IN THE GLASS OF WINTER

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DAVID JAFFIN

With an Introduction by Edward Lucie-Smith

Abelard-Schuman • London

For my parents

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Abelard-Schuman Limited 450 Edgware Road, London W2 and Kingswood House, Heath and Reach, Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire

Printed in Great Britain by Billing & Sons Limited, Guildford and London

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These poems have appeared in the following periodicals:

The Contemporary Review; English (Oxford University Press); Tribune; The Dublin Magazine (Ireland); The Chelsea Review (USA); Ariel (University of Calgary, Canada); The Christian Century (USA); Meridian Poetry Magazine; The Decal Review; Workshop New Poetry; The Anglo Welsh Review; The Antigonish Review (St. Francis Xavier University, Canada); Tagus; Samphire; In Dark Mill Shadows (Anthology of Bailrigg Poems, University of Lancaster); Poet (London); The Dalhousie Review (Dalhousie University, Canada); The Little Word Machine; The Literary Half Yearly (University of Mysore, India); Littack; Capella (Ireland); The Chapman; The Clare Market Review (London School of Economics); The Wisconsin Review (USA); Poem (USA); The Galley Sail Review (USA); The Wascana Review (University of Saskatchewan, Canada); The Roanoke Review (Roanoke College, USA); The University of Portland Review (USA); Gallery Series Poets (USA); The Florida Quarterly (University of Florida, USA); Waves (University of York, Canada); The Washington and Jefferson Literary Journal (Washington and Jefferson College, USA); Orbis; The Free Lance (USA); Here Now; Gong (University of Nottingham); The Whetstone (USA); Platform (Yorkshire); Muse (Birmingham Poetry Centre).

Introduction

It is a matter for concern, as well as for curiosity, that the struggle to be modern has had, in the English language at least, such an intermittent success. Much consciously ‘modernist’ poetry written in English is forced and pretentious; but work which shuns experiment is often pretentious and boring. Things are different abroad. In France, the ethos of the Modern Movement permeates contemporary poetry as much as it does painting and sculpture, and developments in poetry have been inseparably linked with those which have taken place in the visual arts. Expressionist painting in Germany ran parallel with the development of Expressionism in literature, and especially in poetry; and the modernist development which Hitler checked has been taken up again with renewed vigour in the years since 1945, as we can see in the works of poets otherwise as different from one another as Enzensberger and Celan. In the literature of Spain and of the Spanish-speaking Americas the vitality of the poets—they range from the vigour of Neruda to the severity of Nicanor Parra—has perhaps surpassed that of the visual artists produced by the same group of cultures.

It will take many writers, not just one writer, to remedy this situation where English is concerned, but David Jaffin is certainly one of the few who seem to be aware of the problem. His poems are brief, and at a first reading look very simple. It is only as we re-read them that we realize how subtly he handles his linguistic material. Many of his most characteristic effects come from small but nevertheless vitally important displacements of words—from their usual function or their usual context. Here are some examples, chosen almost at random: ‘Memory lights the scent /of lilac’—‘When winter comes/ We take a book to ourselves/From those long covered shelves/of silence’—‘You touched/Your fingers placed silence fin place'.

This sensitivity to the weight and meanings of words, and the way in which the meaning can be altered by a number of different factors: context, grammatical function, position in the line, the overall rhythm of the poem—here is something which makes it clear that David Jaffin has nothing to do with ‘academic poetry’ of a conventionally skilful kind.

One reason why we read poems is because they refresh the language, because they bring words alive, and rub off the tarnish which accumulates in daily usage. This cleansing function is one of the most important the poet can exercise, though it is not necessarily the one which will make his work immediately popular. David Jaffin’s characteristic spareness and economy make the reader particularly keenly aware of his concern for good language, which means fresh and immediate language. He deserves to be read because he improves and extends the instrument he uses.

Edward Lucie-Smith

[I] PREFACE

The tentative light of the winter dawn,

Its cold truth I break with this song;

Incomplete I left the flower

Before my lips could form its presence.

GREEN SCARF

I am of the winter of your eyes:

The mist

(the flower cold)

You circling on that field,

Your green scarf (this circled sun),

The sorrow of our love;

Why among the clouds so shaped and solemn,

Memory lights the scent of lilac?

