

i.m. E.F., who lived next door but one

I

Befriended half-stranger, I would like to claim
(with the guilty politeness of the one still living)
that our first meeting in someone's dining-room

was unforgettable. Certainly I can remember it now:
our neighbourly talk of primulas, border hedges;
then something we said about politics... yes, how

Parliament must fail us, lacking poets, engineers.
And then the pause, the slow, slight inclination
of one towards the other: two watchful gatekeepers

doubtfully unlatching the simultaneous landscapes
of two very different lives. Smilingly, I heard you confess
dyslexia, and suffer again the routine contempt

of post-war dominies, though your boyhood's solace
was the boy's-own best: Father owned a dockyard
(as you thought then), and so the truisms ships express –

of proportion, handiness, and social swimming knack –
were yours to con by heart and bring you knowledge, love, career.
My life? I left it foggy, shadowed by some big mistake...

Done now: no need to define it, or particularly care

II

"I read a few pages... the endings – well, I like to guess.
Please, come and collect it next week." In my hands the book
I brought to amuse you emptied, refilled – like a looking-glass,

reflecting just ourselves now: blurry faces, daylight-grey,
which, like planets in some random reach of space,
need or need not be there. With nothing of my own to say,

I paused in your final room, observing on each wall
your careful paintings, loved untranscendent landscapes,
your children snapped in poses they would happily recall;

and heard you, in your quickness, your liveliness to please,
recap stories of Africa, snakes, fearful hand-in-hand flight;
then finish, and fold all neatly, like clothes laid in a valise;

then hold out your hand and wish me an equally good night.