

Sir John Betjeman

- poems -

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A Bay In Anglesey

The sleepy sound of a tea-time tide
Slaps at the rocks the sun has dried,

Too lazy, almost, to sink and lift
Round low peninsulas pink with thrift.

The water, enlarging shells and sand,
Grows greener emerald out from land

And brown over shadowy shelves below
The waving forests of seaweed show.

Here at my feet in the short cliff grass
Are shells, dried bladderwrack, broken glass,

Pale blue squills and yellow rock roses.
The next low ridge that we climb discloses

One more field for the sheep to graze
While, scarcely seen on this hottest of days,

Far to the eastward, over there,
Snowdon rises in pearl-grey air.

Multiple lark-song, whispering bents,
The thymy, turfy and salty scents

And filling in, brimming in, sparkling and free
The sweet susurrations of incoming sea.

Sir John Betjeman

A Shropshire Lad

The gas was on in the Institute,
The flare was up in the gym,
A man was running a mineral line,
A lass was singing a hymn,
When Captain Webb the Dawley man,
Captain Webb from Dawley,
Came swimming along the old canal
That carried the bricks to Lawley.
Swimming along -
Swimming along -
Swimming along from Severn,
And paying a call at Dawley Bank while swimming along to Heaven.

The sun shone low on the railway line
And over the bricks and stacks
And in at the upstairs windows
Of the Dawley houses' backs
When we saw the ghost of Captain Webb,
Webb in a water sheeting,
Come dripping along in a bathing dress
To the Saturday evening meeting.
Dripping along -
Dripping along -
To the Congregational Hall;
Dripping and still he rose over the sill and faded away in a wall.

There wasn't a man in Oakengates
That hadn't got hold of the tale,
And over the valley in Ironbridge,
And round by Coalbrookdale,
How Captain Webb the Dawley man,
Captain Webb from Dawley,
Rose rigid and dead from the old canal
That carries the bricks to Lawley.
Rigid and dead -
Rigid and dead -
To the Saturday congregation,
Paying a call at Dawley Bank on the way to his destination.

Sir John Betjeman

A Subaltern's Love Song

Miss J.Hunter Dunn, Miss J.Hunter Dunn,
Furnish'd and burnish'd by Aldershot sun,
What strenuous singles we played after tea,
We in the tournament - you against me!

Love-thirty, love-forty, oh! weakness of joy,
The speed of a swallow, the grace of a boy,
With carefullest carelessness, gaily you won,
I am weak from your loveliness, Joan Hunter Dunn

Miss Joan Hunter Dunn, Miss Joan Hunter Dunn,
How mad I am, sad I am, glad that you won,
The warm-handled racket is back in its press,
But my shock-headed victor, she loves me no less.

Her father's euonymus shines as we walk,
And swing past the summer-house, buried in talk,
And cool the verandah that welcomes us in
To the six-o'clock news and a lime-juice and gin.

The scent of the conifers, sound of the bath,
The view from my bedroom of moss-dappled path,
As I struggle with double-end evening tie,
For we dance at the Golf Club, my victor and I.

On the floor of her bedroom lie blazer and shorts,
And the cream-coloured walls are be-trophied with sports,
And westering, questioning settles the sun,
On your low-leaded window, Miss Joan Hunter Dunn.

The Hillman is waiting, the light's in the hall,
The pictures of Egypt are bright on the wall,
My sweet, I am standing beside the oak stair
And there on the landing's the light on your hair.

By roads "not adopted", by woodland ways,
She drove to the club in the late summer haze,
Into nine-o'clock Camberley, heavy with bells
And mushroomy, pine-woody, evergreen smells.

Miss Joan Hunter Dunn, Miss Joan Hunter Dunn,
I can hear from the car park the dance has begun,
Oh! Surry twilight! importunate band!
Oh! strongly adorable tennis-girl's hand!

Around us are Rovers and Austins afar,
Above us the intimate roof of the car,
And here on my right is the girl of my choice,
With the tilt of her nose and the chime of her voice.

And the scent of her wrap, and the words never said,
And the ominous, ominous dancing ahead.

We sat in the car park till twenty to one
And now I'm engaged to Miss Joan Hunter Dunn.

Sir John Betjeman

An Edwardian Sunday, Broomhill, Sheffield

High dormers are rising
So sharp and surprising,
And ponticum edges
The driveways of gravel;
Stone houses from ledges
Look down on ravines.
The vision can travel
From gable to gable,
Italianate mansion
And turretted stable,
A sylvan expansion
So varied and jolly
Where laurel and holly
Commingle their greens.

Serene on a Sunday
The sun glitters hotly
O'er mills that on Monday
With engines will hum.
By tramway excursion
To Dore and to Totley
In search of diversion
The millworkers come;
But in our arboreta
The sounds are discreeter
Of shoes upon stone -
The worshippers wending
To welcoming chapel,
Companioned or lone;
And over a pew there
See loveliness lean,
As Eve shows her apple
Through rich bombazine;
What love is born new there
In blushing eighteen!

Your prospects will please her,
The iron-king's daughter,
Up here on Broomhill;
Strange Hallamshire, County
Of dearth and of bounty,
Of brown tumbling water
And furnace and mill.
Your own Ebenezer
Looks down from his height
On back street and alley
And chemical valley
Laid out in the light;
On ugly and pretty
Where industry thrives
In this hill-shadowed city
Of razors and knives.

Sir John Betjeman

Back From Australia

Cocooned in Time, at this inhuman height,
The packaged food tastes neutrally of clay,
We never seem to catch the running day
But travel on in everlasting night
With all the chic accoutrements of flight:
Lotions and essences in neat array
And yet another plastic cup and tray.
"Thank you so much. Oh no, I'm quite all right".

