

UNLOVE

JOHN LEONARD

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64 POEMS

by

JOHN LEONARD

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J.L

For M.

DOG-VIOLETS

At the end of a flowerless
Childhood, searching for primroses,
The first violets were almost
An affront
—That first day of March.

I had never been prepared
For their tiny perfection,
The lowness of the clump
To the leaf-mould
—The first day of March.

Nor had I been warned
How the sun would begin
To shine, the wind seem
Less wintry
—The first day of March.

WAKING UP

My fear has always been
That one day I should
Wake up, mad, in a world
Of determinedly sane objects,
Screaming and cursing
At their same- and so-ness.

But what if, instead,
I were to wake up, sane,
In an ever-never, mad world
Of lovesome magic, where
Things had become events
And words and wishes had
Acquired unwonted powers
In due proportion?

HEADS OR TAILS

In theory the flip-side
Demands an obverse—
But what sort of argument,
To begin only tail-wise?

And “obverse”? scarcely
The bold, expected answer,
More the reverse of the reverse—
No comfort in obversity

APOLOGY

Jack must then be banished to his box?
I grant him uncouth and startling
With his staring eyes and painted
Red cheeks; I see that he frightened you.

But look how sadly he lolls,
Is he not to be rewarded with
A kiss or at the least relieved
Of his crushed paper flowers?

It was perhaps the nursery-tawdriness
Of it angered you? Such exuberance
Was ill-timed; now we are older
Pathos is of the very cheapest.

Should you, though, choose to revisit
The emptied rooms of the past
With reawakening curiosity,
You must try to guess his feelings.

Take the box on your knee,
Touch the dangerous hasp,
But count on no new-found
Immunity from Jack's surprise.

THEM

There is no need to tell me
What they have or have not done,
Since I already know.

Nor is there any point in saying
That they have let you down,
They cannot have done.

Safely kept, in the third person,
From the vagaries of the other two,
Naturally they're free from any
Vague lie that you pretend.

With us, things are different,
All demand and disappointment
Left far behind.

Though our relations are alike
Of distance and difference,
Such is that difference, that
Only you or I can tell.

LOVE AND LOVE

Although love is a bright
Skeleton-key, credited with the power
Of turning any lock whatsoever,
There is always love and love
And no love but it is
Tempered with something else—
Jealousy perhaps, or gratitude.

EVERY NINTH WAVE

Every ninth wave,
Some say, mistaking fancy
For a golden rule;
Just so, every ninth leaf,
Spinning from its tree,
And every ninth thought
(My more-than tithe)
Belongs to you.

ODD

Odd that each day,
Sharded into a thousand
Whims and colours,
In its broken difference
From yesterday or tomorrow,
Should at length come
To share a broken sameness.

fridays

Strange things happen on fridays
(Not that fridays fall on Friday
Any more than on any other day,
But “friday” is as good
A name as any).

Birds and fish have been known
To speak, and as for the weather,
Fridays’ weather is very much
The same as other days’,
Only more so.

TWO ROGUES

Hope, secretly cossetted
Beyond his worth, manages
To make fine clothing
Cheap and vulgar.

In disgust
At which we turn to despair,
Who has the good sense
Always to affect black.

LOVING-

Loving-, as in loving-friendship
Or loving-gratitude and other
Cat-by-the-fireside conceits—
Or even just as in loving;

But love, uncompounded, is
A lonely-proud sort of loving,
An outdoor, all-weather creature,
Fed on scraps and curses.

IMPOSTURE

There's a thief about who's stolen
Your looks and ways, she's even
Perfected your laugh, and she signs
Your name as easily as her own.

She looks like carrying it off too,
Since she has only to reckon with
A general, doltish blindness to
Her imposture, and my helpless fear.

Please let me know you're not
A party to the crime - where would
Be the sense in receiving what's
Yours already to sell it cheap?

YOU'RE

You're nothing like my idea of you
As, lazily, I had assumed,
Though, in the unlucky way
Of accidents, you share your name
With that heart-grown puppet.

You're plainer than memory gave out
And laugh at my discomforture
(I'd forgotten too just how
Taking you amusement is,
But also, how unsettling).

