gloom of their stillness:
Logged on last year's black leaves, watching upwards.
Or hung in an amber cavern of weeds

The jaws' hooked clamp and fangs
Not to be changed at this date;
A life subdued to its instrument;
The gills kneading quietly, and the pectorals.

Three we kept behind glass,
Jungled in weed: three inches, four,
And four and a half: fed fry to them –
Suddenly there were two. Finally one.

Pike] large, predatory freshwater fish
tigering] i.e. making stripes like a tiger's skin
pectorals] lateral fins
fry] newly hatched fish

With a sag belly and the grin it was born with.
 And indeed they spare nobody.
 Two, six pounds each, over two feet long.
 High and dry and dead in the willow-herb -

One jammed past its gills down the other's gullet:
 The outside eye stared: as a vice locks -
 The same iron in this eye
 Though its film shrank in death.

A pond I fished, fifty years across,
 Whose lilies and muscular tench
 Had outlasted every visible stone
 Of the monastery that planted them -

Stilled legendary depth:
 It was as deep as England. It held
 Pike too immense to stir, so immense and old
 That past nightfall I dared not cast

But silently cast and fished
 With the hair frozen on my head
 For what might move, for what eye might move.
 The still splashes on the dark pond.

Owls hushing the floating woods
 Frail on my ear against the dream
 Darkness beneath night's darkness had freed,
 That rose slowly towards me, watching.

willow-herb] yellow loosestrife, a wild plant
 film] the eye's surface
 tench] freshwater fish
 cast] flick the line of a fishing-rod

haleyon
 (dais] pl
 down] s
 wair] squ
 eyes] i.e
 fleur-de

Hunting Snake

JUDITH WRIGHT

Sun-warmed in this late season's grace
under the autumn's gentlest sky
we walked, and froze half-through a pace.
The great black snake went reeling by.

Head-down, tongue flickering on the trail
he quested through the parting grass;
sun glazed his curves of diamond scale,
and we lost breath to watch him pass.

What track he followed, what small food
fled living from his fierce intent,
we scarcely thought; still as we stood
our eyes went with him as he went.

Cold, dark and splendid he was gone
into the grass that hid his prey.
We took a deeper breath of day,
looked at each other, and went on.

Horses

EDWIN MUIR

Those lumbering horses in the steady plough,
On the bare field – I wonder why, just now,
They seemed terrible, so wild and strange,
Like magic power on the stony grange.

Perhaps some childish hour has come again,
When I watched fearful, through the blackening rain,
Their hooves like pistons in an ancient mill
Move up and down, yet seem as standing still.

Their conquering hooves which trod the stubble down
Were ritual that turned the field to brown,
And their great hulks were seraphim of gold,
Or mute ecstatic monsters on the mould.

And oh the rapture, when, one furrow done,
They marched broad-breasted to the sinking sun!
The light flowed off their bossy sides in flakes;
The furrows rolled behind like struggling snakes.

But when at dusk with steaming nostrils home
They came, they seemed gigantic in the gloam,
And warm and glowing with mysterious fire
That lit their smouldering bodies in the mire.

grange] farmhouse
seraphim] angels
mould] ground
bossy] swelling
gloom] dusk
mire] mud

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The Cockroach

KEVIN HALLIGAN

I watched a giant cockroach start to pace,
Skirting a ball of dust that rode the floor.
At first he seemed quite satisfied to trace
A path between the wainscot and the door,
But soon he turned to jog in crooked rings,
Circling the rusty table leg and back,
And flipping right over to scratch his wings –
As if the victim of a mild attack
Of restlessness that worsened over time.
After a while, he climbed an open shelf
And stopped. He looked uncertain where to go.
Was this due payment for some vicious crime
A former life had led to? I don't know,
Except I thought I recognised myself.

skirting] avoiding by a detour
wainscot] panelling

The City Planners

MARGARET ATWOOD

Cruising these residential Sunday
streets in dry August sunlight:
what offends us is
the sanities:
the houses in pedantic rows, the planted
sanitary trees, assert
levelness of surface like a rebuke
to the dent in our car door.
No shouting here, or
shatter of glass; nothing more abrupt
than the rational whine of a power mower
cutting a straight swath in the discouraged grass.

But though the driveways neatly
sidestep hysteria
by being even, the roofs all display
the same slant of avoidance to the hot sky,
certain things:
the smell of spilt oil a faint
sickness lingering in the garages,
a splash of paint on brick surprising as a bruise,
a plastic hose poised in a vicious
coil; even the too-fixed stare of the wide windows

give momentary access to
the landscape behind or under
the future cracks in the plaster

sanities] *sanity* = the condition of mental health
swath] track, row

when the houses, capsized, will slide
obliquely into the-clay seas, gradual as glaciers
that right now nobody notices.