At home in Cornwall hurrying autumn skies
Leave Bray Hill barren, Stepper jutting bare,
And hold the moon above the sea-wet sand.
The very last of late September dies
In frosty silence and the hills declare
How vast the sky is, looked at from the land.

Sir John Betjeman

Business Girls

From the geyser ventilators
Autumn winds are blowing down
On a thousand business women
Having baths in Camden Town

Waste pipes chuckle into runnels,
Steam's escaping here and there,
Morning trains through Camden cutting
Shake the Crescent and the Square.

Early nip of changeeful autumn,
Dahlias glimpsed through garden doors,
At the back precarious bathrooms
Jutting out from upper floors;

And behind their frail partitions
Business women lie and soak,
Seeing through the draughty skylight
Flying clouds and railway smoke.

Rest you there, poor unbelov'd ones,
Lap your loneliness in heat.
All too soon the tiny breakfast,
Trolley-bus and windy street!

Sir John Betjeman

Christmas

The bells of waiting Advent ring,
The Tortoise stove is lit again
And lamp-oil light across the night
Has caught the streaks of winter rain
In many a stained-glass window sheen
From Crimson Lake to Hookers Green.

The holly in the windy hedge
And round the Manor House the yew
Will soon be stripped to deck the ledge,
The altar, font and arch and pew,
So that the villagers can say
'The church looks nice' on Christmas Day.

Provincial Public Houses blaze,
Corporation tramcars clang,
On lighted tenements I gaze,
Where paper decorations hang,
And bunting in the red Town Hall
Says 'Merry Christmas to you all'.

And London shops on Christmas Eve
Are strung with silver bells and flowers
As hurrying clerks the City leave
To pigeon-haunted classic towers,
And marbled clouds go scudding by
The many-steepled London sky.

And girls in slacks remember Dad,
And oafish louts remember Mum,
And sleepless children's hearts are glad.
And Christmas-morning bells say 'Come!'
Even to shining ones who dwell
Safe in the Dorchester Hotel.

And is it true,
This most tremendous tale of all,
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue,
A Baby in an ox's stall ?
The Maker of the stars and sea
Become a Child on earth for me ?

And is it true ? For if it is,
No loving fingers tying strings
Around those tissued fripperies,
The sweet and silly Christmas things,

Bath salts and inexpensive scent
And hideous tie so kindly meant,

No love that in a family dwells,
No carolling in frosty air,
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells
Can with this single Truth compare -
That God was man in Palestine
And lives today in Bread and Wine.

Sir John Betjeman

Cornish Cliffs

Those moments, tasted once and never done,
Of long surf breaking in the mid-day sun.
A far-off blow-hole booming like a gun-

The seagulls plane and circle out of sight
Below this thirsty, thrift-encrusted height,
The veined sea-campion buds burst into white

And gorse turns tawny orange, seen beside
Pale drifts of primroses cascading wide
To where the slate falls sheer into the tide.

More than in gardened Surrey, nature spills
A wealth of heather, kidney-vetch and squills
Over these long-defended Cornish hills.

A gun-emplacement of the latest war
Looks older than the hill fort built before
Saxon or Norman headed for the shore.

And in the shadowless, unclouded glare
Deep blue above us fades to whiteness where
A misty sea-line meets the wash of air.

Nut-smell of gorse and honey-smell of ling
Waft out to sea the freshness of the spring
On sunny shallows, green and whispering.

The wideness which the lark-song gives the sky
Shrinks at the clang of sea-birds sailing by
Whose notes are tuned to days when seas are high.

From today's calm, the lane's enclosing green
Leads inland to a usual Cornish scene-
Slate cottages with sycamore between,

Small fields and tellymasts and wires and poles
With, as the everlasting ocean rolls,
Two chapels built for half a hundred souls.

Sir John Betjeman

Dawlish

Bird-watching colonels on the old sea wall,
Down here at Dawlish where the slow trains crawl:
Low tide lifting, on a shingle shore,
Long-sunk islands from the sea once more:
Red cliffs rising where the wet sands run,
Gulls reflecting in the sharp spring sun;
Pink-washed plaster by a sheltered patch,
Ilex shadows upon velvet thatch:
What interiors those names suggest!
Queen of lodgings in the warm south-west....

Sir John Betjeman

Death In Leamington

She died in the upstairs bedroom
By the light of the ev'ning star
That shone through the plate glass window
From over Leamington Spa

Beside her the lonely crochet
Lay patiently and unstirred,
But the fingers that would have work'd it
Were dead as the spoken word.

And Nurse came in with the tea-things
Breast high 'mid the stands and chairs-
But Nurse was alone with her own little soul,
And the things were alone with theirs.

She bolted the big round window,
She let the blinds unroll,
She set a match to the mantle,
She covered the fire with coal.

And "Tea!" she said in a tiny voice
"Wake up! It's nearly five"
Oh! Chintzy, chintzy cheeriness,
Half dead and half alive.

Do you know that the stucco is peeling?
Do you know that the heart will stop?
From those yellow Italianate arches
Do you hear the plaster drop?

Nurse looked at the silent bedstead,
At the gray, decaying face,
As the calm of a Leamington ev'ning
Drifted into the place.

She moved the table of bottles
Away from the bed to the wall;
And tiptoeing gently over the stairs
Turned down the gas in the hall.