You're a cruel remembrancer, to shake
My sleepy wits so hard—
Though no one but you could
Set me right once again,
More patiently or lovingly.

THRUSH-SONG

In carelessly-flowered spring
Blossoms open either a month
Too early, or too late,
The rain comes when it wants,
Likewise, snow, wind and sun.

Thrushes begin to sing
At odd hours, from hitherto-
Unnoticed trees; anyone can
Have the best ringside seat
If they should chance by.

THE MAGICIAN'S LOVE-TRYST

He obtained a magic cloak
Which made him irresistible
To women; from the cloister
He tempted the most virginal
Of all her sisterhood.

It was with her he discovered
That, just as with the hottest whore,
The spell must not be broken;
Wretched fellow, he had to keep
His precious cloak on.

ANSWER

Your question
Unasked,
As my answer
Is unanswer.

To you entirely?
To whom else,
And how other
Than wholly?
A love despite
Not because.

THE RAVELLED CORD

Looped and tangled upon itself—
Close your eyes and see
With the mind's eye, trust
To your five senses
And perhaps the outlaw sixth;
Fingers work their will,
The cord slips knotless
Through a vacant heart.

LOST

To admit yourself lost
In strangeness is not
Despair but honesty.
As honest as only you
Are, can you claim
Never to have known
Such strangeness before?

GEAN

It was a great pity it had
To come down, but we found
It was rotten to the heart
And a danger to passers-by.

A pity because as children
My sisters and I and some
Of the lads from the village
Played for many hours there,

Scrambling up and down, seeing
Who could be “King of the Castle”.
We were told it was a “merry-tree”,
Its country-name pleased us.

So after it was taken down
I made sure we did not waste it;
The pile of logs we gained
Lasted a whole winter through
And perfumed the air most sweetly
In any room where they were burnt.

LOST LOVE

Stones unturned, books
Never read, days gone by
Long before they were fathomed—
None of these, or any other
Bolting-hole, could hide so
Huge a thing as lost love.

(When it leaps from ambush,
Larger than the dazed eye
Can well reckon—larger,
Certainly, than life—the wonder
Is that the sky does not burst
With all the glory of regret).

A SECOND GLANCE

One morning, rising late
And hurrying through the garden,
He paused for a second glance
At the old apple-tree.

The apple-tree which had stood
There, as long as he could remember,
Whose gnarled trunk he had often
Climbed in his childhood days.

The sky had suddenly brightened,
The tree was bare and shivering
And he noticed that it was
Not quite as he had thought.

There was something new there,
And, looking away, the gaudy
Beds of crocuses, his pride
And joy, there too ...

It was this that started it,
Or so the neighbours said.

A BIRD OF PASSAGE

Money is not hard to come by,
Soi-disant love, of whatever sort,
Is there, to be had for the asking—
Only blessedness, that bird of passage
Will not stay long.

The right way to keep it by you
(This, a tip from worldly wisdom)
Is a life led well, giving
Close attention to this creature's
Every crazy whim.

Yet neither in thought or truth
Will this vagrant domesticate,
But remains true to its kind,
Unexpected, unbidable always,
A dangerous guest.

THE PLURAL OF PHOENIX

Why pity the legendary phoenix
Its singular birth and reign
Of lonely splendour, its death
At last on a fragrant pyre?

Consider instead the prudence
Of this bird—imagine the fiery
Consequences, were a pair
Of them ever to meet up.

A WISH

I wish you knew the rareness
Of that gift which you, in innocence
Granted me; the proud knowledge
Of love's impossibility,
The pain of almost-hope.

DRY AS DUST

Kept from sweet rain
And mould, inside,
Condemned to live
With stuffed creatures,
Cobwebs, other dead things,
In sleepy autumn-sunlight—

Outside, in the cold breeze,
The tang of dryness and dust
Clings to your fingers
As a reminder of how
Once you dealt with them.

SPARROWS' DAY

Other birds have their days,
But today is Sparrows' Day;
Since long before dawn
They have been getting
Their voices in tune.

