***Through the Cracked Looking Glass***



 ***Dodgson and I***

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***A Talk with Ruskin and a Friend of His***

*I dream I am in the ageing Ruskin’s house in Brantwood, in the Lake*

*District. He is muttering to himself in his study overlooking Coniston*

*Water, while poring over old drawings and photographs of girls. I*

*hesitate to interrupt, but how I long to speak with the poor mad genius!*

1.

*Ah, I no longer see the gleam! See the ‘Intimations Ode’.* [Mr V]

 *This photograph disturbs me. She,*

 *My young Turk, says too much to me.*

*Nature is having a bad dream…*

*Decomposition rules. No help*

 *For anything from anything*

 *Save Siren-tunes the bank-notes sing*

*While the stock-market devils yelp…*

Teacher I honour, can you talk

 With one whom you must surely loathe?

 *A morbid love destroyed us both.*

*We both have failed… Many a walk*



*We took together, you and I,*

 *O’er many a silver-misted quad*

 *Talking much nonsense about God*

*And Tintoretto… Can love die?*

Love that can kill can surely die.

 You drew her hauntingly on her

 Deathbed, your Rose. *Ah, do not stir His tragic life’s love, Rose La Touche.*

*Those visions in an old man’s eye!*

Those little girls of yours, your ‘flirts’:

 You never, of course…? *The very thought!*

 Which perish! Still, the matter’s fraught

With ambiguity that hurts

Your reputation. As for *mine,*

It is past hurting: it is dead.

 What I did cannot be unsaid

And all I am is as a sign.

But Child Cults, Cults of Innocence!

 What could be more perverse? Come, come!

 You and Charles Dodgson are a rum *Charles Dodgson alias Lewis Carroll, co-founder*

Old pair… *Yes, Oscar, we’re old f-f-friends*. *of the Society for Psychical Research, appears*

 *in his astral body, in the aura of a migraine.*

2.

My dear Dodgson, let me ask you:

 Those photographs you took of nude

 Young girls: how, without seeming rude,

Did you persuade the parents to

Allow you to *do* such a thing?

 *It was all innocent, sir, d-d-dirty*

 *Only to dirty eyes.* Quite ‘flirty,’

Those girls? Inclined to worshipping?

*We are not given to your s-s-sport,*

 *Oscar. You’ve fallen among Tories,*

 *Violent Tories… But* your *story’s*

*Easy to tell. It is a sort*

*Of Tarot’s Progress mystery*

 *Wherein the Fool becomes the Foul Dodgson plays his ‘Word-Ladder’*

 *And in the Foul becomes a Soul. or ‘Doublet’ game with me.*

*In doublets you seek unity.*

*But isn’t it a bit expensive,*

 *The expense of spirit, wasting time*

 *And money on a sordid crime,*

*Inflicting damage so extensive*

*On loved ones for so mean a cause?*

 *It’s such a waste of shame, good shame.*

 *(For having smirched your parents’ name,*

*Let’s say—noble, for all their flaws.)*

*What on earth made you sacrifice*

 *Your fame and social standing for*

 *So vicious a perversion, or,*

*Vice versa, so perverse a vice?*

*Your suit against the Marquis was*

 *A tour de force of lust in action,*

 *Perjured, and full of blame.—In*action,

Perhaps: for during the brief pause

Before the third and final trial

 I could have fled so easily!

 That choice had to be made for me

When England’s temper spelled exile.

 *You were stuck in the honey pot*

 *Of your own mind.* Being the bee

 *And* the honey, presumably?

*And the sting, which a bee can not*

*Survive*. And the wings. *And the cell.*

 *Your head: it looks so very small,*

 *Shaven, like the head of a doll.*

*What secrets do dolls have to tell?*

*They have no depths that call for plumbing.*

 *I’d label you, essentially,*

 *Hysterical* poseur*. To be*

*Is not your bailiwick, becoming*

*As you so costume-airily are.*—

 Contrarily*,* sir, I am *all* Being.

 A way of saying. A way of seeing.