Sir John Betjeman

Diary of a Church Mouse

Here among long-discarded cassocks,
Damp stools, and half-split open hassocks,
Here where the vicar never looks
I nibble through old service books.
Lean and alone I spend my days
Behind this Church of England baize.
I share my dark forgotten room
With two oil-lamps and half a broom.
The cleaner never bothers me,
So here I eat my frugal tea.
My bread is sawdust mixed with straw;
My jam is polish for the floor.
Christmas and Easter may be feasts
For congregations and for priests,
And so may Whitsun. All the same,
They do not fill my meagre frame.
For me the only feast at all
Is Autumn's Harvest Festival,
When I can satisfy my want
With ears of corn around the font.
I climb the eagle's brazen head
To burrow through a loaf of bread.
I scramble up the pulpit stair
And gnaw the marrows hanging there.
It is enjoyable to taste
These items ere they go to waste,
But how annoying when one finds
That other mice with pagan minds
Come into church my food to share
Who have no proper business there.
Two field mice who have no desire
To be baptized, invade the choir.
A large and most unfriendly rat
Comes in to see what we are at.
He says he thinks there is no God
And yet he comes ... it's rather odd.
This year he stole a sheaf of wheat
(It screened our special preacher's seat),
And prosperous mice from fields away
Come in to hear our organ play,
And under cover of its notes
Ate through the altar's sheaf of oats.
A Low Church mouse, who thinks that I
Am too papistical, and High,
Yet somehow doesn't think it wrong
To munch through Harvest Evensong,
While I, who starve the whole year through,
Must share my food with rodents who
Except at this time of the year
Not once inside the church appear.
Within the human world I know
Such goings-on could not be so,

For human beings only do
What their religion tells them to.
They read the Bible every day
And always, night and morning, pray,
And just like me, the good church mouse,
Worship each week in God's own house,
But all the same it's strange to me
How very full the church can be
With people I don't see at all
Except at Harvest Festival.

Sir John Betjeman

Dilton Marsh Halt

Was it worth keeping the Halt open,
We thought as we looked at the sky
Red through the spread of the cedar-tree,
With the evening train gone by?

Yes, we said, for in summer the anglers use it,
Two and sometimes three
Will bring their catches of rods and poles and perches
To Westbury, home for tea.

There isn't a porter. The platform is made of sleepers.
The guard of the last train puts out the light
And high over lorries and cattle the Halt unwinking
Waits through the Wiltshire night.

O housewife safe in the comprehensive churning
Of the Warminster launderette!
O husband down at the depot with car in car-park!
The Halt is waiting yet.

And when all the horrible roads are finally done for,
And there's no more petrol left in the world to burn,
Here to the Halt from Salisbury and from Bristol
Steam trains will return.

Sir John Betjeman

Executive

I am a young executive. No cuffs than mine are cleaner;
I have a Slimline brief-case and I use the firm's Cortina.
In every roadside hostelry from here to Burgess Hill
The maitres d'hôtel all know me well, and let me sign the bill.

You ask me what it is I do. Well, actually, you know,
I'm partly a liaison man, and partly P.R.O.
Essentially, I integrate the current export drive
And basically I'm viable from ten o'clock till five.

For vital off-the-record work - that's talking transport-wise -
I've a scarlet Aston-Martin - and does she go? She flies!
Pedestrians and dogs and cats, we mark them down for slaughter.
I also own a speedboat which has never touched the water.

She's built of fibre-glass, of course. I call her 'Mandy Jane'
After a bird I used to know - No soda, please, just plain -
And how did I acquire her? Well, to tell you about that
And to put you in the picture, I must wear my other hat.

I do some mild developing. The sort of place I need
Is a quiet country market town that's rather run to seed
A luncheon and a drink or two, a little savoir faire -
I fix the Planning Officer, the Town Clerk and the Mayor.

And if some Preservationist attempts to interfere
A 'dangerous structure' notice from the Borough Engineer
Will settle any buildings that are standing in our way -
The modern style, sir, with respect, has really come to stay.

Sir John Betjeman

Felixstowe, or The Last of Her Order

With one consuming roar along the shingle
The long wave claws and rakes the pebbles down
To where its backwash and the next wave mingle,
A mounting arch of water weedy-brown
Against the tide the off-shore breezes blow.
Oh wind and water, this is Felixstowe.

In winter when the sea winds chill and shriller
Than those of summer, all their cold unload
Full on the gimcrack attic of the villa
Where I am lodging off the Orwell Road,
I put my final shilling in the meter
And only make my loneliness completer.

In eighteen ninety-four when we were founded,
Counting our Reverend Mother we were six,
How full of hope we were and prayer-surrounded
"The Little Sisters of the Hanging Pyx".
We built our orphanage. We built our school.
Now only I am left to keep the rule.

Here in the gardens of the Spa Pavillion
Warm in the whisper of the summer sea,
The cushioned scabious, a deep vermillion,
With white pins stuck in it, looks up at me
A sun-lit kingdom touched by butterflies
And so my memory of the winter dies.

Across the grass the poplar shades grow longer
And louder clang the waves along the coast.
The band packs up. The evening breeze is stronger
And all the world goes home to tea and toast.
I hurry past a cakeshop's tempting scones
Bound for the red brick twilight of St.John's.

"Thou knowest my down sitting and mine uprising"
Here where the white light burns with steady glow
Safe from the vain world's silly sympathising,
Safe with the love I was born to know,
Safe from the surging of the lonely sea
My heart finds rest, my heart finds rest in Thee.

Sir John Betjeman

Five O'Clock Shadow

This is the time of day when we in the Men's ward
Think "one more surge of the pain and I give up the fight."
When he who struggles for breath can struggle less strongly:
This is the time of day which is worse than night.

A haze of thunder hangs on the hospital rose-beds,
A doctors' foursome out of the links is played,
Safe in her sitting-room Sister is putting her feet up:
This is the time of day when we feel betrayed.

Below the windows, loads of loving relations
Rev in the car park, changing gear at the bend,
Making for home and a nice big tea and the telly:
"Well, we've done what we can. It can't be long till the end."

This is the time of day when the weight of bedclothes
Is harder to bear than a sharp incision of steel.
The endless anonymous croak of a cheap transistor
Intensifies the lonely terror I feel.

