



John Herbert Marr

Sonnets for the Modern Man

John Herbert Marr

Published by *Exile*. Hundon, Suffolk. CO10 8HD.

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Emotions cannot be tamed or captured, nor impressions scoured from their dim lair beneath the conscious mind; and yet we try. I have travelled widely all my life, and many have I met to love or fear, admire or be indifferent to. To recollect a passing life, a Yorkshire winter wall, a distant Persian hill, a burning desert sand, the sonnet is but a tiny, exquisite perfume bottle to hold the distillation of the essence of a memory of a dream. One cannot waffle; one cannot expound or explain; just words to punch the air with the power of their creating moment, and hope they resonate within another's mind to share an instant of humanity.

These sonnets span some fifty years, from intolerant, impatient, wistful youth to reflecting, peaceful child-like age. The fleeting love of passing beauty, idealised beyond all reason; the hard reality of marriage and children; through adultery and divorce, through a new hope of perfection into the dignity of deep friendship and lasting love, and the stirring death of contemporaries whom once we loved, these sonnets evoke the passing shadow of a man. Shakespeare was the master and I, his willing 'prentice, took his forms and ran to show again those eternal truths we hold in common bond.

JHM 2012

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Dedication

When certainty is dulled by shafts of doubt,
Ambition – catching breath – does sickly stalk;
Humour ebbs, laughter from our hearth slinks out,
And effortless achievements lamely walk.

Then seek the peace which dwells in solitude;
Whence poetry may lift us to that clime:
To gaze upon a world another's viewed –
With strength and stature in a well-placed rhyme.

Now, sweetest love, see God in children's play
Which, as the lark each morning sings anew,
Does in its pleasure lark all doubt away
While leaving sharpened hope to bear us through.

This book you gently lay your hand upon,
With oak-grained love is sent, to Ann from John.

Maria Flor de Liza Famentera Villa Nueva

Let all that's in me rise up to this page,
Like idle tongues that do their masters prate.
Far more than simple blood or brain, engage
My saddened eyes, my lowly man's estate.

All I have loved and kissed and held most dear;
All heaven and earth and sun and stars and moon;
The very flowers and perfumes of the air,
Taking their proper place, would deem a boon.

But love, like labour, brings its share of pain
Which issues from its climax of the night.
Not seeking stress, but lacking it is vain
If true fruition burst to glorious light.

So, darkest hour, now council well my heart;
To seek a glimmer in this love's false start.

No Reply

I know it loud rings in your room above;
Its sound drowns out the silence that's your home,
Returning me closed eyes, mind, heart and love:
All expurged by that long unanswered phone,

Till – like my love – the echoes die away.
Your air can take infinity of sound,
Which falls and melts like blossom in the May
To vanish like a single raindrop drowned.

What loss, to top the desert with my sand:
Though all I have, 'tis just a grain to you.
My whole life but a gesture of your hand;
No, less – the shadow which it forms in lieu.

What pains I'd take to have milled down my heart;
In your machine, a tiny screw its part.

Separation

You've locked yourself away. How can you run
So fast, yet leave your image in my mind?
Clasped by the past where living was begun
You've travelled far – but left yourself behind.

There is no hole on earth where you can hide;
My thoughts do chase you out, like sun the rain
Returns to heaven in a well shaped cloud.
No – here imprisoned will you e'er remain.

Blue silk; so cool the soft touch of your skin;
The scented air that hangs upon your breath;
Your tender mind that to mine own was kin;
Dark pools – your eyes now flash my pending death.

For though temporally I see you go,
In imagery I cannot leave it so.

Eternity

The life of the spirit now surrounds you,
Heard trembling in the sighing of the wind:
Both of the world, yet separate, for we sinned;
Revealed alone in lives that truth pursue.

The flowing river courses ever on,
Yet ever stays essentially the same;
The murmur of the sea foretells your name:
There dwells your spirit life, though body's done.

Your brow is soft with peace that comes of God;
Hold to His word, whence faith alone is true.
The life of the spirit is within you:
Walk in those paths where His good feet have trod;

Returning love to all, then - as the prize -
Eternity's sharp light shines from your eyes.

