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# THE SHIELD OF ACHILLES

FOR LINCOLN AND  
FIDELMA KIRSTEIN

*From bad lands where eggs are small and dear  
Climbing to worse by a stonier  
Track, when all are spent we hear it—the right song  
For the wrong time of year.*

### Note

I owe my readers an explanation for reprinting two poems, “Prime” and “Nones,” which appeared in my previous volume. They were planned to be part of a sequence which is now complete, and it is in their proper context that I would prefer them to be read.

Thanks are due to the following publishers and periodicals in whose pages some of these poems have appeared: Messrs. Boosey and Hawkes, *Ballantine Books*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Listener*, *Encounter*, *The London Magazine*, *Botteghe Oscure*, *Poetry*, *The Catholic Worker*, *The Third Hour*.

I  
Bucolics

*Fair is Middle-Earth nor changes, though to Age,  
Raging at his uncomeliness,  
Her wine turn sour, her bread tasteless.*

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## 1. WINDS

*(For Alexis Leger)*

Deep below our violences,  
Quite still, lie our First Dad, his watch  
And many little maids,  
But the boneless winds that blow  
Round law-court and temple  
Recall to Metropolis  
That Pliocene Friday when,  
At His holy insufflation  
(Had He picked a teleost  
Or an arthropod to inspire,  
Would our death also have come?)  
One bubble-brained creature said—  
“I am loved, therefore I am”—:  
And well by now might the lion  
Be lying down with the kid,  
Had he stuck to that logic.

Winds make weather; weather  
Is what nasty people are  
Nasty about and the nice  
Show a common joy in observing:  
When I seek an image  
For our Authentic City,  
(Across what brigs of dread,  
Down what gloomy galleries,  
Must we stagger or crawl  
Before we may cry—O look!?)  
I see old men in hall-ways  
Tapping their barometers,

Or a lawn over which  
The first thing after breakfast,  
A paterfamilias  
Hurries to inspect his rain-gauge.

Goddess of winds and wisdom,  
When, on some windless day  
Of dejection, unable  
To name or to structure,  
Your poet with bodily tics,  
Scratching, tapping his teeth,  
Tugging the lobe of an ear,  
Unconsciously invokes You,  
Show Your good nature, allow  
Rooster or whistling maid  
To fetch him Arthur O'Bower;  
Then, if moon-faced Nonsense,  
That erudite forger, stalk  
Through the seven kingdoms,  
Set Your poplars a-shiver  
To warn Your clerk lest he  
Die like an Old Believer  
For some spurious reading:  
And in all winds, no matter  
Which of Your twelve he may hear,  
Equinox gales at midnight  
Howling through marram grass,  
Or a faint susurration  
Of pines on a cloudless  
Afternoon in midsummer,  
Let him feel You present,  
That every verbal rite  
May be fittingly done,

And done in anamnesis  
Of what is excellent  
Yet a visible creature,  
Earth, Sky, a few dear names.

## 2. WOODS

*(For Nicolas Nabokov)*

Sylvan meant savage in those primal woods  
Piero di Cosimo so loved to draw,  
Where nudes, bears, lions, sows with women's heads  
Mounted and murdered and ate each other raw,  
Nor thought the lightning-kindled bush to tame  
But, flabbergasted, fled the useful flame.

Reduced to patches owned by hunting squires  
Of villages with ovens and a stocks,  
They whispered still of most unsocial fires,  
Though Crown and Mitre warned their silly flocks  
The pasture's humdrum rhythms to approve  
And to abhor the licence of the grove.

Guilty intention still looks for a hotel  
That wants no details and surrenders none;  
A wood is that, and throws in charm as well,  
And many a semi-innocent, undone,  
Has blamed its nightingales who round the deed  
Sang with such sweetness of a happy greed.

Those birds, of course, did nothing of the sort,  
And, as for sylvan nature, if you take  
A snapshot at a picnic, O how short

And lower-ordersy the Gang will look  
By those vast lives that never took another  
And are not scared of gods, ghosts, or stepmother.

Among these coffins of its by-and-by  
The Public can (it cannot on a coast)  
Bridle its skirt-and-bargain-chasing eye,  
And where should an austere philologist  
Relax but in the very world of shade  
From which the matter of his field was made.

Old sounds re-educate an ear grown coarse,  
As Pan's green father suddenly raps out  
A burst of undecipherable Morse,  
And cuckoos mock in Welsh, and doves create  
In rustic English over all they do  
To rear their modern family of two.