Sir John Betjeman

Guilt

The clock is frozen in the tower,
The thickening fog with sooty smell
Has blanketed the motor power
Which turns the London streets to hell;
And footsteps with their lonely sound
Intensify the silence round.

I haven't hope. I haven't faith.
I live two lives and sometimes three.
The lives I live make life a death
For those who have to live with me.
Knowing the virtues that I lack,
I pat myself upon the back.

With breastplate of self-righteousness
And shoes of smugness on my feet,
Before the urge in me grows less
I hurry off to make retreat.
For somewhere, somewhere, burns a light
To lead me out into the night.

It glitters icy, thin and plain,
And leads me down to Waterloo-
Into a warm electric train
Which travels sorry Surrey through
And crystal-hung, the clumps of pine
Stand deadly still beside the line.

Sir John Betjeman

Harrow-on-the-Hill

When melancholy Autumn comes to Wembley
And electric trains are lighted after tea
The poplars near the stadium are trembly
With their tap and tap and whispering to me,
Like the sound of little breakers
Spreading out along the surf-line
When the estuary's filling
With the sea.

Then Harrow-on-the-Hill's a rocky island
And Harrow churchyard full of sailor's graves
And the constant click and kissing of the trolley buses hissing
Is the level of the Wealdstone turned to waves
And the rumble of the railway
Is the thunder of the rollers
As they gather for the plunging
Into caves

There's a storm cloud to the westward over Kenton,
There's a line of harbour lights at Perivale,
Is it rounding rough Pentire in a flood of sunset fire
The little fleet of trawlers under sail?
Can those boats be only roof tops
As they stream along the skyline
In a race for port and Padstow
With the gale?

Sir John Betjeman

How To Get On In Society

Phone for the fish knives, Norman
As cook is a little unnerved;
You kiddies have crumpled the serviettes
And I must have things daintily served.

Are the requisites all in the toilet?
The frills round the cutlets can wait
Till the girl has replenished the cruets
And switched on the logs in the grate.

It's ever so close in the lounge dear,
But the vestibule's comfy for tea
And Howard is riding on horseback
So do come and take some with me

Now here is a fork for your pastries
And do use the couch for your feet;
I know that I wanted to ask you-
Is trifle sufficient for sweet?

Milk and then just as it comes dear?
I'm afraid the preserve's full of stones;
Beg pardon, I'm soiling the doileys
With afternoon tea-cakes and scones.

Sir John Betjeman

In A Bath Teashop

"Let us not speak, for the love we bear one another—
Let us hold hands and look."
She such a very ordinary little woman;
He such a thumping crook;
But both, for a moment, little lower than the angels
In the teashop's ingle-nook.

Sir John Betjeman

In Westminster Abbey

Let me take this other glove off
As the vox humana swells,
And the beauteous fields of Eden
Bask beneath the Abbey bells.
Here, where England's statesmen lie,
Listen to a lady's cry.

Gracious Lord, oh bomb the Germans,
Spare their women for Thy Sake,
And if that is not too easy
We will pardon Thy Mistake.
But, gracious Lord, whate'er shall be,
Don't let anyone bomb me.

Keep our Empire undismembered
Guide our Forces by Thy Hand,
Gallant blacks from far Jamaica,
Honduras and Togoland;
Protect them Lord in all their fights,
And, even more, protect the whites.

Think of what our Nation stands for,
Books from Boots' and country lanes,
Free speech, free passes, class distinction,
Democracy and proper drains.
Lord, put beneath Thy special care
One-eighty-nine Cadogan Square.

Although dear Lord I am a sinner,
I have done no major crime;
Now I'll come to Evening Service
Whensoever I have the time.
So, Lord, reserve for me a crown,
And do not let my shares go down.

I will labour for Thy Kingdom,
Help our lads to win the war,
Send white feathers to the cowards
Join the Women's Army Corps,
Then wash the steps around Thy Throne
In the Eternal Safety Zone.

Now I feel a little better,
What a treat to hear Thy Word,
Where the bones of leading statesmen
Have so often been interr'd.
And now, dear Lord, I cannot wait
Because I have a luncheon date.

Sir John Betjeman

Inexpensive Progress

Encase your legs in nylons,
Bestride your hills with pylons
O age without a soul;
Away with gentle willows
And all the elmy billows
That through your valleys roll.

Let's say goodbye to hedges
And roads with grassy edges
And winding country lanes;
Let all things travel faster
Where motor car is master
Till only Speed remains.

Destroy the ancient inn-signs
But strew the roads with tin signs
'Keep Left,' 'M4,' 'Keep Out!'
Command, instruction, warning,
Repetitive adorning
The rockeried roundabout;

For every raw obscenity
Must have its small 'amenity,'
Its patch of shaven green,
And hoardings look a wonder
In banks of floribunda
With floodlights in between.

Leave no old village standing
Which could provide a landing
For aeroplanes to roar,
But spare such cheap defacements
As huts with shattered casements
Unlived-in since the war.

Let no provincial High Street
Which might be your or my street
Look as it used to do,
But let the chain stores place here
Their miles of black glass facia
And traffic thunder through.

And if there is some scenery,
Some unpretentious greenery,
Surviving anywhere,
It does not need protecting
For soon we'll be erecting
A Power Station there.

When all our roads are lighted
By concrete monsters sited
Like gallows overhead,

Bathed in the yellow vomit
Each monster belches from it,
We'll know that we are dead.

Sir John Betjeman

Ireland With Emily

Bells are booming down the bohreens,
White the mist along the grass,
Now the Julias, Maeves and Maureens
Move between the fields to Mass.
Twisted trees of small green apple
Guard the decent whitewashed chapel,
Gilded gates and doorway grained,
Pointed windows richly stained
With many-coloured Munich glass.

