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The DRIVE- IN



The DRIVE-IN

A Breakthrough Book
No. 50

Poems by R. S. Gwynn

**The
DRIVE-
IN**

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For My Parents

*When my father and mother forsake me,
then the Lord will take me up.*

R15796

Contents

- Among Philistines, 9
 - M. Magus, 11
- Letter from Carthage, 12
- Iago to His Torturers, 13
- Horatio's Philosophy, 14
 - Parenthetical, 16
- The Hunchback with the Withered Arm, 17
 - B. 1885; D. 1980, 18
- The Decline of the West, 19
 - 1916, 21
- A Short History of the New South, 24
- Scenes from the Playroom, 26
- The Death of Mishima, 27
- Vitamin Deficiency, 28
 - Ars Poetica, 29
- Also to the Tower, 30
- Stranded in the Jungle, 33
- Mallarmé: Windows, 35
 - Anacreontic, 37
- Laird of the Maze, 38
 - The Drive-In, 39
- Three Views of the Young Poet, 41
 - Eminent Personages, 46
- Our Hearts Were Growing Up, 47
 - Vice Squad, 48

Rubbers, 49
The Rings, 50
Ultima Thule, 52
In Place of an Elegy, 53
As You Leave Vermont, 54
Stalemate, 55
Untitled, 56
The Parting, 57
The Simplification, 58
The Masterpiece, 59
Bearing & Distance, 60
Mimosa, 61
The Denouement, 64

Among Philistines

The night before they meant to pluck his eyes
He caught his tale at six on *Action News*—
Some stylish moron blabbing the bald lies
The public swallowed as “Official Views.”

After a word for snuff, Delilah made
A live appearance and was interviewed.
Complaining what a pittance she was paid,
She plugged the film she starred in in the nude.

Unbearable, he thought, and flipped the switch,
Lay sleepless on the bed in the bright room
Where every thought brought back the pretty bitch
And all the Orient of her perfume,

Her perfect breasts, her hips and slender waist,
Matchless among the centerfolds of Zion,
Which summoned to his tongue the mingled taste
Of honey oozing from the rotted lion;

For now his every mumble in the sack
(Bugged, of course, and not a whisper missed)
Would be revealed in lurid paperback
“As told to” Madam Sleaze, the columnist.

Beefcake aside, he was a man of thought
Who heretofore had kept to the strict law:
For all the cheap celebrity it brought
He honestly deplored that ass’s jaw,

The glossy covers of their magazines
With taut chains popping on his greasy chest,
The ads for razor blades with the staged scenes
And captions: *Hebrew Hunk Says We Shave Best*.

Such were his thoughts; much more severe the dreams
That sped him through his sleep in a wild car:
Vistas of billboards where he lathered cream,
Gulped milk, chugged beer, or smoked a foul cigar,

And this last image, *this*, mile upon mile:
Delilah, naked, sucking on a pair
Of golden shears, winking her lewdest smile
Amid a monumental pile of hair

And headlines—*Meet the Babe Who Skinned the Yid!*
Starring in JUST A LITTLE OFF MY HEAD.

He noted how his locks demurely hid
Her tits and snatch. And how her lips were red,

Red as his eyes when he was roused at seven
To trace back to its source the splendid ray
Of sunlight streaming from the throat of Heaven
Commanding him to kneel and thus to pray:

“Lord God of Hosts, whose name cannot be used
Promotion-wise, whose face shall not adorn
A cornflake box, whose trust I have abused:
Return that strength of which I have been shorn,

That we might smite this tasteless *shiksa* land
With hemorrhoids and rats, with fire and sword.
Forgive my crime. Put forth thy fearsome hand
Against them and their gods, I pray you, Lord. . . .”

So, shorn and strengthless, led through Gaza Mall
Past shoeshop and boutique, Hallmark and Sears,
He held his head erect and smiled to all
And did not dignify the scene with tears,

Knowing that God could mercifully ordain,
For punishment, a blessing in disguise.

“Good riddance,” he said, whispering to the pain
As searing, the twin picks hissed in his eyes.

M. Magus

In the South of France the peasants had the gall
To squint and snicker when they read my name,
Hold discourse with a hydrant or a wall,
Falling through manholes in their silly game.
What did their cry of "Waldo!" signify?
How could my faithful camel miss the turns
And bring me here, while in the winter sky
The star, albeit faintly, plainly burns?

Too many years of study by the dim
Glow of the midnight oil have left these eyes
Two cloudy windows on a clouded mind.
Now I wonder at the meaning of the hymn
That lifted up our thoughts to touch the skies.
Wonder and wander. The blind shall lead the blind.

Letter from Carthage

"To Carthage then I came
But found it overrated.
The shops all seemed the same;
The theatre was dated.

"That 'cauldron of desire'
My guidebook slyly hints at?
Old fleshpots black with fire
That one could only wince at.

"I have tasted every sin
And nothing could be duller.
Brown monochromes of skin
Suffice for local colour.

"This chap, this 'Augustine,'
Is much to be mistrusted.
The staff at Michelin
Should have the fellow busted.

"One sees him in his room
In the act of self-expression,
Springs squeaking in the gloom:
Sic, his 'confession.'

"My dreams of thigh and breast
Now come to me abstractly.
Carthago? Delenda est.
My sentiments, exactly.

"I would sell my soul for one night
Of unencumbered lust.
I search through endless sunlight.
My shoes are filled with dust."

Iago to His Torturers

Tighter, me boys! One half-twist on that screw
And the wee piggy'll pop like a green bean.
Tighter, I said. And if the bloody shoe
Won't fit, ah, make it fit. My foot, I mean.
Let me my tendons plink, boys, lovely boys.
Tune up the rack. I love it, every minute.
Enjoy me whilst you can, like kids with toys.
Remember, *I* won't have to face the Senate.

And when the Maiden's fired, while hoists and cranks
Pinwheel me like a flea-bit dog-day dog,
Maybe you'll get it, how I did it so
We'd come to this, who like my pleasure slow.
Say Emilia wasn't handy with the flog.
It's all in the wrist. For this relief, much thanks.