And now in the glad,
March sun they are posturing
And preening, making ready
For some beggars' holiday,
Or Festival of Sparrowhood.

A LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT

After his death his dear wife
And brothers, sorting through his papers,
Came upon much strange writing.
“Why!” the wife exclaimed,
“This is not his hand, nor
Are these his words.” And then
Grew pale at what she read.

And the poor starved ghost,
Crouched, shivering, outside,
In the rain, on the window-ledge,
Saw and heard all this—
And could not but agree.

LIKE A BOOK

In your wisdom you read
Me like a book—though
For all my unreason
I have never claimed
The like of you.

IN EXILE FROM NOWHERE

There's supposed to be a limit
To the amount of luggage
You can bring—but I appear
To have exceeded it.

Not

That they made any trouble
At the airport, and the taxi-driver
Didn't seem to mind, but
Carrying my cases up only
One flight of stairs put me
In a nasty sweat.

That's how

My first evening, in exile
From nowhere, was spent;
Sitting, staring at my case,
Not daring to unpack even
A toothbrush, for fear of what
I might have brought with me.

HALF-WAY THERE

After years of vexation
And toil, and, who knows,
Maybe even prayer,
An alchemist reviews
His success; bright gold
Turned to base metal.

BIRCH SEEDS

Opening a book at a favourite place
A few birch seeds tumbled out,
Brown now and shrivelled, but
They reminded me how I came
To the house in early autumn
And would sit by an open window
In the cool evenings, trying
To write to you, and how
Each letter grew more crabbed
And false and how I would stab
Idly at the birch seeds with
My pen, as they fell on to the page.

EAVESDROPPERS

They're a dirty-faced, curious lot
Perpetually baffled by the scraps
Of conversations they have caught,
Conversations not meant for them.

Perplexed by the fact that what
They overhear is not the painstaking,
Written word, with all its comic
Rigmarole of why and wherefore,

But the kind of serious banter,
Riddling chains of joking truth,
Which is tolerated and understood
Only among the best of friends.

Which of course, does not stop
These unwelcome guests from reporting
Every kind of tall story, as
A handsel of their urchin spite.

THE NIGHTINGALE

If you catch the old showman
Say at noon, hours before
His evening performance, you
Risk hearing his querulous,
Other music, of mimicry:
Cat- and frog-calls, the least
Impressive parts of other birds'
Song, together with sneers
And chucks of pure contempt.

SIMONY

Picture any gull, telling over,
With curses, money largely spent
And what a poor kind of unwisdom
It bought.

Next you'll find him scheming
How, with his persuasive pitch,
He can turn this bad bargain
Into profit.

FALLING INTO FRIENDSHIP

Any fool can fall in love—
Head over heels, just like that—
And many do, but the knack
Of falling thus into friendship
Is a rarer one to find.

For, was there ever friendship
Struck, that hadn't some hint
At least of calculation in it?
Compared to love, friendship comes
Empty-handed but is enriched.

POLITICAL PRISONER

His is a life-sentence
In a well-guarded prison,
Lest, at liberty to exercise
Free-speech, he should begin
To offend against decorum with
His luckless, wayward tongue.

Strange what trouble we take;
So bowed is he with neglect,
So weakened he can scarcely stand.
His wild words and injunctions
Are not seditious, could only
Provoke our pity, or laughter.

WART-CHARMERS

Most wart-charmers are agreed
That the skill cannot be taught,
Most would then go on to add
Three other rules for the craft:

Firstly—that no wart-charmer
Should ever advertise the fact.
Secondly—that no wart-charmer
Must ever charge for charming.

Thirdly—that whatever cure
Is used is the charmer's choice
And no one should ever think
To follow his peculiar way

(Some use raw bacon, others
Verdigris or spittle, though many
Have no one nostrum and always
Suit the cure to the patient).

Another school, however, holds
That the only nicety required
Of any charmer is the knack
Of making away with warts.

THE RESURRECTIONISTS

In spite of the closest watch,
Railings and a heavy grave-slab,
The fresh corpse is too much
Of a lure to be resisted
By the resurrectionists.