See the black-shawled congregations
On the brodered vestment gaze
Murmur past the painted stations
As Thy Sacred Heart displays
Lush Kildare of scented meadows,
Roscommon, thin in ash-tree shadows,
And Westmeath the lake-reflected,
Spreading Leix the hill-protected,
Kneeling all in silver haze?

In yews and woodbine, walls and guelder,
Nettle-deep the faithful rest,
Winding leagues of flowering elder,
Sycamore with ivy dressed,
Ruins in demesnes deserted,
Bog-surrounded bramble-skirted -
Townlands rich or townlands mean as
These, oh, counties of them screen us
In the Kingdom of the West.

Stony seaboard, far and foreign,
Stony hills poured over space,
Stony outcrop of the Burren,
Stones in every fertile place,
Little fields with boulders dotted,
Grey-stone shoulders saffron-spotted,
Stone-walled cabins thatched with reeds,
Where a Stone Age people breeds
The last of Europe's stone age race.

Has it held, the warm June weather?
Draining shallow sea-pools dry,
When we bicycled together
Down the bohreens fuchsia-high.
Till there rose, abrupt and lonely,
A ruined abbey, chancel only,
Lichen-cruste, time-befriended,
Soared the arches, splayed and splendid,
Romanesque against the sky.

There in pinnacled protection,
One extinguished family waits

A Church of Ireland resurrection
By the broken, rusty gates.
Sheepswool, straw and droppings cover,
Graves of spinster, rake and lover,
Whose fantastic mausoleum,
Sings its own seablown Te Deum,
In and out the slipping slates.

Sir John Betjeman

Lenten Thoughts of a High Anglican

Isn't she lovely, "the Mistress"?
With her wide-apart grey-green eyes,
The droop of her lips and, when she smiles,
Her glance of amused surprise?

How nonchalantly she wears her clothes,
How expensive they are as well!
And the sound of her voice is as soft and deep
As the Christ Church tenor bell.

But why do I call her "the Mistress"
Who know not her way of life?
Because she has more of a cared-for air
Than many a legal wife.

How elegantly she swings along
In the vapoury incense veil;
The angel choir must pause in song
When she kneels at the altar rail.

The parson said that we shouldn't stare
Around when we come to church,
Or the Unknown God we are seeking
May forever elude our search.

But I hope that the preacher will not think
It unorthodox and odd
If I add that I glimpse in "the Mistress"
A hint of the Unknown God.

Sir John Betjeman

Loneliness

The last year's leaves are on the beech:
The twigs are black; the cold is dry;
To deeps beyond the deepest reach
The Easter bells enlarge the sky.
O ordered metal clatter-clang!
Is yours the song the angels sang?
You fill my heart with joy and grief -
Belief! Belief! And unbelief...
And, though you tell me I shall die,
You say not how or when or why.

Indifferent the finches sing,
Unheeding roll the lorries past:
What misery will this year bring
Now spring is in the air at last?
For, sure as blackthorn bursts to snow,
Cancer in some of us will grow,
The tasteful crematorium door
Shuts out for some the furnace roar;
But church-bells open on the blast
Our loneliness, so long and vast.

Sir John Betjeman

Meditation on the A30

A man on his own in a car
Is revenging himself on his wife;
He open the throttle and bubbles with dottle
and puffs at his pitiful life

She's losing her looks very fast,
she loses her temper all day;
that lorry won't let me get past,
this Mini is blocking my way.

"Why can't you step on it and shift her!
I can't go on crawling like this!
At breakfast she said that she wished I was dead-
Thank heavens we don't have to kiss.

"I'd like a nice blonde on my knee
And one who won't argue or nag.
Who dares to come hooting at me?
I only give way to a Jag.

"You're barmy or plastered, I'll pass you, you bastard-
I will overtake you. I will!"
As he clenches his pipe, his moment is ripe
And the corner's accepting its kill.

Sir John Betjeman

Middlesex

Gaily into Ruislip Gardens
Runs the red electric train,
With a thousand Ta's and Pardon's
Daintily alights Elaine;
Hurries down the concrete station
With a frown of concentration,
Out into the outskirt's edges
Where a few surviving hedges
Keep alive our lost Elysium - rural Middlesex again.

Well cut Windsmoor flapping lightly,
Jacqmar scarf of mauve and green
Hiding hair which, Friday nightly,
Delicately drowns in Dreen;
Fair Elaine the bobby-soxer,
Fresh-complexioned with Innoxia,
Gains the garden - father's hobby -
Hangs her Windsmoor in the lobby,
Settles down to sandwich supper and the television screen.

Gentle Brent, I used to know you
Wandering Wembley-wards at will,
Now what change your waters show you
In the meadowlands you fill!
Recollect the elm-trees misty
And the footpaths climbing twisty
Under cedar-shaded palings,
Low laburnum-leaned-on railings
Out of Northolt on and upward to the heights of Harrow hill.

Parish of enormous hayfields
Perivale stood all alone,
And from Greenford scent of mayfields
Most enticingly was blown
Over market gardens tidy,
Taverns for the bona fide,
Cockney singers, cockney shooters,
Murray Poshes, Lupin Pooters,
Long in Kelsal Green and Highgate silent under soot and stone.

Sir John Betjeman

Mortality

The first-class brains of a senior civil servant
Shiver and shatter and fall
As the steering column of his comfortable Humber
Batters in the bony wall.
All those delicate re-adjustments
"On the one hand, if we proceed
With the ad hoc policy hitherto adapted
To individual need...
On the other hand, too rigid an arrangement
Might, of itself, perforce...
I would like to submit for the Minister's concurrence
The following alternative course,
Subject to revision and reconsideration
In the light of our experience gains..."
And this had to happen at the corner where the by-pass
Comes into Egham out of Staines.
That very near miss for an All Souls' Fellowship
The recent compensation of a 'K' -
The first-class brains of a senior civil servant
Are sweetbread on the road today.