Horatio's Philosophy

For Paul Cubeta

Absented from felicity a year
In the back room let by his maiden aunts,
He let his hair grow long and pierced one ear,
Staring at cards Reynaldo mailed from France.

The scenes which they depicted gave him pause.
Stranger than Pliny (he had flunked the course),
In violation of all natural laws
A young girl copulated with a horse.

If such as that could be, how stale and flat
Would seem the stupid tale he'd sworn to write:
The spider nesting in the old king's hat,
The late appearance of the northern lights,

Simple adultery and the rancid stew
Which he'd passed up but cost the crown its life,
His fat friend's garter tangling with his shoe,
Pitching him forward on his letter-knife.

The memo came from Osric, now the Chief
Of Royal Information: *Get to work!*
Keep the thing scandalous, and keep it brief.
Action and jokes. Make everyone a jerk

Except, of course, King Fortinbras. Let him
(Deus ex machina) arrive in time
To get lard-ass's blessing. You can trim
Most of the facts. Put in some crime

To make us look legitimate. And need
I mention that you've missed your deadline twice?
Next week. At latest. Then, as we agreed,
You'd best get out of town. Take my advice.

And so he sat there hours, thinking hard.
Paris? Why not? But he was tired and broke
And known by face to every border guard.
The truth was bad enough. *This* was a joke.

His skills, such as they were, lay in debating
Questions of ethics, and his style of prose
Would never keep the groundlings salivating
With prurient puns. He'd *seen* Lord Osric's shows.

But what was truth? Wasn't it, all things said,
Whatever the authorities deemed right?
The rest was silence, for the dead were dead.
Feeling much better, he began to write.

The first draft took two days. He hired a ghost,
Dictating while he packed and paced the floor.
By Friday he had made it to the coast,
Sunday, stood knocking at Reynaldo's door.

Parenthetical

None of his seven sons survived the nursery.
The daughter did, to some embarrassment,
And was much spoken of. He dozed in chancery
While lawyers raved, was thought too tolerant
When their harangues stretched like a hanged man's neck.
His idiosyncratic rulings set
No precedents, or few. Behind his back
Justice herself, the Temple whispered, slept.

No writings have survived; a single pen
Caricature in robes: a lump of black.
Aubrey names him only to make his case
About some better man and, even then,
Can call to mind no more than a gray face,
The wig askew, the weak jaw hanging slack.

The Hunchback with the Withered Arm

The hunchback with the withered arm
Scrawls "Murder!" on the convent wall,
And where the gangsters burned the barn
A group of orphans shyly smile
For color photographs. Meanwhile,
We fill the necessary forms
And count the bodies in the well.
Some speak of sounding the alarm.

Before, when we were left to farm
In peace, the hunchback rang the bells
For Sundays, holidays, and storms,
For weddings, births, and funerals;
And when they echoed to our hill
We put our shovels down and turned
To watch the skies or highways fill.
Few spoke of sounding the alarm.

Now gray ash overflows the urns
And scatters through the empty fields
To settle on the bread and wine.
Some call it harmless; others dwell
At length on how it causes boils
Or aberrations in the sperm.
The women file their fingernails.
One speaks of sounding the alarm.

The hunchback turns. His smile is warm.
We praise him greatly for his skill
Although we note, perhaps from worms,
His face has turned a deathly pale.
He waves his severed genitals
And dips them in the bloody jar.
He signs his name, and now he falls.
None speak of sounding the alarm.

B. 1885; D. 1980

I

Grandpater's wit, the Empire's plum,
Was as sharp as the ends of his moustaches.
Lord Bucky (he was several years our junior)
Once crawled beneath the table during tea
And soiled Grandpater's spats. "Enough, Sir!"
Cried Grand P. "D'ye take me for an omnibus?"
At the old Queen's demise, Grandpater wept
And lived, moreover, eleven years more.

II

At Rugby all was cricket. No lad peached.
When I was sent up to Brasenose, old Crolmonderly
Was yet in the chair. I looked to Rome a term,
Then looked the other way. When war came
I resigned my living to do my duty. That is,

III

"Buy Imperial," advised Cripswitch. I sold,
And for weeks thereafter was thought a cad,
Which is to say, until the crash. Cripswitch,
Incidentally, was indentified by his dentures.

IV

Epitaph

Here lies my dearest wife, or, rather, sits:
Bridge was at seven-sharp; at eight, the blitz.

V

Hoolywod is bloody unsufferable

The Decline of the West

Help is on the way! cried the decadent
Grenadier, but after the crème de menthe
And hog jowls all I cared about was getting
Home safely. I rang for the sedan chair,
But finding no one below save the peanut
Vendor and Hans, his smirking aide-de-camp,
I hurried off, ignoring their remarks
About my rank and socks. My venom rose.
Near the deserted barricades a bum
Came up to me and said, *Friend, can you spare
A sou? I ain't had a bite in a week.*
So I killed him, hiding the wretched body
Under a heap of empty seltzer bottles
Left by the Nihilists. The plot grew thick.
In every quarter my very name was "Mudd."
However, I continued as before
To frequent the same haunts, knowing full well
The worth of keeping up appearances;
Renting the same flat, hating the concierge
For his six trunks of flapjacks to my three.
Inside a week the old regime had toppled.
Meetings were called. Piles of lorgnettes and wigs
Were confiscated and burned in public places.
Long lists of names were posted in the subway.
Suspect of sundry factions, I fled
To Kansas, dodging cabbages and brickbats,
Not knowing in the darkness of my oil barrel
The point at which this new frontier began
Or how "our man" would find me in the sewers

Posing as Ed, the Polish refugee.
Yet find me he did. Warmly did I clasp him.
My bosom heaved. Still, he remained aloof,
Demanding that I show the secret sign,
Which I did. He wiped the pie from his eyes
And solemnly returned my first embrace
But lapsed soon after into utter silence,
As if he could not justify his actions,
As if the axeman's sorrows were his own.

1916

. . . some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England.

—Rupert Brooke, "1914"

Other Rank.

