

Martin Robertson

The Black-out

This is a pilgrimage in search of the two lost loves of my youth, Anabel Donaldson and Humfry Payne. If it embraces incidentally a good deal else, that is essentially trivia. The beginning and end of this story is the pilgrimage.

London, Autumn 1939

1

I walked down Piccadilly in the black-out.
The scented aura and soft 'hullo, dearie'
offered the troubled flesh peace with dishonour,
dangerous appeasement, till the mind grew weary.
I passed by each and did not pause to con her,
but in the pale Circus stood one alone
just where the moon threw Eros' shadow on her.
She, stepping suddenly where the light was thrown,
cried: "Hangs the sheath still empty, and the sword
stands ever in the water-wandering stone?"
Her face was memory where the cold light poured
and memory the colours in her hair,
and in my ears echoed beyond her word
her voice, as I walked on towards Leicester Square.

2

The first tube gate was shut, but not the second.
Down sandbag-narrowed steps I reached the glare,
but swift a sanded figure from his work
turned and forbade me right of entrance there.
Back up the steps I groped into the murk.
The moon was clouded, I was deadly tired.
This defeat and the inescapable dark
seemed the blackness of war and love misfired,
the concentration of my brooded wrong.
No buses passed me and one taxi, hired.
A wind touched me, and a voice clear and strong:
“trembles the coward soul? But Anabel
who led you laughing where the thorns were long
sends me here now to comfort you through Hell.”

3

As the moon breaks, as the moon broke through cloud
despair thinned on my heart. The moonlight fell
on her pale face and tall, slight, angular figure.
“And you?” I said; and she: “you know me well.
The moor’s loneliness and the wind’s vigour
bred me secret and strong. The wind, the moor
and my own heart sufficed. Three times the rigour
of exile had me dying, but the poor
flesh won and brought me home. I lived and died
in the wide air, behind a bolted door.
From my lone way I could not turn aside,
yet wrote of love, and what I wrote was true.
Passion and loneliness, despair and pride
peopled my moor and heart—that world I knew.”

4

“Prophet and guide, unhopd for helper sent me,”
I said, “I would of all have chosen you.
Through different worlds we take a different way,
but common-coloured threads were woven through
our minds. But what brings you into my fray?
You thought to breathe your soul into the wind,
dissolve and rest.” She smiled: “did I not say
Anabel sent me? Do not fear the wind
has failed me of my peace, or her the wood.
She is of the wood and I am of the wind
now, each resolved to earth and our own good.
But search your heart—there you will find us still
to help and guide, only departing should
the heart reject us, if it can and will.”

5

“Be with me both,” I answered, “long. My way
is lost or never found. Life, that should fill
my days with action, chokes them with excuse.
Find me the path missed on the clouded hill
I set my feet to climb. Let me not lose
the flame, whose power I feel of work and love,
in ashes of self-pity and abuse.
Just now, sunk in the dark, I could not move
spirit or feet, now I am strong and light.
Walk with me home, where Hampstead sleeps above
the quenched city, and talk.” But she: “to-night
you shall not home so soon; in other places
you are awaited. Come.” To the slow height
we turned our backs, towards the Thames our faces.

6

Trafalgar Square, laid empty in the moonlight,
and long Whitehall received my echoing paces,
the noiseless passage of my friend and guide.
We turned, and left behind the shadowy spaces
of Parliament Square, crossed the untrafficked, wide
Embankment to the bridge, and saw the reach
of river, silver at the full of tide.
“East from the sea and Greece, west out of beech-
woods, Berkshire, childhood, Anabel, the flood
waits for the turn,” began my helper. “Each
of countless currents met in you has stood
waiting too long. Oh, do not miss your hour.
Deep hoarded in your heart a wealth of good
observed, absorbed, lies ready. Give it power.

7

“Consider those whose lives have kindled your life
and bring your torch out of the ivory tower.”
She ceased, and I turned from the waiting water
and saw my brother moving towards our
stance his long steps. “But he” I said, and sought her
eyes, “is in Cambridge.” “I am in the ground,
cold bones in Haworth,” said the parson’s daughter;
“he is in Cambridge, talking, sleeping sound,
O thou of little faith; but we are here.”
I listened, and his footsteps left no sound.
The light wind faded out as he came near.
“Oh what a moon,” he said. “By such a shine
we first saw Florence resting in the clear
after-heat dusk of summer’s first decline.