Jennifer Guinness

Down, down, down to a world of deep despair;
Here no bird sings in dimmed dark winter's sun.
Out, out, out where the waiting desert air,
Uncaring, hides while screaming is begun.

Far, far, far flung tide lapping furthest shore,
Brings dross and carnage – folly of mankind.
In, in, into play comes the gunship whore,
To rout a crazed old man by one more blind.

"Maim! Maim! Maim!" mocks the gruesome mindless horde;
Refuelling evil power, revenge takes breath.
"On, on, on!" screams war, waving high the sword;
Where, God of Peace, are you in bloody death?

One kidnapped mother calmly tells her plight:
"Do not hatred show; love alone is right."

*Jennifer Guinness – kidnapped, while President Reagan, with the
connivance of Margaret Thatcher, sent bombers from England to attack
Gadafy in Libya.*

Twice Blest

Ne'er have I loved – till now. How strange the clime,
Where forty winters forge one summer's day.
Night's vigil ends, now golden orb'd display
New-dawns into an unsuspecting time.

Your glance has chased away the moon's limp glow
And colours – freshly wrought – do fight the eye,
Persuade my gaze away and terrify:
Did not your presence here all doubt o'erthrow.

One reared in blindness never knows how green
An orchard seems; how sweetly splashed by red.
Yet, all to shadow fades at your slight tread
Which – from your light – their brilliant colours glean.

Now have I stumbled on a world twice blest:
In having you, and having loveliness.

Choices

Love's axe kisses sharp; cleaves my sickly heart;
Splits forces – once united – to full foes;
Rending in twain harmonious repose;
Forcing bright tranquil lives to rip apart.

Two solid camps, engulfing morning air,
Gash my confused mind in vile turmoil.
Opposing camps of dissonance - once loyal -
Rage now with suffocating bleak despair.

Two fleshy forms, concealing spirits pure.
One mothered many children for my joy.
One mothered manly life from simple boy.
Two roses brought by this ill love to war.

How then do lesser mortals choose the side,
Whilst yet the king knows not which steed to ride?

Spring

Now I have loved you one swift month; till May,
With heavy blossom, decks the ways you tread.
Nimble swallows swoop, glad that winter's fled,
Caressing with fleet wing the grand clean day.

We stroll in tranquil woods, whose sleeping leaves
Awake, spread, feel the air – a thousand shades
Of dappled verdure shield enchanted glades;
Murmuring insects strum the air while peace weaves.

A tiny brook dancing down, kissed each stone
With happy sound, to nurture timbers old
Which form sweet nature's seat. My love, we hold
Each other's warm embrace – no more alone!

Bursting joy swells from buried former plight;
Now we have kissed - the spring of our delight.

Love's Symphony

I see in you pure shimmering sound, so fair:
Awaiting love's poised baton for its start.
Each member, building tone as much it dare,
At once distinct, yet blending yields its part.

Your eyes, like brass trombones, do rip the air
To touch mine own with radiant resonance.
Slim fingers pluck sharp strings that calm my care;
Sweet lips play oboe lines – and mine entrance.

Clear dulcet teeth: the harp that bites my ear.
Your thighs - as proud drum rolls - do stand apart.
The cello forms your breast, in silk sounds near;
So firm yet soft a note to stir my heart.

Thus seeing you, I see a symphony;
A perfect cadence in a brilliant key.

A.W.O.L.

Nobody loved him; nobody hated.

His shallow emotions smoothly smothered

Less balanced views, with all weakness covered.

Not for his soul was panting breath bated.

He never shouted nor raged at the dead;

He never whimpered nor cried in despair;

Sadly, he cared not that someone should care;

Standing contented, warm bellied, well fed.

He made no commitments through tender force,

Seeing not hunger nor pain in his world.

Looking over, he missed a sleeping child curled

In death. He suffered no guilt or remorse.

He slouched there, exiled from human rapport

Not hating, nor loving – so loved no more.

Cages

What arrogance to prate of "God's own way",
And make life's being be the end of all;
They have not risen who can never fall,
But mere survivors with their limbs of clay.

Each man is caged – of this admit no doubt.
Most dare not try, for fear of broken wing
(Though knowing higher larks will sweeter sing),
And wither without pain till day is out.

Two forces fight to set our latitudes;
Each pulls in biased ways our earthly caul –
Fear and love! These two confound us all
And rule our lives in balanced magnitudes.