"A" Company
1st Munster Grenadiers
Cape Helles
1 January

So thank Mum for the book of poetry
Which I've made use of, but to tell the truth
It's other than 'the red sweet wine of youth'
What's pouring by the pint of late from me.
Wasn't quite sure of catching what he means,
This bit about 'a richer dust concealed.'
The only rich spot in *this* foreign field
Is where we dug the regiment's latrines.

It's said we'll soon be off. Perhaps the Turk
Will rush down when the boats are out to sea
And stumble in. So if our dodges work
The *Times* can praise our 'artful strategy.'
As for the poems, say 'Send more!' to Mum—
Whatever's easiest on the bleedin' bum.

Henry.

21 Carlyle Mansions
Cheyne Walk, S.W.
Chelsea
February 14

Of course, of course, his was a *sacrifice*;
Or, rather, as there seems small likelihood
Of compensation, or of *any* good
Resulting, one must label imprecise
The word he leans first toward, so dear the price
Exactd from us in the red sweet blood

Of our young men; thus, one is understood
To use the term (since no less will suffice
Than that which *must* be said) in conscious error
For which he makes apologies but never,
Questions of style aside, would wish revoked,
Such being the times: headlong, relentless terror
To which our destinies are tied, are yoked,
The day of bright young things now fled forever.

Winston.

6th Royal Scots Fusiliers
Somewhere in the Field
March 15

My Dearest Puss: Have had great trouble sleeping.
Penance has been to dream-watch from a hill
While ranks of our lads, like blind swimmers leaping
Into nothingness, charge the far trench until
Not one remains. The Black Dog lingers still
To plague my waking thoughts. Dear Puss, it seems
These Ides of March bode your poor Caesar ill:
Miles Gloriosus laid low by his dreams!

At dawn the 5.9s caught our wiring teams
In no-man's-land; all dead save a young chap
With shrapnel in both legs. Incessant screams
Let us to find him halfway down a sap.
He'd worked one piece out, and he *kissed it*, Clemmie:
O Beauty, wot a Blighty pass you've gi' me!

Cathleen.

The Candler Theatre
New York City
April 1

This evening, in the wings, I missed my cue
And caused a crucial scene to be replayed.
Someone *was* there; I fancied it was you—

Sunny, alive, so dreadfully betrayed.
Our play is *Justice*. It is like most plays,
Cleverly fashioned, filled with complication,
Destined, one would assume, for ready praise.
I have allowed your letters' publication.

My April Fool, how much we missed the mark!
So much for me to learn, so much to teach you—
Our hearts knew what our bodies *should* have known.
Forgive me, dearest. I hold stage alone
And you have vanished in a house grown dark.
Beautiful History, I can't quite reach you.

Subaltern, R.N.D.

Aboard the *Ajax*
Trebuki Bay, Skyros
23rd April

The grove is called Mesedhi. One's aware
Of spices in the sea breeze, thyme and sage,
As if the present met with some lost age
And many heroes congregated there.
It is precisely as Achilles said:
*Rather I'd choose laboriously to bear
A weight of woes, and breathe the vital air
Than reign the sceptred monarch of the dead.*

Is it a year? How soon one's imprints fade
Into the grain of anonymity.
The shepherd who is owner came to speak
Of keeping up the site, saying it made
Him proud the cross had borne some words in Greek.
He tried, but could not spell them out for me.

A Short History of the New South

"Pass the biscuits," said Pappy, pursing his lips,
But the part I remember best was the collect call
From our spy at the National Archives. "The cause,
I fear, is lost, Suh," the spy replied. "Our retreat
Has been repulsed." "The silver!" cried Mammy
And we grabbed our hoes and headed for Gramma's grave
Expecting the worst. Come spring the worst was over
And we dragged the trunks back up to the big house,
Ending the era with supper and lots of biscuits.
Pappy, picking his tooth, said, "Pass the yams,"
But no one had the heart to tell him the truth.
"Bull Run!" yelled Pee Wee, the subject changed,
And Pappy forgot the yams and got drunk instead.
I woke from my bale of paper money to find
The darkies loading their Cadillacs. They were heading
For Baltimore, they claimed, to harvest the nylon crop.
So we plowed the cotton under and planted magnolias
But missed their singing so much we pawned our whips
To buy a gramophone on the installment plan.
As we had no records, we had to make do without.
"Pass Ol' Blue," said Pappy, closing his eyes,
And nothing improved. Pee Wee got up from the table
And ran off to join the White Sox, where he made
A name for hisself after changing his name. Myself,
I stayed at home to fight the school board. "Hurry back!"
Cried Mammy, waving her flag at the bus.
I took my time. Thursday she called collect:
"Pappy's right poorly. Y'all come." I came,
Arriving in time to grab my hoe from the toolshed

And help Pappy dig her a hole right next to Gramma's.
We cashed the insurance and bought us a TV and rotor,
Which we used to improve our minds and accents,
And when the last of the place was sold off to the tourists
We pooled our cash and built this fine new restaurant.
"Pass the pizza," says Pappy, stroking his silver beard.

Scenes from the Playroom

Now Lucy with her family of dolls
Disfigures Mother with an emery board,
While Charles, with match and rubbing alcohol,
Readies the struggling cat, for Chuck is bored.
The young ones pour more ink into the water
Through which the latest goldfish gamely swims,
Laughing, pointing at naked, neutered Father.
The toy chest is a Buchenwald of limbs.

Mother is so lovely; Father, so late.
The cook is off, yet dinner must go on.
With onions as her only cause for tears
She hacks the red meat from the slippery bone,
Setting the table, where the children wait,
Her grinning babies, clean behind the ears.

The Death of Mishima

The color of Mishima's toe was blue
And Mishima's face looked troubled.
I knew no way to console him,
Being far away and in good shape.
His issues seemed remote to me.
This is all unconnected.

Thirsty for fame, Mishima
Made his way by freighter to Stockholm
And found himself hungry for food.
The menus were in strange tongues.
No one would take his orders.
Thus, Mishima died for the country
That had failed to understand him.
His eyes were not shaped for their coins,
And many found this amusing.
My own emotions are "mixed."