8

“By such a moon we quarrelled at Arezzo
over a camera, where all divine
Piero’s great frescoes stand.” “Your Italy,”
I said, “your frescoes, all through you are mine.
Through you I have, such as I have, an eye
for visual truth. And we have shared a world
wider than that, till our ways seemed to lie
always together.” From the darkness curled
a faint rhythm of music far up stream.
Giles turned intent, and soon across the pearled
water we saw a black smudge with a gleam
of metal at the prow. “A gondola;
Laurence,” he said. No more than in a dream
surprised, I listened to the faint guitar.

9

Down to the quay below Westminster Bridge,
where trips for Hampton Court and Greenwich are
embarked, we went, Giles leading. Soon the song,
lost for a while, came loud. The gondola
shot from beneath the bridge and drew along.
A bright-haired girl laughing jumped out: “good-bye,
thanks,” and fled. Waited at the back the strong
oarsman, in front the singers silently,
while Laurence, Giles and I on things remote
from this search talked at ease. And presently
they from the boat were calling me: “why not
come with us too? Come with us.” But my guide
touched me; I shook my head: “meet soon.” The boat
passed down with the already turning tide.

10

The wind was up and cold; I shivered, watching
the gondola grow smaller on the wide
water—so lose them too? But the shrammed soul
shrinking contracts against a knot of pride:
I felt myself shrunk in the cold, but whole
and me; and turned to Emily, ready to
move like the river to my certain goal.
She smiled: “this is no loss,” she said. “If you
had stepped in too, you would have lost your way;
their course your drifting—and that brings no true
peace, but slow fretting which is bound to fray
the bonds of love; but in your own strength now
they will be stronger. Come, we cannot stay.”
She turned towards the sea her quiet brow.

11

Down the steps from the sloping road above us
a form, my mother, came. “From Cambridge how
came she?” my prophet mocked. And she to me:
“countless the hours trouble and loss allow,
harsh in its lasting though their pain must be,
and wide, wide the horizon of the heart
where natural beauty, mutual love are free.
Ointments you have to soothe the personal smart,
and though this dark lies on us all, a warning
of present trouble worse, and when we part
gondola sunk or walkers not returning
may turn a casual parting to a last,
though the night be deprived of moon and morning,
day was before it—and we have had the past.

12

“Follows the dark but interesting future.”
“The interest that through all shadows cast
shines still is yours, and mine through you,” I said,
“with memory that no despair can blast
and beauty in the air till we are dead.
The convent and the court have their own good,
and its own good the way you took instead.”
The bridge shadow, darker than a night wood,
took three and rendered two; what I must yet
feel, brushed me then.

To left the plane-trees stood
part lit; to right the shadowed parapet
where leaned a man against the light and drew.
I looked across his arm, and having set
eyes on the work, the worshipped master knew.

13

Past intellectual truth or visual beauty
yet both intense; the cranes on Waterloo
Bridge, angled black against the fainter sky,
seen in their form, and seen and formed anew.
“Speak to him,” gravely said my guide; and I
“many have I honoured, many loved, but none,
not my guide, more than you.” He answered: “why
worshipping us, have you so little done?
at thirty-two I died, at thirty she,
Humfry Payne thirty-four—two years to run
or four or six; is your tale like to be
equal to ours?—oh, feed and fan your flame.”
I bent and watched the waters to the sea
running, and swallowed down the tears of shame.

14

I pulled my hand across my face, weary,
and through my limbs like wine through water came
my father pulling his hand across his face
—perhaps now at his desk doing the same?
I thought, and turned my head. In the same place
I saw him lean where Seurat leaned before.
He leaned and pulled his hand across his face:
“the second darkness falls,” he said, “the war
recurring like a nightmare or a fever.
Yet while our personal intellects endure
we remain masters of our worlds; the river
reflects the moon between our eyes and brain,
and bound within our private senses quiver
all possibilities of delight and pain.