One thing I want - yet cannot have this day;
That love I crave I cannot have this day,

Though things I hold will die and fade away,
That love I crave shall be with me this day.

A.E.

Beyond constraining corners of my mind
Exists a silent island of repose,
Where I may hide – secure from worldly foes –
Content: there peaceful harmonies to find.

Down those long halls of silence let me brood.
Now callous threat, vile shout, ill sneering drawls,
Rude spite and falsehood drop beyond stout walls
Of places where earth's toil can ne'er intrude.

My isle admits no tremblers, 'fraid to stare
(Who will not yield dull, sallow sunken gaze
To silent wonders, etched by love's keen rays);
Just kindred souls who burdens bravely bare;

Great poets, artists, writers – all who dream;
And dreaming yet hold firm to truth's first gleam

Heroes

You ask me what became of heroes old,
Whose lives – by Nature's bounty – rich fruits yield
While chasing nymphs through Elysian field;
Else – battling dragons – fought for stately gold.

They conquered foreign kingdoms with brave sword;
Or valiant died attempting hopeless task;
For love of high ideal, nought more would ask
Who – furthering frontiers – strove with mighty word.

Now surgeons fight dread foes with scalpel blade;
Dominions new rough Science will explore;
Cruel atom-breeders fuel fresh dragon's jaw;
And love by H.I.V. will low be laid.

Heroes today have different fights to win:
Through waging war 'gainst God and violent sin.

Public Execution

Ten men for justice lost their lives last night.
And in the hall stood eighteen thousand fools,
Taking pleasure in other's wretched plight,
Who cheered and jeered and laughed like Satan's tools.

Did those who died deserve to die? This prove.
For each had whored or cheated, stole or lied,
Or killed from wild anger, fear or love;
And for their way of life they sullen died.

Let not their deaths kill native dignity,
Nor daunting Peking towers impede the mind.
Rude acts diminish shared humanity:
They were our kin, and to ourselves aligned.

Do we know them; can we love so divine?
To turn our minds beyond a Reuter's line?

Jacqueline du Pré

Jacqueline du Pré, you made our hearts glow
In the yearning, aching strings of Elgar
Whose genius, intertwining your bright star,
Insistent, throbbing sounds tore from your bow.

Hear the sound of rushing waters, breaking
In the depths of silence, touching all souls;
While this cello work your passing life knolls,
You have kept the fiery beacon burning.

Brilliance, beauty, power and gentle breeding:
In your life we saw the best of England –
Earth at one with Heaven, (as once God planned
For all mankind) inspired by your leading.

Joyfully your name shall sound as laughter:
Lifted high on music's wing henceafter.

(1945 – 1987) Dedicated to Daniel Barenboim

My Man – (for Linda)

My man's a good man; he wanted the best;

Not just for the kids but also for me.

(I am a student of sociology.

You hear me? It's said - to that I've confessed!)

I'd gotta study, while he watched the kids.

No great shakes: ten years I did it for him,

(But ancient traditions are slow to dim,)

Until – with slurred speech and drink-heavy lids –

He piled my books in a heap on the ground;

Threatened to paraffin them, and kicked me.

Frenzied I rushed to a place of safety

And cried, with my kids and others around:

"All men are strong men, till put to the test;

My man's a good man; he wanted the best."

In Mitigation – (for Judah)

My mother left my dad when I was three;
I struggled on from there. They did not care
If I had food or my dad beat me bare.
Now I've blown it – my wife's walked out on me.

I'd fed my family, working when I could;
We'd laughed and joked and cried as one. I'd strain
My best for them. I'd had my share of pain.
They were my only living flesh and blood.

For days poor health had kept me by the hob;
She ruled the children, while I begged for beer;
Now she was taking over, that was clear:
While she enjoyed her studies, I'd no job.

She did not need my help – nor life – you see;
What had I left, but tell her – "I am me!"?

The Writer – Beatrix Campbell

The woman came with sadness in her eyes
Which tried to pierce through hidden inner soul;
No affectation - she would brook no lies!
She'd only called to ask about my role

Among the people here in Middlesbrough.
It did not seem too hard to share my views,
And she with them seemed quickly to concur.
So why pick me with many more to choose?