Sir John Betjeman

Myfanwy

Kind o'er the kinderbank leans my Myfanwy,
White o'er the playpen the sheen of her dress,
Fresh from the bathroom and soft in the nursery
Soap scented fingers I long to caress.

Were you a prefect and head of your dormit'ry?
Were you a hockey girl, tennis or gym?
Who was your favourite? Who had a crush on you?
Which were the baths where they taught you to swim?

Smooth down the Avenue glitters the bicycle,
Black-stockinged legs under navy blue serge,
Home and Colonial, Star, International,
Balancing bicycle leant on the verge.

Trace me your wheel-tracks, you fortunate bicycle,
Out of the shopping and into the dark,
Back down the avenue, back to the pottingshed,
Back to the house on the fringe of the park.

Golden the light on the locks of Myfanwy,
Golden the light on the book on her knee,
Finger marked pages of Rackham's Hans Anderson,
Time for the children to come down to tea.

Oh! Fullers angel-cake, Robertson's marmalade,
Liberty lampshade, come shine on us all,
My! what a spread for the friends of Myfanwy,
Some in the alcove and some in the hall.

Then what sardines in half-lighted passages!
Locking of fingers in long hide-and-seek.
You will protect me, my silken Myfanwy,
Ring leader, tom-boy, and chum to the weak.

Sir John Betjeman

On a Portrait of a Deaf Man

The kind old face, the egg-shaped head,
The tie, discreetly loud,
The loosely fitting shooting clothes,
A closely fitting shroud.

He liked old city dining rooms,
Potatoes in their skin,
But now his mouth is wide to let
The London clay come in.

He took me on long silent walks
In country lanes when young.
He knew the names of ev'ry bird
But not the song it sung.

And when he could not hear me speak
He smiled and looked so wise
That now I do not like to think
Of maggots in his eyes.

He liked the rain-washed Cornish air
And smell of ploughed-up soil,
He liked a landscape big and bare
And painted it in oil.

But least of all he liked that place
Which hangs on Highgate Hill
Of soaked Carrara-covered earth
For Londoners to fill.

He would have liked to say goodbye,
Shake hands with many friends,
In Highgate now his finger-bones
Stick through his finger-ends.

You, God, who treat him thus and thus,
Say "Save his soul and pray."
You ask me to believe You and
I only see decay.

Sir John Betjeman

Seaside Golf

How straight it flew, how long it flew,
It clear'd the ruddy track
And soaring, disappeared from view
Beyond the bunker's back -
A glorious, sailing, bounding drive
That made me glad I was alive.

And down the fairway, far along
It glowed a lonely white;
I played an iron sure and strong
And clipp'd it out of sight,
And spite of grassy banks between
I knew I'd find it on the green.

And so I did. It lay content
Two paces from the pin;
A steady putt and then it went
Oh, most surely in.
The very turf rejoiced to see
That quite unprecedented three.

Ah! Seaweed smells from sandy caves
And thyme and mist in whiffs,
In-coming tide, Atlantic waves
Slapping the sunny cliffs,
Lark song and sea sounds in the air
And splendour, splendour everywhere.

Sir John Betjeman

Slough

Come, friendly bombs, and fall on Slough
It isn't fit for humans now,
There isn't grass to graze a cow
Swarm over, Death!

Come, bombs, and blow to smithereens
Those air-conditioned, bright canteens,
Tinned fruit, tinned meat, tinned milk, tinned beans
Tinned minds, tinned breath.

Mess up the mess they call a town --
A house for ninety-seven down
And once a week for half-a-crown
For twenty years,

And get that man with double chin
Who'll always cheat and always win,
Who washes his repulsive skin
In women's tears,

And smash his desk of polished oak
And smash his hands so used to stroke
And stop his boring dirty joke
And make him yell.

But spare the bald young clerks who add
The profits of the stinking cad;
It's not their fault that they are mad,
They've tasted Hell.

It's not their fault they do not know
The birdsong from the radio,
It's not their fault they often go
To Maidenhead

And talk of sports and makes of cars
In various bogus Tudor bars
And daren't look up and see the stars
But belch instead.

In labour-saving homes, with care
Their wives frizz out peroxide hair
And dry it in synthetic air
And paint their nails.

Come, friendly bombs, and fall on Slough
To get it ready for the plough.
The cabbages are coming now;
The earth exhales.

Sir John Betjeman

South London Sketch

Hi There! I see you're enjoying the site, and just wanted to extend an invitation to register for our free site. The members of oldpoetry strive to make this a fun place to learn and share - hope you join us! - Kevin

Sir John Betjeman

The Cottage Hospital

At the end of a long-walled garden in a red provincial town,
A brick path led to a mulberry- scanty grass at its feet.
I lay under blackening branches where the mulberry leaves hung down
Sheltering ruby fruit globes from a Sunday-tea-time heat.
Apple and plum espaliers basked upon bricks of brown;
The air was swimming with insects, and children played in the street.

Out of this bright intentness into the mulberry shade
Musca domestica (housefly) swung from the August light
Slap into slithery rigging by the waiting spider made
Which spun the lithe elastic till the fly was shrouded tight.
Down came the hairy talons and horrible poison blade
And none of the garden noticed that fizzing, hopeless fight.

Say in what Cottage Hospital whose pale green walls resound
With the tap upon polished parquet of inflexible nurses' feet
Shall I myself by lying when they range the screens around?
And say shall I groan in dying, as I twist the sweaty sheet?
Or gasp for breath uncrying, as I feel my senses drown'd
While the air is swimming with insects and children play in the street?