15

“We know this shining stream bears London’s refuse
from railway, gasworks, factory and drain
past wordy Westminster to the mined sea,
who know Scamander and the windy plain.
We hold a double talisman—are free,
first of as many worlds as books, and then
have learnt from them a view of history:
public affairs drift by with public men,
self-seeking or at sea, one-tracked, one-sided
or double-crossing once, twice and, again;
but still by personal intellect is guided
his way who will.” I smiled: “surely from you
comes my taste for an ivory tower provided,
unlike some towers, with windows and a view.”

16

My eyes followed the water running faster,
fast to the sea—and sudden I saw new,
as out of cloud, the moon; as hanging over
Croyde Bay or Ringstead Bay. Came sharply through
me hate to be where streets and houses cover
contours of earth, and water runs by walls.
I sought my guide's look: "uncorrupted lover
of earth and air," I said, "the grime that palls
this town must choke you more than me." "A change,"
she laughed: "remember Elbe's pillared halls,
the shimmering chandeliers of Thrushcross Grange."
But I: "remember Roe Head and Law Hill,
remember Brussels. Can you find it strange
there should be times this city sits me ill?"

17

"Brussels, Roe Head, Law Hill—exile and prison,"
she said, "but sometimes on the windy hill
of home I felt no less a prisoner.
Of itself exiled and imprisoned will
the heart become, and little matters where
the body walks—loved places round us then
intensify the shuttered heart's despair.
From London's prison now you turn again
to Dorset, Devon, Berkshire, Greece, and quite
forget the misery of exile when
Ithaca lay lovely in the moonlight."
"Lovely—an exile to desire," I said.
"So stands the moon over Vathý, and bright
the harbour under the dark hills is laid."

18

But she: "our way waits." I turned to my father
and chilled beheld him gone; then where she led
followed, but half my mind followed in Greece.
"Such light," I said, "and more the full moon shed
when caught by night my second day in Greece
we lost our way about the twentieth mile
where hills broke to the sea, and 'this is Greece'
I thought." We walked in silence for a while.
At Blackfriars' Bridge my guide turned up the hill
by narrow alleys where the houses pile,
and half my mind in Greece, among rocks, still
clambered Hymettus. Suddenly stood plain
great St Paul's, and before it tall and still,
Like a poplar or a cypress, Humfry Payne.

19

After loved unknown dead and loved known living
the loved known dead. How much does memory wane?
figure and face and voice I thought I had,
but now with inexpressible joy and pain
from eyes and ears memorial shadows fade
in the truth's presence. "There is more to do
than any life has time to dream," he said.
"Many, many the things I meant, and few
I made; and much I dreamed is mine and lost,
but some waits others, and of those are you;
the time to do things in is short at most;
why sit like those who listen for the phone,
expecting nothing, listen for the post,
when mind and hand hold so much to be done?"

20

I drank his voice and did not think to answer
but looked and looked; and then I was alone
with Emily. The noble mountain stood,
St Paul's, in pale and shadow-moulded stone,
and stilled, emptied my mind; and then what should
unlikely cross its stillness but the phrase
of Queen Victoria: 'I will be good.'?
I laughed, and suddenly in cloud and blaze
rolled back across my heart the gain and loss.
I swallowed, but the tears blotted my gaze.
"You know," remarked my guide, "you make a cross
too easily out of your natural load"
and added gentler: "Come." We passed across
under Queen Anne, and North by a dark road.

21

North, and then West again by the Old Bailey
towards High Holborn, tired, a dreary road.
But moonlit on the bridge the statues were
like a wood-cut; and there beside us slowed
with muted lights but a familiar air
a car. "Hullo; get in." Familiar too
the friendly voice, and I was glad to hear.
I stooped, hand on the open door, but drew
back as another voice said: "Mama, no;
there isn't room for him." And it was true;
there was no room for me if she said so.
"Au revoir." "Au revoir." I shut the door.
They went as might in fairy-story go
some magic castle, leaving a bleak moor.

22

We followed on across the dreary circus,
pit where the sordid alleys of the poor
march with the sordid, ill-rich city, on
towards Chancery Lane, but turned once more
north up the Grays Inn Road. Where the moon shone
across a tram-wire mesh, we met a mass
solemn in a procession, led by one
whose fierce, dark look I knew; who never was
weak to regret, but followed his few days
his light, until “he wrapped his colours” as
Felicia Dorothea Hemans says
“round his breast on a blood-red field of Spain;”
who saw his way among all possible ways
and taking it did not look back again.