Dead bees can't kill you, said Mishima,
But bullets can, and the pebble
Dropped from a lofty height
Becomes a deadly weapon.
Mishima taught that the mushroom
Often contains a lightbulb.
Mishima had a point there.
This much, at least, is clear.

I sit here thinking of Mishima
With Mishima's picture before me
And Mishima's books on the shelf.
My heart may be in the right place,
But my head may be in the wrong place,
And the man in the Mishima mask
Who stares at me through the window,
Fading away, may be saying:
You are wrong. So wrong. So wrong.

Vitamin Deficiency

So I grabbed a handful of men and
Followed my hunch on down
The dry gulch to where
The mattress lay, surrounded by
Sexual garbage. The source
We found asleep there gave
The lowdown: "This," he told us,
"Is where the President did it.
The tracks on the road lead direct
To the White House. The President
Is not a transvestite, nor is his wife, for
The chauffeur saw it all and he
Is my mother-in-law, which might just
Explain any number of things but
Will not be made public until
The Senate decides to take a look in
The Cabinet. If the Cabinet is locked
And tomorrow is Thursday, why are
You gentlemen all just standing around?"
We fired our guns in the air
And, leaving him most of the treasure,
Zipped across the border to freedom.

Ars Poetica

Sweet music makes the same old story new.
That is a lie, but it will have to do.

Also to the Tower

My second thought was, *Kill the s.o.b.*—
“Seminal scholar,” tweedy, old school tie,
(Was it the Phi Beta key that caught my eye?)—
Who set me on this course, for it is he
Who bears the sole responsibility
For my dark woes, his victim gained thereby.

I hung upon his words, that tenured sage
Who puffed his briar and spewed ash on my clothes
While scribbling in my margins cryptic prose
Directives meant to steer my callow rage
To holy war against the empty page
That has an ending . . . where? God only knows.

Here is your Strange Device, he whispered, *known*
But to the few. He delved into his bag
And pulled therefrom a putrid swatch of rag.
Defend it well! It was a white whale, sewn
Upon a field of white. He carried on
About the symbolism: *See? Your flag!*

Then took my arm and led me to my mare
(Only three legs but otherwise OK),
Gave me my cloak and sword and six months’ pay
(Personal check), a snapshot of the fair
Languishing captive maid with flaxen hair
(A few black roots), and sped me on my way.

With his guffaws still chugging in my ear
And the sealed orders snug against my chest,
I spurred the nag and set forth on the quest
While grackles overhead wheeled low to jeer.
The road was narrow, but the way seemed clear.
A sickly yellow sun hung in the West.

How shall I chronicle the trials I knew?
I shan't. So much for that. Let it suffice
To say the ways were slick with filthy ice,
The fields with filthy slush through which a few
Black tangled stems of briar forlornly grew.
The driven sleet picked at my skin like lice.

After a year or so, I thought to stop
And ask directions: *You, sir! Might I ask*
The shortcut to. . . Perhaps my rubber mask
With the red fright-wig frizzing at the top
Alarmed him, for he signaled to a cop.
I hurried off, still vague as to my task.

Then I bethought myself to take a look
Inside my mentor's envelope. (How grave
His look had been!) The thing was empty, save
For the dust-jacket photo from his book,
The Archetypes of Wrath. My fingers shook.
I made for shelter in a nearby cave.

As when some imbecile turns up his coke
And peers into the mouth to see the fly
The guys have warned him of; and in his eye
It dumps, while they, like victims of a stroke,
Choke and redden, convulsed so with their joke
They fall upon the ground and prostrate lie;

Thus did I feel, on whom this jest was played.
For *this* had I disdained wine, wench, and food?
Was *he* the holy grail my tracks pursued?
I plunged my dagger at my breast. The blade
Slid back into the handle. Undismayed,
I tried again. Again, the same ensued.

Dark ran my thoughts, that somehow I might kill
Not just myself, but take that bastard too.
I turned. My mind was made. The slug-horn blew,
Unmaking it, echoing forth with shrill
Notes from the summit of a squatty hill
Where loomed at last, though somewhat overdue,

The fabled tower where my sage had said
The trail would end. In truth, I knew the place:
Ivory brick, twin boulders at the base,
The shaft thrust upward toward the rounded, red
Turret where pennants whitely streamed. I shed
Piecemeal my mail, so eager was my pace!

Significant Form! So manly did I feel
I plunged through the gate, pausing not to heed
The motto cut above. (I could not read
Italian, anyway.) A rusty squeal
Snickered behind me, and I heard the steel
Click of the lock, yet did not check my speed.

Climbing the thing, I then at length could see
The blasted prospect of that endless plain,
Where, popping up like toadstools after rain,
More towers stood, on each a clown like me
Vainly searching his trousers for the key
(*The key? What key?*) to set him free again.

Thus, it began, my lasting tenure there,
Or *here*, that is, here where I have my own
Booze in the bottom drawer to sip alone,
Which tends to help. The comforts here are spare
But adequate: some books, a desk and chair,
Jacket and pipe, false beard and telephone,

Which just now rings: "I called up to remind
You, sir . . ." Familiar voice, though girl or boy
I cannot say. ". . . today. Would it annoy
You if . . ." *Very* familiar. ". . . somehow find
A moment for my latest . . ." Would I mind?
Nothing, dear child, would give us greater joy!

Stranded in the Jungle

We were stranded in the jungle, and we were feeling bad
Because of how we worried about our dear old Dad.
Even in the jungle we thought that it was odd
The way his latest sermons never mentioned God,
But when the day was over and we listened in the night,
The dark beyond the floodlights told us he was right,
And so we had to trust him to keep the dark away:
Our Dad which art in Heaven, let the sinners pray.

Meanwhile, back in the States:
Baby, baby, the man is no good

Meanwhile, back in the jungle:
ah ahah ah ah

He preached to us each evening, and something in his
voice
Convinced us that we really had no other choice;
Then he summoned visions of houses, streets, and parks
And a house of worship for Jesus, Dad, and Marx,
Where we would duly gather so he could enter last
To lead us on like extras in his supporting cast.
The world that stood against us could perish on its own.
His left hand held a Bible; the right, a microphone.