Sir John Betjeman

The Hon. Sec.

The flag that hung half-mast today
Seemed animate with being
As if it knew for who it flew
And will no more be seeing.

He loved each corner of the links-
The stream at the eleventh,
The grey-green bents, the pale sea-pinks,
The prospect from the seventh;

To the ninth tee the uphill climb,
A grass and sandy stairway,
And at the top the scent of thyme
And long extent of fairway.

He knew how on a summer day
The sea's deep blue grew deeper,
How evening shadows over Bray
Made that round hill look steeper.

He knew the ocean mists that rose
And seemed for ever staying,
When moaned the foghorn from Trevoise
And nobody was playing;

The flip of cards on winter eves,
The whisky and the scoring,
As trees outside were stripped of leaves
And heavy seas were roaring.

He died when early April light
Showed red his garden sally
And under pale green spears glowed white
His lilies of the valley;

The garden where he used to stand
And where the robin waited
To fly and perch upon his hand
And feed till it was sated.

The Times would never have the space
For Ned's discreet achievements;
The public prints are not the place
For intimate bereavements.

A gentle guest, a willing host,
Affection deeply planted -
It's strange that those we miss the most
Are those we take for granted.

Sir John Betjeman

The Irish Unionist's farewell to Greta Hellastrom in 1922

Golden haired and golden hearted
I would ever have you be,
As you were when last we parted
Smiling slow and sad at me.
Oh! the fighting down of passion!
Oh! the century-seeming pain-
Parting in this off-hand fashion
In Dungarvan in the rain.

Slanting eyes of blue, unweeping
Stands my Swedish beauty where
Gusts of Irish rain are sweeping
Round the statue in the square;
Corner boys against the walling
Watch us furtively in vain,
And the Angelus is calling
Through Dungarvan in the rain.

Gales along the Commeragh Mountains,
Beating sleet on creaking signs,
Iron gutters turned to fountains,
And the windscreen laced with lines,
And the evening getting later,
And the ache - increased again,
As the distance grows the greater
From Dungarvan in the rain.

There is no one now to wonder
What eccentric sits in state
While the beech trees rock and thunder
Round his gate-lodge and his gate.
Gone - the ornamental plaster,
Gone - the overgrown demesne
And the car goes fast, and faster,
From Dungarvan in the rain.

Had I kissed and drawn you to me
Had you yielded warm for cold,
What a power had pounded through me
As I stroked your streaming gold!
You were right to keep us parted:
Bound and parted we remain,
Aching, if unbroken hearted -
Oh! Dungarvan in the rain!

Sir John Betjeman

The Last Laugh

I made hay while the sun shone.
My work sold.
Now, if the harvest is over
And the world cold,
Give me the bonus of laughter
As I lose hold.

Sir John Betjeman

The Licorice Fields at Pontefract

In the licorice fields at Pontefract
My love and I did meet
And many a burdened licorice bush
Was blooming round our feet;
Red hair she had and golden skin,
Her sulky lips were shaped for sin,
Her sturdy legs were flannel-slack'd
The strongest legs in Pontefract.

The light and dangling licorice flowers
Gave off the sweetest smells;
From various black Victorian towers
The Sunday evening bells
Came pealing over dales and hills
And tanneries and silent mills
And lowly streets where country stops
And little shuttered corner shops.

She cast her blazing eyes on me
And plucked a licorice leaf;
I was her captive slave and she
My red-haired robber chief.
Oh love! for love I could not speak,
It left me winded, wilting, weak,
And held in brown arms strong and bare
And wound with flaming ropes of hair.

Sir John Betjeman

The Olympic Girl

The sort of girl I like to see
Smiles down from her great height at me.
She stands in strong, athletic pose
And wrinkles her retroussé nose.
Is it distaste that makes her frown,
So furious and freckled, down
On an unhealthy worm like me?
Or am I what she likes to see?
I do not know, though much I care,
xxxxxxxxx.....would I were
(Forgive me, shade of Rupert Brooke)
An object fit to claim her look.
Oh! would I were her racket press'd
With hard excitement to her breast
And swished into the sunlit air
Arm-high above her tousled hair,
And banged against the bounding ball
"Oh! Plung!" my tauten'd strings would call,
"Oh! Plung! my darling, break my strings
For you I will do brilliant things."
And when the match is over, I
Would flop beside you, hear you sigh;
And then with what supreme caress,
You'd tuck me up into my press.
Fair tigress of the tennis courts,
So short in sleeve and strong in shorts,
Little, alas, to you I mean,
For I am bald and old and green.

Sir John Betjeman

The Planster's Vision

Cut down that timber! Bells, too many and strong,
Pouring their music through the branches bare,
From moon-white church-towers down the windy air
Have pealed the centuries out with Evensong.
Remove those cottages, a huddled throng!
Too many babies have been born in there,
Too many coffins, bumping down the stair,
Carried the old their garden paths along.

I have a Vision of The Future, chum,
The worker's flats in fields of soya beans
Tower up like silver pencils, score on score:
And Surging Millions hear the Challenge come
From microphones in communal canteens
"No Right! No wrong! All's perfect, evermore."

Sir John Betjeman

The Plantster's Vision

Cut down that timber! Bells, too many and strong,
Pouring their music through the branches bare,
From moon-white church towers down the windy air
Have pealed the centuries out with Evensong.

Remove those cottages, a huddled throng!
Too many babies have been born in there,
Too many coffins, bumping down the stair,
Carried the old their garden paths along.

I have a Vision of the Future, chum,
The workers' flats in fields of soya beans
Tower up like silver pencils, score on score:
And Surging Millions hear the Challenge come
From microphones in communal canteens
"No Right! No Wrong! All's perfect, evermore!"

Anonymous submission.