Spirited away by night
The dead man comes to life
(An imitation, mock life,
Articulated in front of students,
Glossed neatly for text books).

MANUMISSION

Consider well before you wake
The silent dead to people
Your dumb-shows.

Being nameless
They cannot resist the cruel
Tug, across to our time.

As their lives are spectral,
So leave them, if you would
Earn their gratitude.

CHESHIRE ACRES

The renown of Cheshire men
Is nowhere better served
Than in their modest acres,
Twice as large as those
Of any, more boastful county.

We might explain this
As careful husbandry—
The fear that, with so many,
A tired farmer could stint
Some acres of their due.

Or perhaps we might suspect
Cheshiremen of shrewd reckoning
(As disappointed fellows everywhere
Agree, no lands are as large
As at first, trusting glance).

A QUESTIONABLE INHERITANCE

The lawyers' letter had not mentioned
These things, but blandly hinted
At an easy inheritance of all
The patrimonial acres, together
With the respect of the tenantry
And the gift of the living.

Instead

He found a tumble-down estate
And house, cadavers and bones
With the claret in the cellar.

And, above stairs, a collection
Of every kind of freakish
And misbegotten beast: a lamb,
Perfectly formed, save that it had
An owl-like face, a bat with
A newt's tail. The steward merely
Laughed, in his slow, stage-country
Way, as they fawned over the heir:
"They know a father's son,
Right enough, ha! ha!". (A hound
As large as a donkey planted
Its paws squarely on the shoulders
Of its new master, and began
To lick his face for him).

THE PRISONER'S PLANS

The prisoner's plans,
Endlessly circumvented,
Not by warders' prescience,
But by a simple lack
Of any place to escape to.

A SECOND YEAR

Grant any thoughtless quirk
The latitude that such
Whims do not deserve.

In time, a month or two,
The giddy-head has only
His tattered stubbornness.

—A second, wilful year
Argues either good sense
Or folly writ large.

DEAD END

The beauty of it (from a certain
Point of view) was that none came here,
But who lived or had business.
It was not a through-route, though
It ran towards the hills there
Were more direct roads. None ever
Stopped over, to carry on later.
One came here, the joke was,
To live and die. All trouble,
Quirkiness and grief was directed on.

In the days before the street's
Reputation grew, theft, wife-beating
And assault were not unknown.
But that was many years ago, many
Staid years ago; strange then
The interest shown at first reports
Of drunken laughter in the night—
Heavy, running footsteps and
The noise of shattering glass.

THE WEATHER-VANE

The arrow long ago lost
Its flight of feathers
And the vane would yaw
Crazily from north-north-east
To south and back again.

Next the figure went
(Whether it portrayed Nelson,
Or just the usual cockerel,
I can't remember) only
A pair of stumps remained.

Now it swings lopsidedly
Through north and west
All the way to east,
Whichever wind may blow,
Or when none does.

LADY MEED

If my Lady Meed is gracious
It is right to show gratitude.
But remember, though, like all *grandes dames*
She is most indulgent
Towards her dogs, she expects
Them to know their place.

THAT OTHER OLD HABIT

I was glad to find,
On meeting you again,
Unexpectedly, as in a dream,
You had not changed
Your grace of word or look.

Nor had you forsaken
That other old habit,
Perhaps the reason that
I love you so, still
You hadn't a word for me.

TRAITOR

You will recognise him
By his blue shirt and red tie,
And a copy of *The Times*,
Folded so.

But also by his bearing,
His ramrod back, well-brushed hair,
And proud eyes.

He will tell you how
Much better he sleeps now
And how much easier
His digestion is, now,
Since this betrayal was forced
Upon him.

Humour him, though,
Deplore the ragged rewards
Of loyalty, the difficulty
Of knowing truth from falsehood
The fatefulness of fate,
Or whatever... we have hopes
Of him still.

ON SCHOOLING

The tutelage is too long
When the only skills to learn
Are the straitened ones
Of guarding well the tongue
And keeping a closed mind.

The practice, hardly won,
Is of circumspection only;
A mental cast, bent so long
Right or left, behind,
It looks ahead with pain.

