

Postcards from a Private Park

by Iain James Robb

First movement

I.

The town that I reside in is no river country;
It has no meadow brinks or sculpted border walls
Extending straitly onward to the city limits,
No ancient gates that lead apart to bramble paths
Enchanted by the play of distant Lydian strings.
The ghosts of verdant cities past will shed no shape here;
If forever lives in this life it will stay this way:
I know that where I stay this day is some place nowhere,
Continuing past limits when I pass these bounds.
Come with me to somewhere you have also travelled.
Where you cross by you may see me near a midnight road,
And pass me without seeing me; I know you also
And I lose you as you turn your face away from me.
I do not pretend it matters where I am this moment
Since I am far beyond you now, so here I am;
I would sooner place my footsteps in another country
Than the one that now inhabits all my present roads.

I do not believe that life for me holds Heaven,
Yet if there's any trace of peace it's in this place;
On a park-bench resting lone beside the bandstand
I've no real hope for other haven here.
Once I've drained the drags of this last can I'm grasping
I shall rise in search of sleep, a cardboard king,

In leaves that flood abroad, and pass from nowhere,
To sound the depths of all the shades that take their frames.

In this place hardly special, just five minutes distant
From the roadway leading far too close to home,
I can pretend I'm far from that which cast my actions ,
To judge the junction between hand and lager can.
For the moment I can sit awhile and leave off motion,
For a while it may not matter what I am in name;
This place also has no name that I would care to mention-
We are joined, if you will, in calm ignominy.
Take my hand and I will lead you far from somewhere;
I will let you hear my languished voice refrain from psalms,
That could be mimics for the unheard birds I know outgrace me,
When surmounting me with faint and yonder orisons.
The place where I reside contains no river country;
Beside no meadow's brink, within no border walls,
I think I'll stay a while though hours outface me-
And suggest too late I should be going, though I've long been
gone.

II.

Abroad, a bird of such as break the daylight
Comes a sister to my voice, if not its twin:
Yet no such tongues may hold it to the midnight,
In defeat of dreams, as those which will begin
And end in me, with pallor as their playwright,
And I have no laurels left to chase or win:
No loves to lose, to gain men's ears in going,
Nor a word for listless things that limp their wing.

When once a babe and given to such wordage
As a tongue can nurse, when lip is cut from thought,
I could have lisped of all this green-verged passage

With a brighter sense than fades once being taught;
But here I sense the dregs of last year's garbage
That the season weeded back there where it's sought,
By backward mind I'd soon turn straight, in stillness,
To some face that constellates this wilderness.

In silence here I stand, and wait my station,
Wording passive psalms for this or that doll else
Whose life lives past its god, past all thought's nation
Born of breath that gave them breath that have no pulse.
I will be that lord who tailors their negation-
And since God's grim hands work me, my shadow falls
Alike through those dumb to my jurisdictions,
Fake ragged daughters mine, pale tattered sons.

What have I done? I would not thus have travelled
Had I sense enough to know this was land's end;
My works may haunt me as a wraith unravelled,
Across the faceless waters, where all waters end.
My mimic hordes will never sense I levelled
All my darts of chance their way, as they ascend
Far past my mark, when I shall leave this country:
All of thought's a breath, and with a breath may die.

What else have I in words than these to fashion
From the dregs of life to paint on, listless? All
The jokers in my deck provide my moments' ration:
A drunken fuck or so, one more blank wall
Put forth against my passage and my passion;
God's eyes will laugh again to watch my fall.
My Muse resides in halls long since deserted,
And does not deign to grieve, long being dead.

So I begin again, where I have ended,
Just to start and stall so many times before,

Again to chart the path where I've descended:
And my pen inks blood and bondage mine once more,
And blood and bonds of those who I've befriended-
All my cast of masks whose ship is shorn from shore:
My actors marching past to bright oblivion,
To rise, to pass, to reach to touch the sun.

III.

So here I am at last, and the world has surrendered its stories
For others to thrive on; my page is a space that holds vagueness
in vain.

I would be as the leaves that are senseless to death, or to birth,
and the glories

They've passed, unremarked on, that left with the rain.