WHEN WINTER COMES

When winter comes We close the windows behind us, Seal off that last bit of cold from within us

And consider the warmth inside.

We are rooms then,

With emptied spaces and shutters without,

Perfectly planned we stand to Within the centre of ourselves And turn that switch between light and darkness.

When winter comes We take a book to ourselves From those long covered shelves of silence

And feel out the pages of sound

To our stretched out thoughts recede,

Touch to each a quickened vein At a fire of our own asking:

Wine, and the wintered winds -without.

GETTING OLD

You were getting old they told me,

The fires gone from your face, Burned to the coolness of diminished flame,

The heat in being constant,

Coals that kept their purpose still;

You were getting old they told me,

Hands less quick to grasp But slow to yield As if touch could replace that Active thought of yours—

And yes,

They told me you sat by the fire now,

Days on end, not thinking At all but watching those flames Diminish to their final glow.

UPON A STILL GLASS

Ask in silence me,

The words have whispered found

as breath upon a still glass

then cease to be.

And that afternoon

We sat at ease, I had waited

Long for your coming,

With hat in hand And the winds had blown Whatever thoughts I had, away,

Before you came and we took A loaf of bread between us,

Sliced it to the last fragments of sun

And it was like looking

in,

You talked and it was Like looking in a door we’d Already closed behind And all those seats were filled before,

The faces wanted to be away

But you brought them nearer, Constantly nearer—

Was it your hands,

The quiet intonation of your voice?

And they sat And we sat looking at the same thing,

At a word we’d focused on, And the candle on the table Standing at the middle Blew repeatedly upon its own flame.

I sit in the afternoon.

THAT AFTERNOON IN SALZBURG

It could be a garden here

And the fountains would be on Turning their clear light As people pass

Between rows of gardened grass

I sit where I am,

Time and place are all the Same in this ordered scene

I sit and think Or I come and go between These rows of conscious sounds

Nothing takes place.

People pass, the fountains are Lit, on, flowers open out Their face to that all consuming sun

But the shadows are gathering sounds

The still’s become cold And I’ve grown conscious of These stones I’m looking at And sitting on The sun sinks, its tendered Light, a wind without a mark Quicker now, each time the Shadows break, people pass as Birds take flight

fainter still

from here.

Sadness came in the night With a change in the winds It left snow,

WITH A CHANGE IN THE WINDS

It left a face of clearness,

It deceived for its own sake.

And in the morning

When we heard the men working

Between the hills,

Sounds that echoed out And birds that circled there Self enclosed in shadow

Where the winds crossed as waves of sound

Sadness came that night And we felt it between ourselves, Distances there that were Covered over too and deceptively clear.

It is better not to say. Quietness at least conceals.

AT NIGHT BY THE FIRE

It can be touched to The cloth work turn of your hands At night by the fire When your face was a pause in the shadows And flames sparkled their thirs t

We remained to the corners of That room we called familiar once

Concealing ourselves there From the winds that told without

And the flames that burned their cause away.

There must be quiet And there must be beauty, Whichever way the world

goes

Here it stays still,

Here it is brought to and Here it shall find

As a chair in an empty room,

Hardly noticed at first Concealing space where You sat, you as you And drawn to within the Qualities of yourself.

Let us close that door now To silence and to beauty And to rest, and let us Listen in that calmed stillness

To the voice of our own concealed voice.

The sun is broken,

Its face of glass reflected the image I—

Not the I of myself,

But the glass, the image reflected.

Fear is of two wings (flight but shadow)

That distils this silence, the

awkward pain—

Fear that these eyes would meet themselves

that dream was but fancy, of cloth woven

that when I touched your hand

It was only the wind, and i.

DYING

It was that room again,

The same and ever present and walked into

As the sea with its life like Sounds that could have been drawn even closer once

He stirred, the light Changed and his eyes were half expectant

As she came in his mind Down those corridors of sound

And he thought of summer then,

The stillness of being loved,

The counting out of things together, and after

(that light changed)

Not at a moment to be taken in hand

Or with a switch

He lay in shadow Conscious of those sheets that couldn’t cool

About him night closed it self round,

The ringing out of stars And that bright, apparent moon

It was that room again,

The same and ever present and walked into

He prepared, he neared his own parting.