COMMON COURTESY

Just as confirmed stone-throwers
Rarely live in glass houses
(And those that do spend
Their lives picking up glass)
So any wise man would baulk
At living in a house of cards.

But common courtesy dictates
That on passing his neighbour's
Crazy, four-suited pile,
On tip-toe, with bated breath,
He should restrict himself
To the most mundane remarks.

Or if his neighbour calls him
For a whispered colloquy,
That all hints of foul weather,
A red dawn or mackerel skies,
Are so far forbidden him
As almost to be taboo.

HARD WORDS

It seems months ago we spoke
Yet I am only now sifting
Your words, trying to distinguish
Pleasantry from serious speech.
But the best of our talk,
Words I seem to hear you speak,
Was neither jest nor earnest,
But spoken without thought—
Hard and gracious words, such as
Could only be excused by truth.

GHOSTS

What emotions do ghosts awake?

I heard of one, a young man
Two weeks dead who came back
To visit some of his old friends.
The townsfolk were at first afraid,
Then indignant—what right had he
To return? Wasn't the funeral
In every way decent and proper,
The eulogies as bland as they
Were heart-felt?

He was first
Reviled, then pelted with stones
Back to the churchyard gate.

A LOCAL PAPER

At the tail-end of anywhen,
The beginning of no season
In particular, I picked a copy
Of the local paper from a hedge.

Leafing through, to see what
Designs it might have on me,
Nothing unusual stood out:
Weddings, petty crime, all
Was as normal—then as I
Caught the date I understood,
Although it had been yellowed
By the sun, soaked by rain
Many times over, it belonged
To the year after next.

ADVICE TO CHILDREN

As I learn less and grow
Younger it seems that the irreproachable
Roundness of the peg in its hole,
Is nubbed with such a crew
Of awkward corners, unlooked-for angles,
As none but a fool would slide it
Into any hole but the square,
Though the fit is just as approximate.

THE UNDEFEATED

There was no sense in which
He could have understood
Our admiration—had we
Asked him, he would,
I think, have been amazed
That we could imagine
He might dare do otherwise.

OWL-EATERS

Owl-eaters have little joy
From their strange tastes;
Spot them by their busyness
(Frantic at times)
To gobble up mice.

THE SORCERER'S APPRENTICE

With head hung low
He accepts the reproof as just—
The giant, starred robes
Falling ridiculously long
About his feet, the wand
As heavy as lead in his hand.

He is set back to work;
Firstly to clear the wrecked room,
Then about his old tasks,
Gathering simples to concoct
Philtres, searching and transcribing
Old, battered books of magic.

Jobs, the sorcerer owns, he could
Not do half so well himself.

ACCOUNTANTS

Accountants? I doubt if any
Of them could think up
So much as a decent excuse.

AFTER WINTER

In the morning
With frightened eyes
She tells of her dreams:

Visions, nightmares
Of ghastly power
And hurtful colours.

And of the calm sleep
Towards morning
Which shows a land
Beyond all dreams,
Of no age or place,
Where spring is always
Just about to start
And love, never false.

STAYING TRUE

It's hardly to be expected
There should be medals given
Or plaudits, just a jeering
Kind of patronage, hinting
"You've not done as well
For yourself as you might".

Or at best the same thing,
From those who know you better,
A fine, jealous interest, only
A little this side of scorn.

UNDECIDED

Your decision, taken after we
Of hard, careful thought,
Might just as well have been
Blurted out at once
Without any premeditation
And been just as wrong-head

Neither reason nor instinct
Can claim the monopoly—
If you're of an enquiring mind
And need this explaining,
Put it down to a hard climate
And the heart's smug husbandry.

NO SEASON

No season leads to no season,
In waiting either for summer
Or for winter, but lasts
Longer than either.

The weather which happens
In no season is unseasonable;
The sun vaguely warm, wind
Always fierce.

The flowers of no season
Are next season's early
Or last season's late,
Growing together.

No season, being no season,
Contains no anniversaries,
Nor any single day of note
For the calendar.

No season's crop of people
Are dull and secretive
(No season is the only time
For unlove).