If a vagrant escaped and was kept on a page to recline like an
island,

It would hold the same history of thoughts now, that vanish, apart-
That a season usurps, as a spring leaves from heath-bed to
highland:

With all of the things that I'd held, that are hulled in my
heart.

In the silence replaying my crowds, and the innocent throngs of
their faces,

Their throstle-throats play to my ear and are drowned in the wake
of a wind.

Before I depart I'll know death, yet again, will escape with their
traces:

They'll be born yet again, and decline out of mind.

In the grey granite paths by the flats where my neighbours are
stationed,

The wraiths of the fountain and mountain, that mated with river
or sky,

In ages that never existed will dwell in my head for a second,

Vacated through space of the air, to catch sparks as they die.

I know nothing of kingdoms or kings, or of minstrels or players;
I have no-one to play for or serve, and I have no desire for a
throne.

Of my hopes there is nothing to rise to or drape in my prayers:

My glances are drawn back to things as foregone.

All my audience then, in the walls where my days were yet hours,

Were voices yet young as they'd come to their close:

And I feel as a man who is dead through the dusk that a new day
deflowers,

That has stolen the snow that held red from the soul of a
rose.

IV.

Where I am I can raise inward eyes, past a point that may nurture
ambition:

And I think of a place that I knew of before Time was caught in its
breeze;

I can stand under arch and the sky of a carmine and purple
pavilion,

At a girl who floats there on a gilded trapeze.

As she sails in the space of the air what she'll know of the motion
that guides her

Is indifferent for me, for I think that I'll ride to the same juncture
now:

When following thoughts as if all were a garlanded horse with no
rider-

As I dwell in detention again, and fail to know how.

Since the detours I took were unsought, when my pen had not
found its position,

I've not followed the roads that they chose who have freedom as
thrall:

As an acrobat's eyes are inspired by a glance, that's a slave to
their vision,

From the world that perceives them retreat from their
fall.

I could be there, ascend and descend there forever in motion
beside her,

If desire were clad in reality's garb, and I'd followed the crest
Of a desperate tide in a tempest I'd glided and welled with to find
her:

And a phoenix carves fire instead through a dell of my
breast.

What shall cross through the gates of her mind in the blank and
the disparate hours,

Once the cold finds her bosom of ermine and takes from the roses
it holds

Their contour and colour, come suns till one comes that
unflowers

All the weft of her hair, and the waft of its shimmering coppers
and golds?

Shall her mirror be mine in the clasp of grey times that to her I'd
have given,

If just that they'd meet us both there, when I've come to
my close?

When the face I wear fades, she'd return when we're both as one
light rearsen:

Forever, to rise or to fade with a ray, that lends breath
to an endless rose.

Movement 2

V..

I do not perceive the words or thoughts of God;
I do not believe I need to know them now.

Here before the brake, below the bough
I catch vague things and point these all at odd;
To gild strange hymnodies, write books of love?
Are these my sums of gravest heritage,
Which signal man with all his vaulting powers,
To scale the stars and praise their shaping hand?
I would rather be, to eulogise the endless,
Some short impulse made quite wayworn, in the breeze
That leads a leaf, than share my mind's dominion
With a love most men can claim or call their own.

And I know this place too well; I can colour its contours:
I know I've been here many times before.
Here once again, there's nothing in these borders
That can make me cast my eyes up past the floor.
There's just the traceless swaying of the rainfall,
And scatter of the leaves the light might glide,
As leave all sounds; I am immaculately lonely.
Though inward bound, I'm free to pick my bounds,
Which is something more than freedom to belong to
Other laws I turn from, love; no motion, now
Granted me than from the loops held inward, endless
I turn from and reclaim; but is that really motion,
If detained in what was mine once to detain?
I'd prefer to place premeditated distance
From a world of outward eyes, whose senses turn
Their pens to set down words, for loves that burn them;
And there are no records in my thoughts for these.
My name is fluttered only into distance
Against the turning of these sleepless veers,
I dwell in, wondering, before my gaze averts there,
Diverted down to face each inward I.