CLOSED BEHIND

And when we went a bit further The fence closed behind.

It swang, the way Robert Frost Wrote of birch swingers,

But it closed. It wasn’t our choice.

We didn’t even think of it then,

Not till later, the sun had Climbed over the hill before us And winter was at its brightest Despite those shifting shades and The pastel sky that added a Tone of lightness to our step As we passed through the powdered Snow and noticed row upon row How that fence had widened itself out Until we were closed within

And when we went a bit further We came to a wood.

It was light at first,

Combs of birch stood at the sides But before we realized where we Were it had darkened,

The trees became higher, the Snow deeper, the world Darker, and we couldn’t think, not Even then, of turning back,

We kept going on and on

Deeper and deeper into that closing

Darkness until at once

I lit a flame to my fingers to

Take that cold away

And when I looked you weren’t

There and I turned round to where

We’d been before, but

Our steps had blown away.

IN LIGHT

You were alone in a room. The light lit you It fell where you were And folded your hands together

Creating a moment You touched

Your fingers placed silence in place

Rethinking sounds Recollecting thoughts

You closed that door quietly, behind Went out, into the sun

Your dress creased Your mind absorbed light Your fingers ceased to think

For themselves

As you stepped quickly instead

Aside from what you thought

And were gone in a Moment of shadow and shade.

LATE HARVEST

The last fruit is almost in,

The fields will be stubble and stone

And what we’ve forgotten to take, dried,

The trees will loose their leaves

As you did for me once, your hair,

And that sun will turn cold, to touch.

Let us walk now,

Let us take hands, for we are less than this.

Here, waiting at the gate The sun slipped quickly through my hands

As the scales of a fish Left shining in light

Steel touched I stood Where the sky had ceased to move in me Its clustered sounds of snow

The stroking of the winds

Trees stepped, footwise higher

For the leaves to turn Their stillness

out

And the gate,

Prefigured, cold watching night.

ENCOUNTERED

That day

Cold and clear as a conscious flame

I feared as I fear myself now, Not knowing how it came to this,

Cold and clear As light that wants itself, a Brightness without cause you came,

Eyes wanton flame,

Nearer to my own than this That flesh I called myself,

Marbled/spoken stone seeing presence there.

19 DAYS

For 19 days We didn’t see the sun

It disappeared over night we grew closer

to ourselves in the cold mist

followed our steps from behind

listening to sound the touched-presence of

stone

What we couldn’t see we felt, even

if the cold numbed our hands we went

without hats

that space could be heard

We kept close together breathing the warmed air

We wanted rooms to be lit when we came,

identified their space

We stood before mirrors hours at

a time looking at our eyes those 19 days

without sun.

LADDER

That ladder led its way from place to place

of former chance, traced the cause (barely construed) deciphered then,

hands held fast feet secure

One wanted more scope toward

the top it came, that ladder led the same way down.

CITIES

This time we had to pass walls we couldn’t climb

They were preconceived as an eye that closes with a switch

They stared through fountains, hollowed stillness as a woman

petitions coldness with the touch of a naked hand

Night descended still without stars

the moon a foil to itself.

NEARING SPRING

A man’s picture Taken in the papers, worn with the print,

A pipe leaning beside on a tray

Pursuing its own aimless way in that emptied room

No one sits there,

A radio could be on The curtains could be hung to appear bright

Perhaps a cat’s Creeping along the roof, Keeping its paws close to its own sounds

And perhaps the rain’s been turned on

And there’s a vacancy of light,

A dullness of grass

Nearing spring I could read it from your face,

What’s been worn and Where the print’s coming loose.

ON HIS ILLNESS

He felt the leaves run dry,

In the blue sunlight

He was cold to thought,

The abstractions of time

He asked if the flower could bleed its

scent away.

AQUARIUM

They’ve never thought that way, Light means nothing to them only the borders of sound,

The cold rimmed glass

As they run That flash of steel their prismic thoughts Closed in to the sun of their own unconscious selves

Those scales, that

Light means nothing to them

only the borders of sound,

The cold rimmed glass.