Influence, that magnetic star,

Wielded or yielded to, holds sway

 By being strongly what it is.

 Being’s importance (and its bliss)

Lies in the earnest of a play.

*Or a long alcoholiday.*

 *Your senses didn’t merely cure*

 *Your soul, they pickled it. I’m sure*

*Drink was the prompter in your play.*

*How else explain the riddle of*

 *Your love for an unworthy youth,*

 *Your losing battle with the truth?*

*‘Twere better to have lost the love*

*And won the battle. But that is*

 *Water under a long-gone bridge*

 *By now. The earth, that ‘fretful midge’, Alluding to ‘The Blessed Damozel’,*

*Has spun full many a round since this the famous poem by his friend Rossetti.*

*Sorry business was still a matter*

 *Of choice and not a chosen fate.*

 *Too late for any important date*

*Now with the Queen—though the Mad Hatter*

*Is usually available*

 *For tea.* Poisonous Mercury!

 *At least claiming insanity*

*Makes you appear less culpable.*

Then let poor Oscar, in cap-and-bells,

 As Lear-as-Fool-as -Jack-Falstaff

 Amuse you with a tragic laugh

At Prosper and his broken spells.

*Vos plaudite!* Applause! Applause!

 What is the point of respiration

 We do not crowd with celebration

Of breath whose every breath is loss?

3.

*What principle did you defend?*

 *If total lack of self-restraint*

 *Were virtue, you would be a saint.*

*What did you die for, for what end?*

The Cause, of course, Dodgson, the Cause.

 And I’ve no doubt we will prevail,

 Although the process will entail

More monstrous martyrdoms to laws

That never should have been. Our love

 Belongs to life by art and nature.

 For Man is a creative creature,

Desire probes all directions of

Its compass. Sexuality,

 Like truth, is polymorphous, half

 Is artifice, like the light laugh

Of calculated mystery

With which desire conducts its deep

 Flirtations. In the passionate

 Itself there is a check and mate

Of gaming between wake and sleep.

(I think that there should be no laws

 For anyone. Only of dead

 Things should we write in stone. What’s said

In contract, codicil and clause

Is usually a dreary fiction

 Imposed by the constabulary,

 Power usurped, that should be free.

Polonius, whose very diction

Betrays a contradiction, serves

 As learnèd slave, issuing writs

 To warrant Claudius , who sits

Enthroned with a bad case of nerves.)

Desire is but a waking dream,

 A glimpse, a vision, a revision

 Of the spontaneous, repetition

Of the familiar in the gleam

In others’ eyes. When the alienated

 Majesty of the passionate moment

 Resurfaces, and new eyes foment

The old sweet unrest, the chance seems fated,

Fortuitous yet inevitable,

 And faining is the only truth.

 The song that through the heart of ruth

Forges its path, forges us all,

And to that tune hearts play their game

 Of musical chairs, a game that stops

 Only when hearts do, and one drops

Into a silence with no name.

A Soul can Sour, or Soar. A Star

 Waits at the ladder’s topmost rung.

 *The star that landed on your tongue*

*Became a Scar, a Scar, Oscar.*

***Dodgson and I***

 ***Through the Cracked Looking Glass***

 *Scene: Oxford, lounging by*

 *‘the deep and drumly Cher’.*

1.

Of course we all knew you were clever.

 We sometimes crossed paths on the quads,

 But, fundamentally at odds

Upon so many scores, we never

Exchanged nods. Yet the *Alice* books

 I savour: they confirm my sense

 That what’s real or unreal depends

Upon the glass through which one looks.

And we had friends in common, too.

 Ruskin was a friend to us both.

 What made you think me fit to loathe

Was that I would not hide from view

The child’s fantasticality

 Of my imagination, bared

 The fact that I wore masks, and dared

To *expose* my personality

As a promoter, in side-shows,

 Exhibits to us his prize freak.

 (And we, of course, won’t even speak

Of my *outré* Uranian ‘pose’.)

2.