In their wholeness mine, I sense those pass, dissembling
What they are in me, and I, who smooth their strings,

Believe they are in fairness one and nothing,
Both the whole and yet the neither of their parts:
Sense myself they are my part, so I won't wonder
That in bleeding them their blood won't reach to me.
Yet I believe that I may not share in the glory
That their selves may make beyond themselves. I try
To reach towards theirs fames, and alter faintly
Not a bit of what I fall towards: as one
Left to pay my weight in tearless griefs, to free them,
All the actors that I've trapped. I only feel
The fears they are devoid of, raised from nothing
But the bonds I've brought by which beyond I'm bound.

VI.

Is this the boon that God has always given
To those who chase his face, to glorify
Their own name in the vaults to which is given
All their stock of days, by harsh astronomy?
What need have I at last for staffs or haloes
That the shafts of stars can grant me, for my wage-
The cage of age, with all its fancies and adventures
To unfold me in a life's worn folio?
What purpose these scars hard and all-entrenching,
Not the cuts of love of fleshless seraphim,
What need of balms, in promises, brought higher
Than they aim in consummation to resolve?
An unopinioned angel need not pray to Heaven,
Or raise his eyes where wings won't strip the sky,
Once stripped of bliss by bliss borne off to others
Than share his kingdom, breath stripped by a sigh.

O stars that blast from bannerless horizons,
With viewless flutes you charm each beat and chime

The fragile muse leaves, in the straits of silence,
In liquid leaps that scale the rims of Time.
Take here my circus puppets, with the others
I'm too tired to lend a name to, and those named;
Below the weights of dead affections I have made them-
They have crossed with me beyond that borderline.
Shed as dark flowers on the darkneses of ether;
To lose with some gained place both face and title there.
Are these weeds the flowers I'll wreath, gone into stillness,
Faint Madonnas blessed with plastercast despair?
In beyond of range and ken, shall there be sculpture
Come from words, from life made leaden in its rounds:
Or sun-shod, battered down to a sun's likeness
From a world adrift past searches, thoughts and sounds?
Come through me now, strange gaze, I long for only
What I lean towards, lend gaze made stranger still:
Lend me now strange life, my solar crown of hours
And revive against new place of pages now:
Broad lord of light, though clouds shall cloud your lightfall,
You can see through me, though vacant, and I see
Again I know this place; I've been here so alone now:
I've been here so many times, to reach for thee.

VII.

So here I am; the noon feels no such throes
As hide and slide inside me, when I try
To pierce creation's mockeries and mows
At wings that strive, and fail to find the sky;
As moves the ravished forehead of the rose
That rides the breeze that cradles it to die,
My phantoms bleed in air that gave them blood,
My Muse passed short, before her maidenhood.

Is this what it was for then, after all?
Could I have sped against my own decrees
That led me here, to measure out my stall,
Repeating useless words; what worth are these
That cannot bend a storm-lagged sun as thrall:
To storm the stars which chart my Pleiades?
I cannot trade my kingdom for a crown,
Much less grow fruit, beside a barren lawn.

I thought I'd done it all, I'd thought my words
Could measure me and free me from the reins
I'm choked by: with bitter-throated birds
Which kill the dawn, and shatter its remains.
Those characters will meet their own rewards
I've nursed to breath, dumb ministrants whose chains
Are always fixed though, superseding I,
They'd face each morn, with pinioned liberty-

That passes me when, crossed within my bounds,
I wonder who was chained or found release-
Myself, the haltered wraiths who haunt these grounds,
The marionette who rides the lone trapeze?
Mere puppets fit to staunch their maker's wounds
If they can sing a while, before they cease,
They pass, and go: and lose their place in rhyme
With each new face, and painted paradigm.

Deserting me, who lent them hollow hours,
They come back in the end and trace each scar
I'd carved upon their selves, beneath those towers
Creation builds - to plant a tinselled star
Upon each brow which falters with the flowers;
They say, "Remember me, since I am far."
My clowns and maids and knights my winds have thrown
Will not retrack my passage, when I'm gone-

Where all their painted angels lose their wings;
I'll shed my own within the halls of thought
I've crafted as my mask, to quell those things
The mind drinks in, and drowns in, though unsought.
How can I raise my arms against the strings,
Who rest with forms that last year's dollhouse brought,
To perch on shelves and mimic masks and minds:
With doors locked off, and walled against the winds?