23

Behind him walked his brother, and I called him:
“Christopher”, and he stepped out of a train
of shamblers, saying “how can you stand apart,
if you have ever let the reasoning brain
come into contact with the feeling heart?
Knowing men starving while the rank cigar
perfumes the Ritz, my hands cease from their art
to take arms, not in this but a just war
with final victory; even if the best
must fall, the hour of triumph is not far.”
He to the ranks; and I too, half possessed,
half turned; but not my guide. My purpose froze.
We went on, but I felt as we turned West
that I was trying to turn from the world’s woes.

24

In Guildford Place, where London's nicest statue
kneels with her pitcher and her broken nose
between the men's and women's lavatories,
I saw a tall girl, and not yet drawn close
knew Molly and stood still. "But this once more is
truth but not flesh," my guide said; "not the scene
which nicely rounds so many wishful stories,
where boy meets girl again, and what has been
wrong withers inexplicably away
leaving behind love's garden fresh and green.
She is not here; yet here, and on your way
another necessary stage. Go on
and speak to her." I felt my legs obey,
and joined her by the pedestal alone.

25

"You came towards me sad," she said, "with flapping
aimlessly certain feet, as you have done
always from that first party till we parted
—your pleasure, if you felt it, never shown,
no bright spark in your love that might have started
an answering flame in me." "The Paris spring
and hope," I answered, "made me lighter-hearted
—orange blinds, fountains, chestnuts flowering,
red mullet and tomato sauce, and sun;
my love burned high then, but the answering
flicker died soon." "What can one build on one
spring song?" she said. "You never offered me
relationship—only an inner-grown
and self-existent you I cannot see."

26

“I am not all that I am capable of,”
I said, “but what you want I cannot be.
Elsewhere my road. But that I take a road
I owe to you—if I am partly free
from the slothful depressive mud that slowed
my way, I owe it you; and more than that.”
“And on my side,” she said, “something is owed.
Do not be humble, sad; consider that
your gifts are good and time is with you still.
A careful house of cards has fallen flat:
turn to a firmer building now.” “I will”
I answered, sad; then heard: “our way lies on,”
turned, saw my guide, and turned again. The chill
wind seemed among my bones. Molly was gone.

27

The sky was clouded over; my feet were heavy;
houses and trees printing their darker tone
on the dull sky weighed on me as I moved
and thought about my life and little done
—sensibility dumb and strength unproved,
the treacherous laziness of hand and brain,
and love making no contact with the loved.
We had turned North, for when I rose again
out of the pit, I saw the portico
beside us of St. Pancras’ Church, whose sane
classical stillness calmed the aimless flow
of gall. From such a still height I looked down
and watched detached my weary body go
with Emily on towards Camden Town.

28

Suddenly Emily spoke: “often in winter
for weeks together I have seen the brown
hills about Haworth white and smooth with snow.
House-bound I watched its beauty change—clouds frown
or cold sun brighten over it, and though
my heart warms to the first of winter weather
I could have cried at last for it to go.
Then, when I felt my throat hard on the tether,
the thaw—soft air one night, and sound on waking
of water dribbling, drifting mists, sharp heather
black through the snow—the frozen winter breaking,
softening, resolving round me, vanishing;
but sometimes suddenly the cold, retaking
our hills, wiped from the world my fancied spring.

29

“You felt the crusted snow melt from your winter,
the spring’s pulse in the chilled earth wakening,
which to returning cold rehardens now;
but that thaw showed your earth is on the swing
of lengthening days. Be patient and allow
winter its weakening onsets in retreat;
spring warmth is strengthening though you see not how.”
Quieted now I moved with lighter feet.
Past Camden Town we took the Chalk Farm Road,
turned with the tramlines along Ferdinand Street,
the Malden Road, and on until we trod,
past and above the tramway terminus,
Hampstead Heath, which now low but clear of cloud
the eleven day moon whitened in front of us.