While the pre-Raphaelites hung lamps

 Of a revived Romanticism,

 You gave the world Portmanteaucism

And clever little sleeves for stamps.

Fools rush in where no angel dares

 To tread. Where Ruskin risks his name

 In putting greedy wealth to shame,

You map your life in chess-board squares.

And while your friend, intense Rossetti,

 Drowns sorrow for lost love in chloral’s

 Green sea, you toy with proverb morals

And cut up words into confetti.

*Are you describing me, or you?*

 Ah, we both reconstruct the tatters

 As art that makes more sense, and matters

More, than the ‘original’, it’s true.

3.

*You should have thought before you spoke, A Transformation Scene: we are now*

 *Measured the sense and weighed the sounds. in a wood in Looking-Glass Land.*

 *For language costs a thousand pounds Charles scolds me mildly like the Red Queen.*

*A word these days, and one is ‘broke’*

*Before one knows it. The bill has*

 *A way of falling due when least*

 *Expected. The watchword is ‘feast*

*Or famine’. It falls due just as*

*The crowd’s acclaiming you the Lord*

 *Of Language. Ah, the wreath of laurel*

 *Is snatched from off your head. The moral?*

*‘Say no more than you can afford*

*To pay for when the check’s presented’.*

 *Or is it rather, ‘Pound-wise, penny*

 *Foolish’? (Vice versa?) There are many*

*More: ‘Soonest said, soonest repented’.*

*(A variant—this is quite fun!—*

 *On ‘Marry in haste, repent at leisure’.)*

 *You never learned to weigh and measure.*

*Now, take two eggs, for instance. One*

*Costs fivepence farthing, two, just twopence.*

 *But one of them is bad. And so*

 *The moral is—oh, I don’t know,*

*‘One’s sure to meet with one’s comeuppance,*

*Sooner or later’*. I don’t at all

 See how that follows. *Sooner or later*

 *It all follows, you know. The greater*

*Divides into the lesser, fall*

*Follows winter, eventually.*

Ah, yes, that fussy old White Rabbit,

 Winter: he’s quite the creature of habit.

He’s so belated, isn’t he?

You’re quite the Artist of Escape.

 Another of your Transformations!

 The trains we changed are changing stations. *Yes, another Transformation Scene.*

The wood has taken on a shape Another *one? This is growing monotonous!*

That bifurcates into a sheep

 And shop, of which shop sheep is shop-

 Keeper. When does the amusement stop?

Why do you find it hard to sleep?

*Don’t change the subject*. But what *is*

 The subject? *The subject of this study.*

 Which has, by now, grown rather muddy,

*Admittedly*, *as dark as Dis.*

4.

You took a girl once to the local

 Aquarium, and lost yourself

 In a tall tale; the man turned elf.

But then you saw you were the focal

Point of a whole crowd’s rapt attention,

 And hurriedly departed with

 The child. Into the life the myth

Had seeped. Carroll is Carroll, Dodgson

Dodgson: never the twain must meet,

 Except on holidays precisely

 Arranged and calculated nicely

To land you back upon your feet

Once the festivities are over,

 After the days spent boating down

 The river, the hours spent in town

Seeing the Pantomime. The lover

Of child’s play and the mathematician

 Shared the same body, double soul

 In one frame. It worked, on the whole,

The arrangement. But here’s my suspicion:

I think you lie awake in bed

 Keeping at bay religious doubt

 And unclean thoughts by working out

Complex maths problems in your head.

Curiouser and curiouser,

 Your *Curiosa Mathematica,*

Where you propose so automatic a

Response when the Great Problems stir,

Or should I rather say, neurotic?

 I think you were unhappy as

 The Gnat whose voice whispers ‘Alas!’

In the ear of Alice, tiny otic

Oracle. *You might make a joke*

 *About that: otic and ‘O tick!*

 *An Ode’. Or some such clever trick:*

*Mite and Might.* Was that you who spoke? *Now we are talking over wine in his*

 *spacious rooms in Christ Church.*

5.