Meanwhile, back in the States:
Baby, baby, the man is no good
O baby, baby, the man is no good

Meanwhile, back in the jungle:
ah ahah ah ah
ah ahah ah ah

Our eyes had seen the glory, so when the plane came in
We knew the final reckoning was ready to begin.
We took our loaded rifles and waited by the plane,
And when they tried to board it we fired and fired again.
We gathered at the mess hall to find out what to think.
Dad's eyes were hidden from us by glasses black as ink,
But when he handed each of us the little cup of pink,
He said, "This is my blood. I shed it for you. Drink."

Meanwhile, back in the States:

Baby, baby, the man is no good

O baby, baby, the man is no good

O baby, baby, baby, that man is no good

Meanwhile, back in the jungle:

ah ahah ah ah

ah ahah ah ah

ah ahah ah ah

Mallarmé: Windows

For Ben Kimpel

Sick of the ward, sick of the fetid smell
Rising against the curtains' tiresome white
Toward the tired Christ nailed to the bare wall,
The sick man stretches, slyly stands upright,

And shuffles, more to see the common stones
Blaze with sun than to fire his own decay,
Presses a grizzled face gray as his bones
Against the window tinged with dying day,

And greedy for the azure licks his tongue
Across dry lips as if he might regain
That downy cheek he brushed when he was young,
And, with a long kiss, soils the golden pane.

Drunk, he forgets the holy oils; he smiles,
Bidding the broths, the clocks, the bed good-bye;
Forgets to cough. Dusk bleeds across the tiles,
And in a sunset gorged with light his eye

Discerns the gilded galleys, fine as swans,
Heavy with spices on a saffron sea,
Etching their burnished flash of lines upon
The lovely nonchalance of memory.

Just so, disgusted with complacent Man,
Whose appetites devour him, whose sole quest
Is to fetch home what scraps of filth he can
To please the hag with urchins at her breast,

I rush, I cling to all those windows where
One turns his back on life; transformed by light,
Washed by eternal dew and swathed in air,
Reflected in the dawn of the Infinite,

I see myself an angel! die and seem
—Let this be Art! Let it be Mysticism—
To be reborn, wearing my crown of dreams
In the lush beauty of an antique heaven!

But no. The Here and Now lord over me,
Seeking me out no matter where I fly,
And the rank vomit of stupidity
Stops up my nose before the azure sky.

Is there a way for Me, who know such sorrow,
To break this glass soiled by humanity,
To fly on featherless wings into tomorrow—
Risking the plunge into Eternity?

Anacreontic

You drink to piss it all away
You play it tough to seize the day
Toss out more chips and spread your stuff
Or end it with enough's enough
But it doesn't matter what you say
They always seem to call your bluff
It doesn't matter what you do
When you're through you're through

You hit the dirt and slide and slide
Flag down a fox for one last ride
Steal second and go on to third
Or cock the piece and kill the bird
You hope you pray the throw is wide
They'll hold you hold you to your word
And get you down to get you out
When you're out you're out

It's not you didn't do your worst
To quench your everlasting thirst
You kissed them and you made them cry
And didn't wonder how or why
You never even got to first
Toss in the sponge and say good-bye
And let them strip you of the crown
When you're down you're down

It seems a pity seems a crime
They'll get you get you every time
It doesn't matter where you go
Somehow they always seem to know
You're out there but it's closing time
Up to your nuts in drifting snow
Up to your eyes by frosty dawn
When you're gone you're gone

Laird of the Maze

Despite he was a frog and relished flies,
His personality possessed no taint.
No warmth flowed in his veins; he suffered this,
Yet none that knew him could have thought him evil.
Was lacking to no vices; but one joy, his penchant
For moonlit swimming at the maze's center.
At midnight sought his native element,
The pool of scum. None saw his nakedness.

That maze was Life! All others wandered there
Seeking to solve its puzzle; only he
Construed the pattern of its form in abstract
And bore it like the impress of a signet,
For the hedges of that maze were darkly lush
And knit so thickly as to seem impenetrable.
There one could hear the Master at his pleasure—
The dull splash of a dishrag being slapped.

The pathways of his argument, his wit,
The winding traverse of his metaphors,
His irony and syntax, like the maze,
Confounded all, myself among the least.
Yet I must try to . . . true, he were a frog
But a kindred soul lay cloaked beneath that green skin:
Idealist, poet, scholar, who lacked only
The spark of camaraderie, the firm handshake.

So years I lay here in this crumbling tower
Waiting for moonrise and the loathsome croak
Of the frog-man's nightly cry for company.
Mere silence echoes now. The pool is still,
As I gaze into my shoe, which contains a foot,
As I try to piece together what his life meant:
Fallen, the rightful laird, last of his line,
A slick spot drying on the courtyard stone.

The Drive-In

Under the neon sign he stands,
My father, tickets in his hands.
Now it is my turn; all the while
Knee-deep in stubs he tries to smile,
Crying, "You'll love it. Slapstick. Fights.
One dollar, please. Please dim your lights."
I pay and enter. Mother waits
In a black truck with dangling plates
And snag-toothed grillwork idling there
On the front row. She combs her hair
And calls for me to take my place.
The moon-lights dying on her face,
She lights another cigarette
And starts to sing the alphabet.
Quickly, I turn the speaker on:
The soundtrack is a steady drone
Of snoring. With his pockets full
My father gathers up his wool,
His pink tongue rolling up and down.
A wolf, dainty in hat and gown,
Appears, sneaking across the screen
Above my father. Then the scene
Expands to show a flock of sheep.
The wolf is drooling; in his sleep
My father smiles, my mother sighs,
And dabbing gently at her eyes
She goes across to sniff his breath.
A shepherd clubs the wolf to death,
The sheep dance lightly in the sun,
And now the feature has begun:
Union Pacific is its name.
I know it, know it frame by frame,
The tyranny of separation,

The lack of all communication
From shore to shore, the struggle through
Smashed chairs and bottles toward the true
Connection of a spike of gold.
I fall asleep. The night is cold.
And waking to the seat's chill touch
I hear the last car's slipping clutch,
As on the glass a veil of frost
Obscures this childhood I have lost.
The show is over. Time descends.
And no one tells me how it ends.

