

Start With This

So, by now you've picked the setting (someplace
by the sea — maybe a meadow at the
cliff's edge, a small white cottage in County Clare),

and you've put a human figure where there
was nothing since it was necessary
that something be awake and have motion

(though she could as well be made of marble
as flesh for all her stillness). Still you
stand her there looking out to the ocean,

thinking of the empty house she passed last
night deeper than the darkness all around,
and you realize now that she's been lost

ever since she left him, that a certain
kind of peace will never return (though perhaps
something better is on the horizon),

which is when you see the ship approaching,
coming full speed out of the sun, its sails
filled with golden sky, and you remember

a dream you had twenty or thirty years
ago about a boat flying over
the waters, but this time there's no singing,

just the overwhelming sense of wings (as
of Apollo), and you know what Leda
must have known, long before he let her drop.

The Hampstead Sonnets

(The Real Thing)

That was the day I knew, although even
earlier — in Bristol, after we'd been
to Cornwall and back again — I could tell
something was happening to us, something
I wasn't expecting, something unplanned,
uncharted, and entirely amazing.
(I've looked up that word, "amazing," and put
it in another poem which explains
what happened much better than this will.) You
came down to London from The North because
I'd invited you, and even though I
never thought you'd come, you came, and I was
waiting when you rang the bell, and I was there
on Hampstead Heath watching the sun go down,
and then we went inside and fell in love.

We went inside and fell in love — easy
as I am telling it. Our shoulders touched
or didn't touch — it doesn't matter now —
but I could hardly breathe; I think I swooned
(when I'd never believed it possible);
I think my face went pale; I think my heart
was beating wildly — yes, I'm sure it was.
Next day we went to Richmond and to Kew
and walked through the palm house and the gardens,
admiring the gryphons and other beasts,
finding the pagoda disappointing,
the cactus houses overdone, but the
rhododendron grove was perfect: look at
the two of us, surrounded by flowers.

Later, the picture of the two of us surrounded by all those flowers would go into the fire with the other pictures he found. Later, the letters that you wrote would escape the fire and go for years unread. Later — but what's the point? Later is now, and now is too late to wonder what we might have done with that amazing love that came to us when we least expected it, when we didn't know how rare it was, when we — but I really most blame myself — were afraid of saying the truth, afraid the whole world would come down on its pillars, afraid to hurt anyone else but us.

Anyone else but us might have made it work; anyone else but me might have said “Yes, wait,” anyone else but you might have asked again, but because of the distance, because of the differences, because of the dangers, the darkness, the dread nights of the soul, I let all these things swallow our words and then, for many years, silence was all there was between us. Your letters (and you'll never know how fiercely I fought to keep them) went first to a friend's closet and then, when I made the break I couldn't make earlier, to my own apartment, and then to my house where I live alone.

I live alone by choice and for pleasure,
and you have the life I had when we met.
I was a wife then; now you're a husband
and the father of daughters, just as you
hoped. Sometimes I remember us walking
on the beach in Cornwall, gathering slate,
“for pure and useless beauty” as you said,
and how we went later for tea and scones
and how later we slept on the cliff's edge
and (years later) I met you on a bridge
over the Thames just as I was thinking
of how once we had walked there together,
just as I wondered if that amazing
love we had was truly (yes) the real thing.

Say It

Say that it is the continuous life
you desire, that one day might stretch into
the next without a seam, without seeming
to move one minute away from the past
or that in passing through whatever comes

you keep coming to the faces you love,
never leaving them entirely behind.

Say that it is simply a wish to waste
time forever, lingering with the friends
you've gathered together, a gradual
illumination traveling the spine,
eyes brimming with the moment that is now.

Say that it is the impulse of the soul
to endure forever. Say it again.