STEPS IN SNOW

There were steps there

That led across the snow, clearly,

From this house to the road.

I remember how they looked at first, The impression that they made of Distinctness, freshness

That I could almost feel the Boots meet that crush of snow and The clear impressions they

Left, after. And

Then it froze, winter sank to

Its deepest point and

Those steps hardened then,

Without person, intomhed in a Certain stillness as the

Mark of a previous age.

And now it’s melting, that path Itself is thawing and it

No longer meets the road,

And it doesn’t quite start from The house, and at times Between it can’t really find Its own way out.

He had never heard himself.

IN THE GLASS OF WINTER

Everything has sound he thought, the trees

need wind the clouds snow but they can be

heard.

When he was 8 he saw himself once

in a mirror imagined his death

Eyes can’t see themselves without glass

He knew he’d put this edge to himself

It took 4 years before he began to listen

usually in the rain

if he heard hard enough and saw shadows

He thought he’d felt himself

but once a bird passed and he knew he was

gone

Or if he listened long enough

there was only rain But now

at 36 he’s stopped listening

he’s put the shades where he wants

but at night every once in a while

He looks at the moon touches the dark

and’s afraid.

AGING

The day closed as a curtain

folded at either end

certain to meet at the middle—

Winds waste away
out there

You found the light and

combed your hair,

pursued thoughts that weren’t there;

Time recedes, as
touch

You felt very much that way

(without feeling at all)

Except the bright of day

closed as a curtain

folded at either

end.

MISCONCEIVED

As we sat by the fire, Preserved the winter’s flame

I touched your hand observed the same

Forgot precisely the adequate name for such

feelings;

Presumed the presence of flowers

assumed it was May,

But you, my dear

exclaimed That’s a long time

away.

Can you imagine her now With children steeped from head to toe

In a flowing gown and All that regalia of justice,

She who spat upon her mother’s knee, Who taught her masters oft A lesson or two,

Extended her tongue (when she was still quite young) between The upper teeth and the garlicked Dungeons of her lower mouth?

Can you imagine her now Treading the church with a drawn down brow

And all the appearance of a somewhat contemplation

When she used to kick between the chairs And mimic the worthy airs of an elder generation?

Can you think of her as stately And fine, jewelled and gowned In the prismic order of the present?

ALL BEFORE

She had danced it all before. Swung softly to the right

Hips swayed, asked casually If you liked the featured parts,

The prettied portions of her Face appearing on the family page

At length she crossed her legs,

Adjusted the smile Paused awhile raising that glass

To those turned up lips flittered away among the guests.

BALLROOM SCENE (AFTER FRANCESCO DE GUARDI)

The world’s turned cold, Naked for the mind And the eye to behold its solitary light

As truth once told, disenchanted;

Touch defined, Crystalled light the Mind as glass

To its cause, insufficiently.

BRIDGE

The winds are sharp,

The waters cut with a blade

The sky should be steel blue

Whatever I touch shines cold in my hands

Thoughts edged in glass

The mirrored frame of fear

This cold glistens its

Sound and the waves are moved by swans

Tucked in their wings

As persons closed in the folds of their coats

A bridge crosses the water from either side

Steps that can’t be heard

We’ve told to ourselves

And don’t lead as sounds, to.

Somewhere he’s sitting and thinking himself out

ON A WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON

on a park bench

beneath barren trees

and self accustomed stones

on a Wednesday afternoon.

He hears the sounds of his own thoughts

He’s listening closely.

Shadows blow in the wind quickly

His hand touches wood.

He’s trying to stand now

Children jump squares beside him

A fountain should be on but isn’t

He turns now and’s going home.

This room is dying in my heat

VACANCIES OF SOUND

The sun draws its flames from me

Flowers stain that I cut with my bare hands

in the window’s light

As a fire rubbed to the quick of its own

thirst

The colours run Into pools of stagnant streams

I close the windows for my eyes to look out of

nothing within except the vacancies of sound

The city held from its breath as a wind with out touch

I sleep the final sleep of death.