Three Views of the Young Poet

I. Observed

Here is the young poet sleeping,
A cat *couchant* upon the young poet's chest.
"Get up," says the young poet's wife.

"Still dark," complains the young poet.

"It's raining," she says. "Besides,
I meant the cat."

Indolent in torn underwear, the young poet
Cautiously inspects an orange.
Bracing himself, he probes his tongue
Deeply into the cool, sweet pulp.
His wife, in curlers, plugs in the pot.
The young poet begins to mumble.

The young poet stares into the toilet.
He sees his own reflection there
And most of last night's pink chablis.
"I greet you," says the young poet
"At the beginning of a grape career."

Across the street at the Safeway
The young poet thinks he has spotted a friend.
Calling a name, he hoists a jug and points.
"Sorry. I thought I knew you," says the young poet.

"So did I," replies the individual. "So did I."

The young poet is now devouring the classics.
"With relish, ha-ha," he interjects.
Later, deep in his wildest dreams,
He will pick silverfish from between his teeth.

The young poet is being closely watched by his wife.
He is cleaning the spaces between his toes,

Carefully checking his index finger.
Large crowds gather around them.
She pretends not to notice.

The young poet is sleeping again.
There is a woman on his mind.
She is overweight and her toenails are long,
But she rules his thoughts, planting a red flag
Squarely between his frontal lobes.

The young poet wakes with a headache.
"A woman," he writes, "has been on my mind."

II. On the Movies

The young poet is watching the late show, meaning
It is past midnight and his wife has fallen asleep.
"My, what a big bat!" says the hero, prancing
About in knickers. Pale Miss Mina hungers
For the lad, but her will is not her own: The Count,
Powdered and rouged, is waiting in the wings.
While the young poet feels that vampires represent
A symbolic revolt against Victorian sexual repression,
He has never said so, lest he be labeled
A smart ass by his friends.

On channel 9

Tangier, free city and teeming crosscurrent
Of international intrigue, etc., serves as the stage
For a poor comedian, played by a rich comedian
Well known for his right-wing sympathies,
To capture a commie spy for the CIA.
With all the prophetic weight of 30 years' hindsight
The young poet says nothing, lacking an audience.
The star's last name, he notes to himself, is "Hope."

Next, another actor, named "Power," attempts to dispatch
His bull. He lunges, the crowd with him, some
Stabbing their wineskins in the general uproar,

History," he declaims. "Cornelly and Raisin knew no more
Than a good pupil in a rhetoric class. Taste
And Genius cannot be learned. Look at Geethie,"
Adds the young poet's father. "Goothie, you mean,"
Corrects the young poet's father's wife.

"Let me not," thinks the young poet, "to the marriage
Of true minds admit impertinences."

"When are you leaving?" asks the young poet's father.

On Christmas Day the young poet receives
A gift from his mother, who means well.
The package contains a boxed set of the works
Of one Kahlil Gibran. The young poet thanks his mother,
Adding that he has never plumbed the depths
Of these particular tomes, noting however
That once he read high praise of them
In a term paper by a co-ed, whose depths
He did, in fact, at one time, plumb.

"When are you leaving?" asks the young poet's mother.

The young poet sits in a room, which is no longer
The young poet's room, due to his absence from it.
He lies on a bed which seems to have grown small
Or tries on clothes which seem to have grown smaller.
He climbs the creaking attic stairs to search
For his comic books, his panda, his Jew's harp,
Finding only, wedged between two boards,
A folded photograph signed, "Best, Chill Wills."
Brushing cobwebs from his hair, he sits
And tries to write: *Here where the seasons run
To decay, where the dead come to bury
The living, here where I rummage in the dust
Seeking familiar ghosts, turning
When I see their faces. . . .* The young poet
Finishes the poem, signs the poem "T. S. Eliot,"
Draws a swastika through the poem, writes "crap"

On the arms of the swastika, draws a circle around
Each "crap," folds the poem once, twice, places the poem
Inside the copy of *The Prophet* and sticks it
In the bookcase between Gotha's *Sorrows of Young Werther*
And *Pee Wee Harris in Luck*.

"When are we leaving?" asks the young poet's wife.

Never, thinks the young poet. "Soon," he replies.

Eminent Personages

"To strive, to seek," sang Tennyson.
Wind wrapped his cloak around his head
And sent him sailing backwards off
Into the sunrise, home to bed.

The brother, sitting at his desk,
Stares at his knee. There is no stain
Of grass or lime, the scar beneath
A waning moon which gives no pain.

Carlyle, that devil's dung-heap, posed
Above the pit, erupting "Nein!"
Belching a flame that burned him so
He changed his diet, and his mind.

The father, in his mother's house,
Rises before the dawn and shaves.
Books lie upon his unmade bed
As tombstones lie on sunken graves.

And Ruskin, maddened by the child,
As darkness closed, could only say,
"The day they took my Rose from me,
Dear God, they took my life away."

The mother, hanging shirts to dry,
Cannot ignore the empty sleeve
That beckons her. It is the son's
Who is her youngest, and must leave.

Profoundly tearful, poor Charles Lamb
And Mary strolled, their sad heads hung.
At Bedlam's gate she cried, "God bless!"
Rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue.

*Good night, dear ones, for night must fall.
The spring unwinds inside the toy.
No child will come to turn the key.
There is no irony but joy.*

Our Hearts Were Growing Up

Our hearts were growing up.
The boughs hung heavy with them,
Pendulous on their stems
Like balls of tarnished brass.

But they began as blossoms
Somehow surviving the frost,
And swelled with pale greenness.
Soon our hearts darkened.