Then, as she probed and wrote my each reply,
I seemed to sense a distance in her pose;
No matter if I raged or turned to cry,
She listened only for considered prose.

Immured from deep emotion by disdain,
What can she write, who living knows no pain?

Middlesbrough 1987

The Lost Sister

How we all laughed with pleasure at her call:
Truth, intellect and power of mind were one.
Her hair shone like the fiery setting sun;
Her beauty, wit and charm delighted all.

She knew the poets: loved them line by line,
And laid the Brontës' songs within her heart.
Only the bravest heroes rode her cart:
With weak, fat fools she'd e'en refuse to dine.

How could we guess she'd break by simple man?
We never thought dull flattery could turn
Her graceful head; or foolish gold she'd yearn.
But when that sod of clay called, then she sang:

"Though Haworth's lanes in summer suit me fine,
Warm winter's best. A coward soul is mine!"

For all who leave the ways of truth for transient security.

Dedicated to Jane

Lucy

My child came like a welcome summer's day
Whose buds contain the essence of the flower;
Within her tiny frame, all woman's power
Revealing time will over-soon display.

Fresh light glints from her curl of copper hair,
Whilst her soft voice is music, drowning woe;
Through her young wisdom, ways of peace will show;
She grows each day in fun and grace, more fair.

She stands upon the rim of womanhood:
This child, who shared her trust, has glimpsed life's truth,
Reluctant yet to turn from joyous youth,
Yet eager for that force none has withstood.

My joy, my life, my hope is in that hand, –
Still trembling on the brink of love unfanned.

The Recluse

There was a man who vowed to know no pain,
So locked himself away in prick-proof box.
His grieving friends said, "let him boxed remain:
He has no wish to wash or change his socks."

There, well immured, content to leave each day,
He lived dark hours in peace – then visions saw –
So had his eyes plucked out. Sounds came his way –
Unhappy, worldly echoes heard before;

He felt cot pinpricks in his softening flesh,
And ague in his feet and stiffening joints;
His brain, this storm of signals to enmesh,
He measured carefully each one with points

And cut them off – ears, limbs, torso, tongue, frame;
But never did return to know his fame.

Steps Upon The Stair

In fire we saw electrons flash their form
Through switching orbits of some outer shell,
To roast our protein; light us; keep us warm –
Or frighten lesser beasts, which fear this spell.

Within the nucleus we tried to peer,
And thought we were as gods to change its state
By fusing atoms, like some ancient seer,
(Though knowing now its end, we bombs berate.)

Next looking outward, we observed the stars,
And saw the earth swing through eternal space;
We calculated tracks for ruddy Mars,
And set off for the moon with quickening pace.

Nor all our striving lays life's secret bare:
Our knowledge but one step upon the stair.

I Stand Alone

I am the weakness from which death is built.
My darling past, what have I done to you?
Blaspheme, rage, scream, shout:– words are still too few
To press upon me my full weight of guilt.

Impoverished with struggling early years,
You loved and trusted none, but me – who left.
Where now your justice, with your life bereft?
Though saddened and alone, I sense your tears.

I stand apart with none to share my pain;
In leaving you, I leave myself behind:
My children, home and friends! All who were kind
Consider my whole life to be inane.

Yet, standing without hope of homeliness,
I'll not return to utter loneliness.

Isolation

Did anyone pretend it would be fun?
Locked alone in silence, in a silent room?
Now I know the curse of growing stubborn:
Stinking voids will all my thoughts consume.

Light grows dim; chained dogs howl the coming night;
Books grow heavy; weariness consumes me;
Too frequently I question what is right,
While prattling maids conspire to exhume me.

Hand, heart and feet grow cold with idleness;
My pen is like a turgid weight to wield;
And she, deprived now of her bridleness,
Is locked in silent combat till I yield.

With urgent pleas I call up repressed fate;
"Guide me, with token signs, through your next gate."

First Thoughts

Clean, moulded sculpture to life's grand design;
Perfect containment to conceal all change;
Shape fashioned out of function with this spline:
That perfect form must break to further range.

So soft at first, the slightest tap is heard:
The beautiful round shape will crack and spoil.
Above the murmuring world, which hardly stirred,
These sticky, fly-crawled fragments thoughts embroil.