Sir John Betjeman

Trebetherick

We used to picnic where the thrift
Grew deep and tufted to the edge;
We saw the yellow foam flakes drift
In trembling sponges on the ledge
Below us, till the wind would lift
Them up the cliff and o'er the hedge.
Sand in the sandwiches, wasps in the tea,
Sun on our bathing dresses heavy with the wet,
Squelch of the bladder-wrack waiting for the sea,
Fleas around the tamarisk, an early cigarette.

From where the coastguard houses stood
One used to see below the hill,
The lichened branches of a wood
In summer silver cool and still;
And there the Shade of Evil could
Stretch out at us from Shilla Mill.
Thick with sloe and blackberry, uneven in the light,
Lonely round the hedge, the heavy meadow was remote,
The oldest part of Cornwall was the wood as black as night,
And the pheasant and the rabbit lay torn open at the throat.

But when a storm was at its height,
And feathery slate was black in rain,
And tamarisks were hung with light
And golden sand was brown again,
Spring tide and blizzard would unite
And sea come flooding up the lane.
Waves full of treasure then were roaring up the beach,
Ropes round our mackintoshes, waders warm and dry,
We waited for the wreckage to come swirling into reach,
Ralph, Vasey, Alistair, Bidy, John and I.

Then roller into roller curled
And thundered down the rocky bay,
And we were in a water world
Of rain and blizzard, sea and spray,
And one against the other hurled
We struggled round to Greenaway.
Blesséd be St Enodoc, blesséd be the wave,
Blesséd be the springy turf, we pray, pray to thee,
Ask for our children all happy days you gave
To Ralph, Vasey, Alistair, Bidy, John and me.

Sir John Betjeman

Upper Lambourne

Up the ash tree climbs the ivy,
Up the ivy climbs the sun,
With a twenty-thousand pattering,
Has a valley breeze begun,
Feathery ash, neglected elder,
Shift the shade and make it run -

Shift the shade toward the nettles,
And the nettles set it free,
To streak the stained Carrara headstone,
Where, in nineteen-twenty-three,
He who trained a hundred winners,
Paid the Final Entrance Fee.

Leathery limbs of Upper Lambourne,
Leathery skin from sun and wind,
Leathery breeches, spreading stables,
Shining saddles left behind -
To the down the string of horses
Moving out of sight and mind.

Feathery ash in leathery Lambourne
Waves above the sarsen stone,
And Edwardian plantations
So coniferously moan
As to make the swelling downland,
Far surrounding, seem their own.

Sir John Betjeman

Verses Turned...

Across the wet November night
The church is bright with candlelight
And waiting Evensong.
A single bell with plaintive strokes
Pleads louder than the stirring oaks
The leafless lanes along.

It calls the choirboys from their tea
And villagers, the two or three,
Damp down the kitchen fire,
Let out the cat, and up the lane
Go paddling through the gentle rain
Of misty Oxfordshire.

How warm the many candles shine
Of Samuel Dowbiggin's design
For this interior neat,
These high box pews of Georgian days
Which screen us from the public gaze
When we make answer meet;

How gracefully their shadow falls
On bold pilasters down the walls
And on the pulpit high.
The chandeliers would twinkle gold
As pre-Tractarian sermons roll'd
Doctrinal, sound and dry.

From that west gallery no doubt
The viol and serpent tooted out
The Tallis tune to Ken,
And firmly at the end of prayers
The clerk below the pulpit stairs
Would thunder out "Amen."

But every wand'ring thought will cease
Before the noble altarpiece
With carven swags array'd,
For there in letters all may read
The Lord's Commandments, Prayer and Creed,
And decently display'd.

On country morningd sharp and clear
The penitent in faith draw near
And kneeling here below
Partake the heavenly banquet spread
Of sacramental Wine and Bread
And Jesus' presence know.

And must that plaintive bell in vain
Plead loud along the dripping lane?
And must the building fall?

Not while we love the church and live
And of our charity will give
Our much, our more, our all.

Sir John Betjeman

Westgate-On-Sea

Hark, I hear the bells of Westgate,
I will tell you what they sigh,
Where those minarets and steeples
Prick the open Thanet sky.

Happy bells of eighteen-ninety,
Bursting from your freestone tower!
Recalling laurel, shrubs and privet,
Red geraniums in flower.

Feet that scamper on the asphalt
Through the Borough Council grass,
Till they hide inside the shelter
Bright with ironwork and glass,

Striving chains of ordered children
Purple by the sea-breeze made,
Striving on to prunes and suet
Past the shops on the Parade.

Some with wire around their glasses,
Some with wire across their teeth,
Writhing frames for running noses
And the drooping lip beneath.

Church of England bells of Westgate!
On this balcony I stand,
White the woodwork wriggles round me,
Clocktowers rise on either hand.

For me in my timber arbour
You have one more message yet,
"Plimsolls, plimsolls in the summer,
Oh galoshes in the wet!"

Sir John Betjeman

Winter Seascape

The sea runs back against itself
With scarcely time for breaking wave
To cannonade a slatey shelf
And thunder under in a cave.

Before the next can fully burst
The headwind, blowing harder still,
Smooths it to what it was at first -
A slowly rolling water-hill.

Against the breeze the breakers haste,
Against the tide their ridges run
And all the sea's a dappled waste
Criss-crossing underneath the sun.

Far down the beach the ripples drag
Blown backward, rearing from the shore,
And wailing gull and shrieking shag
Alone can pierce the ocean roar.

Unheard, a mongrel hound gives tongue,
Unheard are shouts of little boys;
What chance has any inland lung
Against this multi-water noise?

Here where the cliffs alone prevail
I stand exultant, neutral, free,
And from the cushion of the gale
Behold a huge consoling sea.

Sir John Betjeman