Now here, now there, some loosened element,  
A fruit in vigor or a dying leaf,  
Utters its private idiom for descent,  
And late man, listening through his latter grief,  
Hears, close or far, the oldest of his joys,  
Exactly as it was, the water noise.

A well-kempt forest begs Our Lady's grace;  
Someone is not disgusted, or at least  
Is laying bets upon the human race  
Retaining enough decency to last;  
The trees encountered on a country stroll  
Reveal a lot about a country's soul.

A small grove massacred to the last ash,  
An oak with heart-rot, give away the show:  
This great society is going smash;  
They cannot fool us with how fast they go,  
How much they cost each other and the gods!  
A culture is no better than its woods.

### 3. MOUNTAINS

*(For Hedwig Petzold)*

I know a retired dentist who only paints mountains,  
But the Masters seldom care  
That much, who sketch them in beyond a holy face  
Or a highly dangerous chair;  
While a normal eye perceives them as a wall  
Between worse and better, like a child, scolded in France,  
Who wishes he were crying on the Italian side of the Alps:  
Caesar does not rejoice when high ground  
Makes a darker map,  
Nor does Madam. Why should they? A serious being  
Cries out for a gap.

And it is curious how often in steep places  
You meet someone short who frowns,  
A type you catch beheading daisies with a stick:  
Small crooks flourish in big towns,  
But perfect monsters—remember Dracula—  
Are bred on crags in castles; those unsmiling parties,  
Clumping off at dawn in the gear of their mystery  
For points up, are a bit alarming;  
They have the balance, nerve,

And habit of the Spiritual, but what God  
Does their Order serve?

A civil man is a citizen. Am I  
To see in the Lake District, then,  
Another bourgeois invention like the piano?  
Well, I won't. How can I, when  
I wish I stood now on a platform at Penrith,  
Zurich, or any junction at which you leave the express  
For a local that swerves off soon into a cutting? Soon  
Tunnels begin, red farms disappear,  
Hedges turn to walls,  
Cows become sheep, you smell peat or pinewood, you hear  
Your first waterfalls,

And what looked like a wall turns out to be a world  
With measurements of its own  
And a style of gossip. To manage the Flesh,  
When angels of ice and stone  
Stand over her day and night who make it so plain  
They detest any kind of growth, does not encourage  
Euphemisms for the effort: here wayside crucifixes  
Bear witness to a physical outrage,  
And serenades too  
Stick to bare fact; "O my girl has a goitre,  
I've a hole in my shoe!"

Dour. Still, a fine refuge. That boy behind his goats  
Has the round skull of a clan  
That fled with bronze before a tougher metal.  
And that quiet old gentleman  
With a cheap room at the Black Eagle used to own

Three papers but is not received in Society now:  
These farms can always see a panting government coming;  
    I'm nordic myself, but even so  
        I'd much rather stay  
Where the nearest person who could have me hung is  
    Some ridges away.

To be sitting in privacy, like a cat  
    On the warm roof of a loft,  
Where the high-spirited son of some gloomy tarn  
    Comes sprinting down through a green croft,  
    Bright with flowers laid out in exquisite splodges  
Like a Chinese poem, while, near enough, a real darling  
Is cooking a delicious lunch, would keep me happy for  
    What? Five minutes? For an uncatlike  
        Creature who has gone wrong,  
Five minutes on even the nicest mountain  
    Is awfully long.

#### 4. LAKES

*(For Isaiah Berlin)*

A lake allows an average father, walking slowly,  
    To circumvent it in an afternoon,  
And any healthy mother to halloo the children  
    Back to her bedtime from their games across:  
(Anything bigger than that, like Michigan or Baikal,  
    Though potable, is an "estranging sea").

Lake-folk require no fiend to keep them on their toes;  
    They leave aggression to ill-bred romantics

Who duel with their shadows over blasted heaths:  
A month in a lacustrine atmosphere  
Would find the fluvial rivals waltzing not exchanging  
The rhyming insults of their great-great-uncles.

No wonder Christendom did not get really started  
Till, scarred by torture, white from caves and jails,  
Her pensive chiefs converged on the Ascanian Lake  
And by that stork-infested shore invented  
The life of Godhead, making catholic the figure  
Of three small fishes in a triangle.

Sly Foreign Ministers should always meet beside one,  
For, whether they walk widdershins or deasil,  
The path will yoke their shoulders to one liquid centre  
Like two old donkeys pumping as they plod;  
Such physical compassion may not guarantee  
A marriage for their armies, but it helps.