That is where the City Planners
with the insane faces of political conspirators
are scattered over unsurveyed
territories, concealed from each other,
each in his own private blizzard;

guessing directions, they sketch
transitory lines rigid as wooden borders
on a wall in the white vanishing air

tracing the panic of suburb
order in a bland madness of snows.

The Planners

BOEY KIM CHENG

They plan. They build. All spaces are gridded,
filled with permutations of possibilities.
The buildings are in alignment with the roads
which meet at desired points
linked by bridges all hang
in the grace of mathematics.
They build and will not stop.
Even the sea draws back
and the skies surrender.

They erase the flaws,
the blemishes of the past, knock off
useless blocks with dental dexterity.
All gaps are plugged
with gleaming gold.
The country wears perfect rows
of shining teeth.
Anaesthesia, amnesia, hypnosis.
They have the means.
They have it all so it will not hurt,
so history is new again.
The piling will not stop.
The drilling goes right through
the fossils of last century.

But my heart would not bleed
poetry. Not a single drop
to stain the blueprint
of our past's tomorrow.

piling] building foundations
blueprint] architectural plan

Where I Come From

ELIZABETH BREWSTER

People are made of places. They carry with them
 hints of jungles or mountains, a tropic grace
 or the cool eyes of sea-gazers. Atmosphere of cities
 how different drops from them, like the smell of smog
 or the almost-not-smell of tulips in the spring.
 nature tidily plotted in little squares
 with a fountain in the centre; museum smell,
 art also tidily plotted with a guidebook;
 or the smell of work, glue factories maybe,
 chromium-plated offices; smell of subways
 crowded at rush hours.

Where I come from, people
 carry woods in their minds, acres of pine woods;
 blueberry patches in the burned-out bush;
 wooden farmhouses, old, in need of paint,
 with yards where hens and chickens circle about,
 clucking aimlessly; battered schoolhouses
 behind which violets grow. Spring and winter
 are the mind's chief seasons: ice and the breaking of ice.

A door in the mind blows open, and there blows
 a frosty wind from fields of snow.

Sonnet: Composed Upon Westminster Bridge

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth like a garment wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

Westminster Bridge| i.e. across the River Thames in London
steep| bathe (in light)
glideth| glides

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Continuum

ALLEN CURNOW

The moon rolls over the roof and falls behind
my house, and the moon does neither of these things,
I am talking about myself.

It's not possible to get off to sleep or
the subject or the planet, nor to think thoughts.
Better barefoot it out the front

door and lean from the porch across the privets
and the palms into the washed-out creation,
a dark place with two particular

bright clouds dusted (query) by the moon, one's mine
the other's an adversary, which may depend
on the wind, or something.

A long moment stretches, the next one is not
on time. Not unaccountably the chill of
the planking underfoot rises


in the throat, for its part the night sky empties
the whole of its contents down. Turn on a bare
heel, close the door behind

on the author, cringing demiurge, who picks up
his litter and his tools and paces me back
to bed, stealthily in step.

continuum] that which extends continuously
privets] hedges
demiurge] creator

Their eyes as brilliant and as wide as night
Gleamed with a cruel apocalyptic light.
Their manes the leaping ire of the wind
Lifted with rage invisible and blind.

Ah, now it fades! It fades! and I must pine
Again for that dread country crystalline,
Where the black field and the still-standing tree
Were bright and fearful presences to me.



crystalline] as if made of crystal

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A Different History

SUJATA BHATT

Great Pan is not dead;
he simply emigrated
to India.
Here, the gods roam freely,
disguised as snakes or monkeys;
every tree is sacred
and it is a sin
to be rude to a book.
It is a sin to shove a book aside
with your foot,
a sin to slam books down
hard on a table,
a sin to toss one carelessly
across a room.
You must learn how to turn the pages gently
without disturbing Sarasvati,
without offending the tree
from whose wood the paper was made.

Which language
has not been the oppressor's tongue?
Which language
truly meant to murder someone?
And how does it happen
that after the torture,
after the soul has been cropped
with a long scythe swooping out
of the conqueror's face –
the unborn grandchildren
grow to love that strange language.

Pan] the Ancient Greek god of nature, part-man, part-goat
Sarasvati] the Hindu goddess of the arts