Flies glided past our hearts.
The season gained its fullness.
Our hearts remained indifferent
To the passage of the shadows,

And ripe, heavy with worms,
Plunged to the earth below,
Exposing their inner secrets.
The bough swung back, relieved.

Bees sucked our hearts away
To blend bitter honey.
The black seeds of our hearts
Turned in the crops of birds.

Broken by cloven hooves,
Our hearts lay in the sun.
At length our hearts were gone.
They left no bones behind.

Vice Squad

During the wet year and a half or so
That followed his first big shootout

Ricco took pains to take good care
Of himself, his hair, and his gun—

With excellent results!
His hair he massaged each night

With Listerine, combing neatly
The black locks back before applying

White Cloverine Brand Salve.
Kneeling beside his bed in a stiff

Nightshirt, he slowly said,
For his soul, his beads and rubbed

And rubbed his gun with a special
Gun Kit concealed in a sock in the drawer.

Then, as he lay awake in the narrow bed,
He dreamed how swell it would someday be

To arise from the hair mattress and
Telltale sheets, light a fat cigar,

And before the blokes with the butterfly nets
Broke in, tell his pop to stuff it

And amuse his mom with the joke
About five nuns, four sheep, and the current pope.

Rubbers

You held back too
 much potential
yet without you
 our nameless sons
 would hop like frogs
 across pleasant
landscapes so thanks
 for all this lack
 of comfort not
 spilling over
like spoils of war
 into the Queen's
 nice chamber and
 just think of the
 civil wars those
bastards might stir
 up O you kept
us from ourselves
 returning with
 no end our palms
 outstretched as if
 we expected
 a reward for
 being there a
thought or a touch
 familiar as
 a second skin
 a good break
 a name

The Rings

I could roll it up with my hair
She thought, but even standing on
This bucket I can't reach the ends
And besides who can think what with
Rats in the basement, bats in the attic
And me in between with saucepans, now look
I didn't ask for this job, there was this
Election, I voted against everybody and
The next thing I knew here I was, one
Fist on the checkbook and another
In these damn pink suds thinking
I told him to leave the knives out
And him with his face full of headlines
And his lap of pistachio nuts nods
Uh-huh, surely what's done is
Spilt milk but I'm not getting any
Younger these years and you bet
Those rings keep closing in, well
My fingers and his nose I always
Was told, the toes left over for
Tuesday's supper, but ain't it a lie
And you don't dance in one often
Enough to forget what those sixteen
Ounce gloves feel like trying to pinch
A dime off the floor, oh shit
The cape and sword get heavy before
The bull's towed off and I know it
I should have listened, how after
His soak in the tub or steamed cabbage
Or around the necks of white shirts

They collect, they sing in their drawers
Like barbershops, oh girls, it's not all
Maypoles and pockets full of sonnets
It's coffee, once black, getting blacker
It's cups joining hands and circling
While the chewing downstairs and the gnawing
Upstairs seem to be, I have to hang up
Trying to make ends meet.

As You Leave Vermont

I

My ties lie wrinkled on the floor,
The slough of snakes.
Summer is going.
You can see it through the window.

II

The last lovely girl in Vermont
Is picking her flowers.
She wears a tan uniform, which
Is her skin. It becomes her.

III

We leave one banana, black
In its borrowed bowl. It seems
Some tragic figure, Ishmael
Adrift in the tropics.

IV

I have cut my finger, love.
Blood drips on your souvenirs.
We are taking them home to the family.
We have had a wonderful time.

Stalemate

Hand grenades fill the fruit bowls
And in the blue shadow
Of the ticking baby grand
Cats are tasting our suppers.

Disguised as a bellhop
The bellhop delivers flowers.
We tip him with razors, laxatives.
The card, of course, is blank.

The situation is static.
Even words can betray us.
We stuff the ears of the wall with rags
And communicate with glances.

With a tail curled like a fetus
The scorpion crawls from a rose.
If I raise a hand against it, sweet,
I will lose my grip on your throat.

Untitled

*In the morning light a line
Stretches forever. There my unlived life
Rises, and I resist . . .*

—Louis Simpson

In which I rise untroubled by my dreams,
In which my unsung theories are upheld
By massive votes, in which my students' themes
Move me, in which my name is not misspelled;

In which I enter strangers' rooms to find,
Matched in unbroken sets, immaculate,
My great unwritten books, in which I sign
My name for girls outside a convent gate;

In which I run for daylight and my knee
Does not fold up, in which the home teams win,
In which my unwed wife steeps fragrant tea
In clean white cups, in which my days begin
With scenes in which, across unblemished sands,
Unborn, my children come to touch my hands.

The Parting

Lord, it has come, the parting.
It has drawn its black cloak

Across the sky of bird-song.
There in the street where children,

Dogs, and crabgrass grow
Such silence has fallen

Nor any words from the beds
Where couples have tried to speak.

All comes to a proper end.
The parting, Lord, has come.

Where there is love there is
No toleration, no middle ground

Save this fine seam where bodies
That have known each other too long are joined.

Splitting the cloth, backing away
From the tears of the wound, one hears only

A shrouded whisper like silk
Being torn, sees only the loose threads, long,

Hanging like lost hair.
Lord, the parting has come.

The Simplification

For Donna, 30

There were days to be gotten through, and days before,
But then there was the day I lashed you to the bedposts,
Crying, "I can kiss you, I can kill you, I can
Make you sane enough to pass the bar exams." That day
I said, or I meant to say, that the odd afternoon
We dodged the falling parts of the exploding city,
Pink mists of flesh, the rain of rusted scrap that fell
On the heads of those less fortunate, I said
That the day we climbed the dark stair to set aside
Our jewelry, our clothes, there on the level
Above the street where cars continued passing,
We fell, at last, into the hands of ourselves alone
To rip the sheets for bandages. Then, that day,
You taught me what I knew: I would be the man
To make the most of you. Then we made love again.