Only a very wicked or conceited man,  
About to sink somewhere in mid-Atlantic,  
Could think Poseidon's frown was meant for him in person,  
But it is only human to believe  
The little lady of the glacier lake has fallen  
In love with the rare bather whom she drowns.

The drinking water of the city where one panics  
At nothing noticing how real one is  
May come from reservoirs whose guards are all too conscious  
Of being followed: Webster's cardinal  
Saw in a fish-pool something horrid with a hay-rake;  
I know a Sussex hammer-pond like that.

A haunted lake is sick, though; normally, they doctor  
Our tactile fevers with a visual world  
Where beaks are dumb like boughs and faces safe like houses;  
The water-scorpion finds it quite unticklish,  
And, if it shudder slightly when caressed by boats,  
It never asks for water or a loan.

Liking one's Nature, as lake-lovers do, benign  
Goes with a wish for savage dogs and man-traps:  
One Fall, one dispossession, is enough, I'm sorry;  
Why should I give Lake Eden to the Nation  
Just because every mortal Jack and Jill has been  
The genius of some amniotic mere?

It is unlikely I shall ever keep a swan  
Or build a tower on any small tombolo,  
But that's not going to stop me wondering what sort  
Of lake I would decide on if I should.  
Moraine, pot, oxbow, glint, sink, crater, piedmont, dimple . . . ?  
Just reeling off their names is ever so comfy.

## 5. ISLANDS

*(For Giocondo Sacchetti)*

Old saints on millstones float with cats  
To islands out at sea  
Whereon no female pelvis can  
Threaten their agape.

Beyond the long arm of the Law,  
Close to a shipping road,  
Pirates in their island lairs  
Observe the pirate code.

Obsession with security  
In Sovereigns prevails;  
His Highness and The People both  
Pick islands for their jails.

Once, where detected worldlings now  
Do penitential jobs,  
Exterminated species played  
Who had not read their Hobbes.

His continental damage done,  
Laid on an island shelf,  
Napoleon has five years more  
To talk about himself.

How fascinating is that class  
Whose only member is Me!  
Sappho, Tiberius and I  
Hold forth beside the sea.

What is cosier than the shore  
Of a lake turned inside out?  
How do all these other people  
Dare to be about?

In democratic nudity  
Their sexes lie; except  
By age or weight you could not tell  
The keeping from the kept.

They go, she goes, thou goest, I go  
To a mainland livelihood:  
Farmer and fisherman complain  
The other has it good.

## 6. PLAINS

*(For Wendell Johnson)*

I can imagine quite easily ending up  
In a decaying port on a desolate coast,  
Cadging drinks from the unwary, a quarrelsome,  
Disreputable old man; I can picture  
A second childhood in a valley, scribbling  
Reams of edifying and unreadable verse;  
But I cannot see a plain without a shudder;  
“O God, please, please, don’t ever make me live there!”

It’s horrible to think what peaks come down to,  
That pecking rain and squelching glacier defeat  
Tall pomps of stone where goddesses lay sleeping,  
Dreaming of being woken by some chisel’s kiss,  
That what those blind brutes leave when they are through is nothing  
But a mere substance, a clay that meekly takes  
The potter’s cuff, a gravel that as concrete  
Will unsex any space which it encloses.

And think of growing where all elsewheres are equal!  
So long as there’s a hill-ridge somewhere the dreamer  
Can place his land of marvels; in poor valleys  
Orphans can head downstream to seek a million:  
Here nothing points; to choose between Art and Science  
An embryo genius would have to spin a stick.  
What could these farms do if set loose but drift like clouds,  
What goal of unrest is there but the Navy?

Romance? Not in this weather. Ovid’s charmer  
Who leads the quadrilles in Arcady, boy-lord  
Of hearts who can call their Yes and No their own,  
Would, madcap that he is, soon die of cold or sunstroke:

These lives are in firmer hands; that old grim She  
Who makes the blind dates for the hatless genera  
Creates their country matters. (Woe to the child-bed,  
Woe to the strawberries if She's in Her moods!)

And on these attend, greedy as fowl and harsher  
Than any climate, Caesar with all his They.  
If a tax-collector disappear in the hills,  
If, now and then, a keeper is shot in the forest,  
No thunder follows, but where roads run level,  
How swift to the point of protest strides the Crown.  
It hangs, it flogs, it fines, it goes. There is drink.  
There are wives to beat. But Zeus is with the strong,

Born as a rule in some small place (an island,  
Quite often, where a smart lad can spot the bluff  
Whence cannon would put the harbor at his mercy),  
Though it is here they chamber with Clio. At this brook  
The Christian cross-bow stopped the Heathen scimitar;  
Here is a windmill whence an emperor saw  
His right wing crumple; across these cabbage fields  
A pretender's Light Horse made their final charge.