30

Over the short grass my feet too were silent;
silent and dark behind the nebulous
city receded; crossing slope and stream
we lost all trace of habitation—house
and street gone from the fresh earth like a dream;
freshness and silence of the country night.
I spoke: “if I did not know, this would seem
Berkshire.” “Or Yorkshire,” answered with a light
laugh Emily; “each to our own is true;
each takes its own home by an absolute right.
Here I must leave you. I have given you
the keys of hope; further I cannot lead.
Not I the spirit whose eyes can brighten through
your dark sea. Waits ahead the help you need.”

31

“Anabel,” I thought, and pressing forward questioned:
“Anabel?” and unanswered turned my head.
I know what Orpheus felt when turning he
touched emptiness. What Emily had said
of hope seemed nothing to me now that she
was gone; I hoped no more for Anabel,
when “Martin” from the shadow of a tree
came clear. Clean from my heart the black cloud fell;
softly the fresh wind moved; the stars were bright,
before dawn and the moon behind the hill.
I reached the tree and paused, straining my sight,
standing within the dark tree’s edge, and could
see nothing first, but slowly the dim light
shaped me the shadows among which I stood.

32

She sat there on a low bough, her legs hanging,
swinging a wide hat, not as in the wood
she braved the thorns, but later, nine or ten
perhaps—another meeting equally good.
In the darkness I could not trace again
each feature's line, and scarcely tried; such peace
flowed over me to have her there as when
nightmares or wars, quarrels or waitings cease.
“Martin” she said, “how goes your pilgrimage?”
No remembered, no memory-wakening voice
of childhood, but herself set out of age;
“in my heart and in yours slumbered a seed
of great and happy life. An early page
closed my unfinished book; how does yours read?”

33

I laughed: “a hard time to be great or happy.
Greatness I think we lack since Yeats is dead;
yet we have Eliot, for whom in Auden now
our long debt to America is paid;
both James Joyce and Virginia Woolf know how
thought weaves in words its inexpressible spells;
Sickert we may in honesty allow
a measure; Stanley Spencer's vision tells
one need not paint in French exclusively;
Margot Fonteyn dances at Sadler's Wells
and Sally Gilmour at the Mercury.
Greatness perhaps there is; but I who wait
invisibly chained for—what?—to set me free
am neither great nor likely to be great.

34

“For happiness a still more doubtful season:
we are at war, and as the stage is set
small hope is offered of a happy ending.
The world seems more than usually wet
with blood and tears; wrongs beyond hope of mending
lie at the root of every decent life;
those who sit still, and those who fall defending
justice, seem equally guilty of the strife
with gangsters and with gamblers on the game,
whetters and users of the deliberate knife.
Between the starving North and war’s dull flame,
distressed only by the knowledge of distress,
disturbed but not stirred by the prick of shame,
I watch the world and wait for happiness.”

35

She sighed: “unhappiness has always reasons;
fences about the truth, veils on her face.
The heaviness you father on the war,
preventable slaughter, and on the disgrace
of wide preventable want, though such things are
good causes for unhappiness, does not spring
from them. Unhappiness hides the genuine scar
under some other likely-seeming thing;
you know not even abortive love can be
called the first cause, however sharp its sting.
You are unhappy because you dare not free
your self-bound life, but sit with bated breath
—a kind of cowardice and treachery
to all you ought to be, a breach of faith.”

36

Hurt home I struck back: "I have not committed
the cowardice or treachery of death."
"Death is itself and asks no more," she said;
"not so life. Life is more than pulse and breath,
getting through days and years till one is dead.
To see both sides is good; always to keep
a sensitive balance on the fence is bad.
Not yours to raise a fiery cross and sweep
the world before a cause, but none the more
to sit and wait and lull your powers asleep.
You have a sensitive mind and heart, and store
flashes of truth which pass and many miss,
but sensibility locked behind a door
is lost—is power betrayed by cowardice.

37

"Your delicate task to keep your power, neither
thrown to the winds, nor hid as now it is.
Turn to whatever calls you, only use
your power, and do not use it least for this:
to strip your own inaction's false excuse."
A wind shook through the tree; I raised my head
and saw a few faint stars across the loose
network of twigs, and knew that all was said.
Before I looked again I knew her gone;
then looked, and shivering left the deeper shade,
and tired and cold moved stiffly, vaguely on.
Soon to the Spaniards unexpectedly come,
between the set moon and the gathering dawn,
I turned to Hampstead and walked slowly home.