So now we are here, this summit, this glaring stone,
And a shore where two smooth lines of white converge
Down which the afflicted struggle, sad of the earth.
You in your gown of white, I in my white robe,
Our hands that have touched too many wrong things
Having led a trail across bleached rock to where
We stand, receive, open and say to all,
"This is the point from which you start again.
The past ends here in love and whitest skin.
See us and touch, and by that touch be healed
Of all your hesitations. Do not fear."
By this, I mean to say the simplest thanks:
Whatever we have asked for has been given,
As now, descending the dark stair, I say this truth:
The sunlight melts like copper in your hair.

Masterpiece

It came but was hard enough for those
Who were willing to understand it

Impossible for the rest
Who wanted as much for themselves

Simple for only the two
Who inked their name to the contract

And moved inside to love.
The problem with those outside

Was whatever it was was lacking
They couldn't say but missed it all the same

Losing the point for the sake of the flaw
They felt was necessary for themselves.

Some said it will surface soon enough
And some said yes all right maybe it won't

And some peered through the azaleas with their lights
Reflecting off closed curtains and closed glass

To illuminate themselves.
Inside we lie beside ourselves, sip wine

Smiling around each other as we plot
The next stroke of our uncompleted work.

Bearing & Distance

W. T. Combs (1895–1977)

The lady has left her cigarette butts in the ashtray,
But that's okay, I watched her smoke them all,
Matching her puff for puff right down to the end.

They're the same brand, and if you project a line
Due north from here across the face of earth
You will come to a region of cold, a place of ice.

The man who is standing there behind the tripod
Is smoking one and looking through a glass
And soon enough will be sighting down on me,

Backsighting, foresighting, moving me left or right
With waves of his ungloved hand and trails of smoke,
Curses and coughs until he finds me good.

I pound a stake in the earth, center a tack in the top
And drive that home, cross-haired, double-centered.
The mark is love and the lady is the earth

And the hand that has stubbed the last spark in the tray
Will guide me into sweet perfumes and darkness
As the line continues northward, out of sight.

The man behind the tripod waves both arms,
A mounting hawk now fading, good, good-bye:
The line recedes to where the smoke still curls.

Mimosa

*Patience, patience,
Patience dans l'azur!
Chaque atome de silence
Est la chance d'un fruit mûr!*
—Paul Valéry, "Palme"

Thrusting fernlike leaves
And pink, abundant blooms
Upward to brush the eaves,
Your copious presence looms
Over my garden plot.
Cut to the ground but not
Killed by the chainsaw, Tree,
You have withstood the test
Of winter to protest
Such cruel surgery.

True to self-seeking plans
You flaunt your gaudy show-
Girl powderpuffs and fans
Until the plants that grow
Beneath you, even the weeds,
Submit before the needs
That rob the hours of day-
Light from my wrinkled green
Pepper and blighted bean
So you can have your way.

Window and open door
Admit you with the season,
Proclaiming you endure
For no apparent reason
Except to fill the room
With profligate perfume.
You mock my ill-regard
And demonstrate a will
To propagate until
You fill both house and yard!

When I was a child
The field behind the drive-in
Provided you a wild
Environment to thrive in.
I stripped your slippery bark
And threw spears at the dark
Imagined shapes of terror.
Thirty years have made
Them real, and I have strayed
To darker woods of error.

Nel mezzo del cammin . . .
How lightly words are spoken
Until the day they mean
One's own design is broken,
And all he sees ahead
Are the alluring dead
Who have nothing to give—
Eternally awake
With thirst they cannot slake,
Still asking how to live.

Mimosa sensitiva,
You show a better way.
Like some true believer
Bent to the earth to pray,
Each day with the late sun
You fold your leaves upon
The stem as if to hoard
Your unexpended powers
Until those lucid hours
When all will be restored.

What questions I could ask!
You might have words for one
Who sets himself a task
He fears cannot be done.
Perhaps your hard-won beauty
Declares that one's sole duty
Is to send from the heart-
Wood such resurgent growth
As must amaze us both—
Art for the sake of art.

Thus, through the harsh winters
Of private discontent,
Nurturing vital centers
Which are not easily spent,
While we may not know
To what heights we may grow,
We bide time and repair
That any seed born from
Sheer impulse might become
A tree that the mind can bear.

The Denouement

Who were those persons who chased us?

They were the last of the others.

Why must we always be running?

We are the last of our own.

Where is the shelter you spoke of?

Between us. All around us.

Shall we be safe until morning?

There is no doorway to enter.

How shall we live in this desert?

Just as we did in the farmlands.

How was it done in the farmlands?

Just as it shall be here.

What is the word for this place?

No one has ever used it.

When shall I hear the word?

Never, until it is spoken.

Who were my father and mother?

Trust me to keep your secret.

What is the mark on your forehead?

What is the mark on your cheek?

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"The gifts which R. S. Gwynn generously displays and shares with us in *The Drive-In* would be rare enough at any time, but are especially so in the present state of poetry. I mean, of course, and among many other singular virtues, his graceful and skilled sense of the forms of poetry; his concern for worthy subjects, explored without vulgar exploitation; his full deck of good humor, ranging from an elegant verbal wit to a strong and sometimes rowdy laughter; and, above all, an honorable regard for his readers which moves this reader to pleasure and to praise."—George Garrett

"Readers who cherish R. S. Gwynn's brilliant, skilled, and tough-minded work—I'm one—have impatiently awaited this first full collection. Open the book to 'Among Philistines,' and you're helpless in the hands of a poet not quite like any other now practicing. Verse so strictly crafted is rare, yet Gwynn is no mere tinkering formalist: his work has equal parts of passion, energy, and outrageousness. Poem after poem reads like a tightly corked explosion. Dark emotions course through many of these pages. Yet in lighter moments, Gwynn takes his place among our sharper and more hilarious satirists; he is capable, too, of subtlety and tenderness. Here is a mature, slowly perfected voice with its own distinctive power and resonance. High time it is widely heard."—X. J. Kennedy

About the author

R. S. Gwynn's poems, translations, and critical articles have appeared in a number of publications, among them *Poetry*, *The Sewanee Review*, *Playboy*, and *Prairie Schooner*. He is currently Associate Professor of English at Lamar University, Beaumont, Texas.

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