*The ‘O’ your Christian name begins*

 *With is itself a word, a whole*

 *World of vocatives, or the hole*

*You dug yourself with your own sins.*

*The first letter of your last name:*

 *Two ‘V’s as written, double ‘U’*

 *As said aloud: the double you,*

*The player of your double game.*

You mean through my two ‘I’s, I saw

 Two worlds? Clever!—*Yes, you saw ‘double’,*

 *Like foolish people who have trouble*

*Holding their liquor, till the law*

*Steps in.*—I carried round my own

 *Semblable, mon frère*… And you, sir,

 Must be my *hypocrite lecteur*.

Down to the marrow of the bone

You were a paederast, your chaste

 Exterior notwithstanding. In

 Your heart you longed to commit sin.

Then which of us, sir, is two-faced? *Have I ‘scored’ with that one? His face re-*

 *gisters no response but a faint Cheshire smile.*

*Now put the ‘O’ and ‘W’*

 *Together: the acronym, alas!*

 *Sounds like the cry one might make as*

*The sword of Justice runs one through. Yes, it hurts, being Oscar Wilde.*

*He* came among us with a sword,

 Lord Christ. And Christ, too, cried in pain

 Upon the Cross. And to our gain

Christ summed His Loss up in that Word:

*Tetelestai*. Not *I am defeated*,

 Ah, no: *Determined, dared, and done! Christopher Smart, ‘Psalm of David’.*

 For Christ the Artist looked down on —[Mr V]

His life as on a Poem completed.

 *More word games.*

6. *An Acrostic Ode*

*O woe is Oscar, in the snare of*

 *Sin vainly struggling, the law takes*

 *Charge of his body now, it aches*

*And breaks. Such sins one should beware of!*

*Ruin they spell; down from the high*

 *Wall Humpty Dumpty falls and shatters*

 *Into his pieces, all in tatters*

*Lies his good name. Farewell, good-bye,*

*Dame Luck, a stranger to him now.*

 *England won’t have him back again,*

 *Oscar, whose other name is Pain.*

*Wild woe to Oscar, Mr OW!*

7.

Ah, how ingenious you are,

 How mathematical! How caustic

 You mockery is, and how acrostic!

The letters brand me like a scar.

*‘Wilde’ is a word. What’s in a word?*

 *Words, words, words, words. A Wilde by any*

 *Other name would be one too many.*

Charles, you make me seem so absurd!

*Oscar, you are a man of words,*

 *Not of your word. Ah, we would not*

 *Expect so little of you. What*

*A waste of time, reducing surds!*

8. *Oscar, Man of Letters: a Hyper-Anagram*

*As Oscar rises, so Wilde crawls.*

 *Oscar is solid, Wilde is oil.*

 *Oscar is rose as Wilde is soil.*

*Oscar sees all, Wilde sees cell walls.*

*Oscar is cordial, Wilde is coarse.*

 *Social is Oscar, Wilde is low.*

 *Oscar or Wilde, sir? Owl or crow?*

*Oscar’s radical. Wilde’s a corse.*

*Oscar’s desire is Wilde’s disease.*

 *Oscar’s so candid. Where Wilde lies,*

 *Oscar swears lies are real. Wilde:* Dies

Irae*! Oscar we will release. Dodgson falls to the floor in a sort of fit.*

9.

You’re in a fugue state, my poor Charles.

 Seem I the Angel of Pain, who comes

 In migraine aura? Then do sums,

Fiddle with morals when it *quarrls*, *A portmanteau word: snarls and quarrels,*

 *with a glance at Quarles the emblem-poet.*

The jub-jub-gibbering Jabberwocky

 Of fit and headache and insomnia.

 *Mathematica* *vincit Omnia*.

Your poor pained head must feel so…*rocky*.