I see the mess, the loss of ancient form,
Which surely never can be carved anew;
But hardly do I notice new life born –
What hopes can this enfeebled lump accrue?

My old ideas must likewise crack and die,
Before the new can shake their wing and fly.

Number Thirteen

I glimpsed the old canal where once I played,
Behind the mill my granddad sweated for;
And knew afresh his sadness midst the braid
That rolled from long-dead looms to feed wealth more.

The segregated doorways of the school
Barred girl from boy with cages of high wire;
My accent led them fight me as a fool,
While mother nursed through grief and death her sire.

I climbed the flag-stoned hill with terraced rows,
And felt a ghostly presence there enshrined:
Dank walls enshrouding silence like wet clothes
Remembered in the cobbled yards behind.

New children, playing now in granddad's street,
Build snapshots in their minds of all they meet.

On returning to my Grandfather's house, 13 Coniston Street, Burnley

No Hoper

In silence, armless men mouth canvas birds;
Blind organists learn Bach to finger fire;
Some Russian girl, imprisoned, stuns with words
And modern Don Juans pen sick desire;

Lapsed Catholics, Muslim rebels or tired Jews
Bewail their problems as the critics rave;
Aids, homosexuals, deviants press new views,
While royalty can't cough without a wave;

The paw prints of a dog hang in the Tate;
Slick television hosts performing fleas;
Loud, bossy women still lament their fate;
Dead druggos' diaries all command fat fees.

Misfortune cast me as a normal male –
Not bent, oppressed, nor spied on: thus I fail!

The Settlement

Now bites the penny with its smooth rolled edge;
Entrail-enwrapping letters guts consume;
Niggardly solicitors plough and dredge
Through summoned spectres from the past's raw tomb.

Parade a naked income to the world
With every florin spent, by all perused.
List the times and words from temper hurled—
Forgetting all the while how minds are bruised.

Beat back the broken promises which haunt;
Grit teeth on edge to firm a deep resolve.
She holds the house, with children kept to flaunt:
Though taken all, their love will not devolve.

Events move slowly down their legal course;
How powerless we stand before divorce.

My Son

You fell into the world a naked hump,
Enbrittled by the flagstones we set down
Till every suckle bruised your vivid lump;
Your heritage was putrid, barren-brown.

How anguishing your distraught mother's kiss
Entreating you with tears to stay her child,
Now you have suffered – and are brought to this!
Not all her arts nor tantrums you beguiled.

Such strength and bravery I've never known –
To wrench asunder family and friends;
A lad, no more, yet eagle-like you've flown,
Nor doubting aught despite uncertain ends.

Find in your heart forgiveness for my fears;
Find resolution in your soul from tears.

Youth's Death

What day, and what low hour caused youth to die?
Who killed that tender bud? Who stole her years?
Who came, with Falsehood's wraps and Cynic's tears,
To mourn her loss and passing with a sigh?

Bright Mirth and Summer had retired to bed;
Plain Laughter slipped away, but Sorrow came.
Conformity was there, and just the same,
Since Revelry and Innocence had fled.

Youth's simple cousin, Happiness, was lost,
And Aunty Curiosity had left;
The twin girls, Hope and Joy, had suffered theft,
But Hatred brought a shroud attired in Frost.

For some, Youth dies as ghostly Death draws near;
But hers was killed by Love's more bitter tear.

Laughter

If laughter be the song of innocence,
Then let me nothing know and gladly live.
If joy blooms where there is no schoolroom fence,
I'll nothing think each day and ten links give.

A soft smile snugly clothes the poorest child,
Till radiantly its glow warms all who see;
Such happiness shall tame their natures wild
And lift from gloom the darker side of me.

More lovely than a solemn church bell peel
The light of playful youth illumines my heart;
Each ripple of delight and youngster's squeal
Can burnish Epstein's noble work of art.

For what good's heaven if they sorrow share?
'Tis better far in hell, if laughter's there.

Another Yesterday

And yesterday was just another day,
 With nothing over long to struggle through:
Some simple walk-on bit part in a play,
 A tune to whistle, perhaps a line or two
Declaiming that the boss would soon be by.
 Then one swift exit after brief applause.

