

Old Colonial Boy

In one photograph he smiles politely beyond
my head, the fist-sucking child on my knees,
beyond the camera that snaps our family picnic
like a frog flicking at half-surprised flies,
smiles anxiously down from his high ground
to the two counties below, chequers softened by mist —

portly, balding Edwardian, my father's schoolfriend,
who left his straw boater behind in the colonies,
then abandoned the dissection of Scottish cadavers
for a civil and serving desk in the milder south,
the training of choir-boys in mid-Anglican churches,
bridge and boating with Mother on Sunday rivers —

"No-one is perfect." my father asserted, a sententious
Fifth Former — "Not even my mother?" he'd challenged —
"Well, no," provoked resentment, silence for a month. . . .
now Mother is mourned, — his enquiries after my father
probe beyond the perfunctory — he lowers his voice
to tell me he's seeing a doctor on Tuesday — "think it's my heart".

This Whitsun Saturday mellows to afternoon
pale gold and ochre on Cotswold stone and spire
roads he has cycled along so many times
the vicarage where he used to visit "a dear friend" —
another photograph features a serene Perpendicular tower
catches his profiled head intent upon the ground.

Children in bed, babysitter installed, we return
to his flat for lamb chops, a lemon custard, perfectly
cooked. He serves us coffee in the two blue
Wedgewood cups he keeps on the mantelshelf —
"I'm trying to save to buy another two"
and draws the curtains to shut out the dark.

Asked to sing, he says that perhaps he shouldn't,
plays records instead — Edith Evans "in a handba-a-a-ag?"
his choir and Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring —
grows restless, changes his mind, takes a stance
near the piano, as years ago in his mother's parlour,
to sing of his longing to go down to the sea again. . . .

the diction is clear, yearning for vagrant gypsy life
wheel's kick and blown spume artistically phrased,
tone softens for sleep and dream when the long trick's over --
the large face reddens with what might be strain,
lines deepen on forehead, around the pale blue eyes,
something other than seagulls cries in his voice

regretting this wild fling, too many flings,
too few? . . . A fortnight later we heard he died
next day, collapsed on the way to church.
Looking now at these photographs one might think
death took him at the right moment with a quiet precision.
The face still smiles politely beyond my head.

—*Elizabeth Jones*