*It hurts, Oscar. Ah, not so widely*

 *As a barn-door: ‘twill serve, however.*

 Well, Charles, you know you’re awfully clever:

You’ll cope. *You didn’t mean that snidely,*

*I trust?* Never, Charles! For I quite

 Like you. *I, I like you as well,*

 *Oscar. (In case you couldn’t tell,*

*I have some Irish in me*.) *Light*

*Comes to me like an enemy*

 *At times, like arrows in my eyes.*

Then let them revel, let them rise

Like Saint Sebastian’s, to the sky!

***Dodgson and I***

 ***The Paradox***

*In Dodgson’s rooms in Christ Church College.* *He*

*has gone to bed. In my cups, I am talking to his chair.*

 \*

*This discourse is dedicated to the city I have visited only*

*in my dreams (but dreams are all that matter): Barcelona.*

1.

This is delightful, Chair. I’m having

 Such fun! *Care for some wine?* Immensely. *The chair has lost its burden*

 I love these word games so intensely! *but not forgotten its manners.*

(My face is in dire need of shaving.)

The Barber: is he in or out?

 The Barber: can he shave himself?

 The Barber is an evil elf,

Who, thinking logically, no doubt,

Slits the white throat of the Princess, *I’m thinking of Beardsley’s evil*

 The gold-haired child, tender and young *little ‘Ballad of a Barber’ here.*

 And sweet as any Schubert song.

How he admires his red finesse!

Does God shave Himself? Does God save

 Himself? He cast a string of pearls The String of Pearls, *title of*

Before us, or a head of curls *the penny- dreadful in which*

Golden and doomed, his Son, the brave *which Sweeney Todd first appeared.*



Scapegoat and Falsipar of God

 Who came among us to be shorn

 Of life to save us from the inborn

Depravity of Sweeney Todd.

*I do not care for such glib chatter*

 *On subjects theological,*

 *Oscar,* harrumphs the Chair. *You are full*

*Of nonsense*. Here is weightier matter:

2*. The Paradox*

What is all Literature if not

 Paradox writ large, on the boundaries

 Between ‘real’ systems, where the foundries

Of Los turn out new forms for thought?

Paradox moves chiastically:

 *Drink, the curse of the working classes*

 Meets *Work, curse of the drinking classes.*

Chiasmus paradoxically

Corrects the order it reverses,

 Perversely rights self-righteous wrong

 And defends rights that should belong

To those whom staid convention curses.

The order of words can change the order

 Of things, chosen strategically.

 Clichés and proverbs, juggled free

Of gravity, slip over a border.

‘As far as I can tell, I am’,

 Said Bernard Shaw, to my delight,

 ‘The only man who cannot write

An Oscar Wilde epigram

At will’. You see, the criticism

 That what I wrote were but inverted

 Truisms was so widely blurted

That it became a new truism.

‘Tis not just *how* words play the clown,

 But where and when and *whether* said,

 Not just cliché stood on its head,

A world shown to be upside-down.

The social world is made of proverbs,

 If not in form, in function. These

 Are satraps governing each a piece

Of power. ‘The proverbs and the no-verbs’ The Merry Wives of Windsor*, III, i.*

 —[Mr V]

Of priests, the diagnostic curse

 Or blessing doctors give, define

 And prescribe limits, draw a line,

Point a direction, and rehearse

The formulas of good and evil,

 Healthy and ill. And soul and body

 Are subjects of on-going study

By the police. It is not level,

The playing field of body and soul.

 Besides the tilt, there is the way

 It’s marked out, and who has the say

Regarding what is fair or foul.

The paradox, by flipping fair

 And foul and trading work for play,

 Points out things needn’t be that way.

It reinterprets what is *there*,

Disputes the rules and challenges

 The official version of the real.

 The world’s a stage, but to reveal

*How* it is staged—how staged it *is*,

Is to stir unrest on the border

 ‘Twixt word and world. My words did not

 Act, they *trans*acted, thought for thought,

Anarchic risk for ancient order.