What if some others took a chance to fly?
 This was no fortified salient, cracked by force,
But their good gift. I could not envy them –
 What well-fed cat envies the wheeling bird?
I thought today would drift on much the same:
 On empty paths; eclipsed in shadows; blurred.

 Then, in the dappled shade, you caught my play
And yesterday's a million miles away.

A Love Yet Stirring

O man! What wreckage has your hatred strewn
Within this tiny, sea-encompassed globe.
Vast, fertile tracts decay to blasted dune;
Days mimicking a xenon-pulsing strobe.

Here once stood nations proud in gaunt relief:
The faithful Moor, the awesome tribal king,
Whose only skirmish was with neighbouring chief
Whom poets, praising brave defeat, could sing.

Your enemy lies now within your walls:
The cause is compromised; the ideals lost.
Semtex is the voice of village brawls;
Flat mortar shells argue when love is crossed.

And yet — through all the carnage, all the waste,
Your constant love my inspiration laced.

The Light We Cannot See

There is a light set in this world for love,
A light deep-set and screened from careless gaze
That unseen, moves through darkest grove
Until a close-held face its rays emblaze.

With face turned like a sun-flamed, rare van Gough,
She stood within that sear of flaming light
Whose close encounter set her soul aglow:
A fiery beacon in an endless night.

Etched now so clear in each sad memory,
With features thrown by love in proud relief
Before us shines our great discovery:
Her glowing eyes, her smile, her voice, her laugh.

That light gave wisdom, power and certainty;
Her life made real the light we cannot see.

In Memoriam: Jo Morgan, Midwife and Tutor, died 1998.

The Wayside Inn

In night's dark field where dreams take urgent rhyme,
I dreamt on life and its full mystery:
A wide and rutted highway throughout time
With speeding souls conveyed in history.

Then came a slip road to a wayside inn;
Some few pulled off to pause for food or song,
Or talk about the journey with their kin
Before embarking to rejoin the throng.

Here birth's the exit, and the entry death;
The milling crowds the land wherein we've strayed;
Yet, on this road, the inn is but a breath
Wherein all life's variety is played.

We clutch to this temporal hut in vain,
And death but starts our journey once again.

For Cardinal Hume, on the announcement of his fatal cancer.

Valerie's Ghost

I saw your ghost last night – your face full freshed
As only twenty years can lend; and still
As winter's light. In silence, thought-enmeshed,
With cheeks aglow we strode Box Hill.

Your duffle coat betrayed a student, bent
In woollen hood to lean upon my arm;
Your dark eyes bright, aglint with fresh love pent,
Your smile as gentle as a whispered psalm.

Frustrated loss that leaves the spirit lame;
Long intervening age's growing pain:
Those forty years of broken dreams that maim,
Sloughed off to leave you strong and young again.

Vindictively ripped through, yet never gone,
Death yields a thousand ghosts – I saw but one.

*Valerie Jean Newman nee Turnbull
b. 14 June 1949
d. 15th October, 2011 aged 62 years*

Valerie did not forget; she kept a secret diary of our times together, discovered and destroyed by her husband after her death.

To Sleep

Oh sleep, you welcome shutter on all pain,
 You chide misfortune with true piety;
Now bathe my mind and coming death disdain:
 Your gentle kiss sets wildest visions free.

Great artists, by its light, new works conceive
 With frenzied hues that are the stuff of dreams;
Sweet orchestras a magic sound-spell weave,
 While architects construct their wildest schemes.

In ousted care and conquered penury
 No valiant knight yet battled greater foe –
From visions of the stars to Kekulé
 Good sleep lays siege to every banished woe.

To rich and poor alike comes ancient sleep:
Such physic yields true bliss in measures deep.

When Childhood Dies

Your quiet room is left in peace, unchanged
To all but silent dust, which settles slow:
The door bricked up, the curtains tightly ranged
Against a seething torment's break and flow.

Your smile is set for ever in its frame;
The carpet holds its imprint where you trod;
Beside a broken, jilted childish game
Lie toys and clothes arranged as they were shod.

I did not wish to die; yet welcome grew
Death's portal if, by touching that great door,
It might have closed against your passing through,
And stayed the reaper's hand by one day more.

It was a moment, set in mystery,
When childhood dreams once laughed and played with me.

June 2000