If I were a plainsman I should hate us all,  
From the mechanic rioting for a cheap loaf  
To the fastidious palate, hate the painter  
Who steals my wrinkles for his Twelve Apostles,  
Hate the priest who cannot even make it shower.  
What could I smile at as I trudged behind my harrow  
But bloodshot images of rivers screaming,  
Marbles in panic, and Don't-Care made to care?

As it is, though, I know them personally

Only as a landscape common to two nightmares:  
Across them, spotted by spiders from afar,

I have tried to run, knowing there was no hiding and no help;  
On them, in brilliant moonlight, I have lost my way

And stood without a shadow at the dead centre  
Of an abominable desolation,

Like Tarquin ravished by his post-coital sadness.

Which goes to show I've reason to be frightened

Not of plains, of course, but of me. I should like  
—Who wouldn't?—to shoot beautifully and be obeyed,

(I should also like to own a cave with two exits);

I wish I weren't so silly. Though I can't pretend

To think these flats poetic, it's as well at times  
To be reminded that nothing is lovely,

Not even in poetry, which is not the case.

## 7. STREAMS

*(For Elizabeth Drew)*

Dear water, clear water, playful in all your streams,  
As you dash or loiter through life who does not love

To sit beside you, to hear you and see you,  
Pure being, perfect in music and movement?

Air is boastful at times, earth slovenly, fire rude,  
But you in your bearing are always immaculate,

The most well-spoken of all the older  
Servants in the household of Mrs Nature.

Nobody suspects you of mocking him, for you still  
Use the same vocables you were using the day  
    Before that unexpected row which  
    Downed every hod on half-finished Babel,

And still talk to yourself: nowhere are you disliked;  
Arching your torso, you dive from a basalt sill,  
    Canter across white chalk, slog forward  
    Through red marls, the aboriginal pilgrim,

At home in all sections, but for whom we should be  
Idolaters of a single rock, kept apart  
    By our landscapes, excluding as alien  
    The tales and diets of all other strata.

How could we love the absent one if you did not keep  
Coming from a distance, or quite directly assist,  
    As when past Iseult's tower you floated  
    The willow pash-notes of wanted Tristram?

And *Homo Ludens*, surely, is your child, who make  
Fun of our feuds by opposing identical banks,  
    Transferring the loam from Huppim  
    To Muppim and back each time you crankle.

Growth cannot add to your song: as unchristened brooks  
Already you whisper to ants what, as Brahma's son,  
    Descending his titanic staircase  
    Into Assam, to Himalayan bears you thunder.

And not even man can spoil you: his company  
Coarsens roses and dogs but, should he herd you through a sluice  
    To toil at a turbine, or keep you  
    Leaping in gardens for his amusement,

Innocent still is your outcry, water, and there  
Even, to his soiled heart raging at what it is,  
    Tells of a sort of world, quite other,  
Altogether different from this one

With its envies and passports, a polis like that  
To which, in the name of scholars everywhere,  
    Gaston Paris pledged his allegiance  
As Bismarck's siege-guns came within earshot.

Lately, in that dale of all Yorkshire's the loveliest,  
Where, off its fell-side helter-skelter, Kisdon Beck  
    Jumps into Swale with a boyish shouting,  
Sprawled out on grass, I dozed for a second,

And found myself following a croquet tournament  
In a calm enclosure, with thrushes popular:  
    Of all the players in that cool valley  
The best with the mallet was my darling.

While, on the wolds that begirdled it, wild old men  
Hunted with spades and hammers, monomaniac each,  
    For a megalith or a fossil,  
And bird-watchers stalked the mossy beech-woods.

Suddenly, over the lawn we started to run  
For, lo, through the trees in a cream and golden coach  
    Drawn by two baby locomotives,  
The god of mortal doting approached us,

Flanked by his bodyguard, those hairy armigers in green  
Who laugh at thunderstorms and weep at a blue sky:  
    He thanked us for our cheers of homage,  
And promised X and Y a passion undying.

With a wave of his torch he commanded a dance;  
So round in a ring we flew, my dear on my right,  
    When I awoke. But fortunate seemed that  
    Day because of my dream and enlightened,

And dearer, water, than ever your voice, as if  
Glad—though goodness knows why—to run with the human race,  
    Wishing, I thought, the least of men their  
    Figures of splendor, their holy places.