3. *A Fable*

I’ll tell a fable, if I may:

 If in the midst of a tableau *Or human pyramids, such as acrobatic*

 (A god, say, hoisted from below *danseuses form to bring their numbers*

By many hands, and held that way *to a climactic finale, at the Empire…*

As if he stood at natural stature

 And stood, and always had stood, for

 Eternity), through a trap-door

A clown bursts out and cries, *Is that your*

*Best act?* *Bring on the dancing girls!*

 And to a fanfare the audience answers

 With cheers, out come the can-can dancers,

Doing their high-kicks and their twirls,

The structure that set up the god

 Will be upset, collapse disclose

 The composed nature of the pose.

To make the obvious look odd,

Question the naturalness of ‘nature’,

 The nature of what passes as

 The natural, is, and always was

Risky play for a social creature.

(The audience would believe the illusion,

 Identify its needs therewith,

 Wants earnest of the wildest myth,

Superstitious, prone to confusion.

How can that great good champion Don

 Quixote, at the puppet show,

 Himself the tallest puppet, know

Those figures his eye fixes on

Are not real things of pleasure and pain,

 The work of cunning sorcerers?

 Artists, why bother to rehearse

A rite good Christians will profane?)

4.

Hermagoras, discussing ‘stances’—

 Four basic legal arguments—

 Names the fourth species of defence

The ‘metaleptic’. (He instances

Seeking a change of venue.) Here

 The strategy is to deny

 That the court has the right to try

The case at all. My Dear, the seer

Or visionary takes the same

 Position *vis à vis* the order

 Of things. Who is to be the lorder-

Over of rules, who gets to name

Things and define their qualities?

 *It is a question of who is master*,

 Says Humpty Dumpty—though disaster

Exposes the fragilities

In *his* assumptions. Dear Chair, all

 Such brittle stances are precarious.

 The children find it quite hilarious
When this good egg has a great fall.

Yes, when poor Humpty Dumpty slips,

 Falls from the wall, all the sublime

 Harlequins, all the Pantomime

Horses of the Apocalypse

Can’t put him back together, at most

 An educated guess, deduction,

 Or philologian’s reconstruction

They make of Self for-ever lost.

And he had such a dainty leg!

 His crash is a Creation Myth,

 Gnostic, and catastrophic, with

A dash of the old Orphic Egg.

Eros is born therefrom, according

 To some. *That* god creates the rest,

 Is Master. The poor Egg is best

Reassembled in *his* re-wording.

Good Mr Dumpty, may I call

 You Humpty? You’re a fine philosopher,

 But goddess Language, with a toss of her

Gold tresses, knocks you from that wall.

5. *Seno* and *Rauxa*

Ah, one *must* ask precisely those

 Things that seem to go without saying

 To say where they are going. Playing

This game, as one like me well knows,

Can make you famous or, if not

 Famous, notorious, and not only

 Notorious: exiled, poor and lonely.

Ah well, Chair. As good as I got,

Almost, I gave, perhaps even better,

 In the long run. But, ah, it is

 A *very* long run! For the kiss

Of Judas and the branded letter

That is the curse of that uplifted

 And stiltedly constructed God

 Is Cain’s mark, and I cross a broad

Desert, and pay for being gifted

With the strange gift of taking nothing

 For granted and assuming play

 Is free in a most serious way.

But like the wave that falls to frothing

The moment it attains its crest,

 The sacred house of cards will fall,

 And there will be a free-for-all

When the spell and the fell arrest

Of the divine tableau is broken

 And motion shatters like a burst

 Of laughter both the too-rehearsed

Composure of all those unspoken

Assumptions *and* the god-persona.

 What an ecstatic spill they take,

 Those human pyramids they make

For *rauxa*’s sake in Barcelona!

 *Dodgson re-enters, unable to sleep, with* *a terrible migraine. He sits down, groaning.*

 *The Chair is just a chair again, my Dears*.

6.

A ladder upside-down is still

 A ladder. Laid out flat, it can

 Be made into a bridge, and span

A rift. Perhaps one day it will.

\*

My *Earnest* and your Alice: quite

 The pair! *Well, nonsense is the soul*

 *Of sense*. Yes it is, on the whole.

Perhaps it’s time to say good-night?

