

1.

Dearest daughters, Jane and Sarah,
You'll read this only when I'm dead.
I'll leave it with my cheerful lawyer
who, with her very well-trained head,

has seen how things might be arranged
when I am truly 'done and dusted',
about what goes to whom and who
might, at the end, be truly trusted.

She's got the clauses all drawn up
in fairness to you both, I'm sure;
she had me there in knots for hours
on who got less and who got more,

on what might just survive a challenge
and what would best defy a judge
who thought my will too mean by half
and just the product of a grudge.

You will have seen the will by now,
resolved your curiosity;
and seen how providence ensures
a certain reciprocity.

I won't go into niceties;
the story's there in black and white;
checked thoroughly (at no small cost)
to see that, legally, it's tight,

Of course, the two of you, I know,
have several times declared you're sorry
for how you carried on while I
was 'sleeping', as you say, with Lawrie

eleven years ago this autumn
and then through Europe in the spring,
that sweet cadenza to his life,
a duet only love can sing —

and, yes, OK, you've eased off when
I neared the age that he was then —
eighty-one and less than mobile,
an age at which you wonder when

and how, precisely, fate will strike.
Cancer? Broken hip? The heart?
In dodging one you find another;
that's the most frustrating part.

Of course, in my case, it's the hips
that finally have let me down
and dropped me off here — minus car —
though not yet in my dressing gown.

Enough of that! The jury's out;
we don't know what the verdict brings.
The subtle powers of entropy
are generous with their offerings.

Are you sitting down and ready?
What purpose can this serve? you think.
Of course, you are annoyed and if
it's after three you'll need a drink.

'But why,' I hear you start to ask,
'do you insist on using rhyme?
Isn't that a sad, old-fashioned
relic of another time,

an age we barely touched in school,
some guys, I think, called Pope and Swift,
the age before the age when moderns
cut such chiming well adrift?

Don't forget you're getting old
and in an "aged facility".
Wouldn't prose be better suited
to your new docility?'

Docile? Maybe, darling Sarah,
and no less so my sweetest Jane,
but I've discovered that small rhymes
can do big wonders for the brain.

You do recall that class I took,
Bring Back Scansion! Bring Back Rhyme!?
A very pleasant man, he was,
not long after Lawrie's time.

He'd followed Whitman when quite young
but as his books rolled out he found
that free verse wafted off a little;
rhyme stayed closer to the ground.

Two years after Lawrie died,
that freeze-frame of the heart and trees,
I found myself recovering,
day by day in small degrees.

We'd known all through it would be brief;
that fate, not you, would make it so.
Head-on elm with autumn leaves
is quite the clever way to go.

Even now I see them falling,
yellow through the shattered glass
and Lawrie at the wheel beside me,
dead, but exiting with class.

Not for him the happy humdrum;
nor the steady diminutions
in a wheelchair down the lino,
the slow farewell of institutions.

I tried back then without success
to seal that moment in a poem.
I thought to run it past the tutor
but, in the end, I didn't show him.

There was another, set in Venice,
that wonder tourists can't quite spoil;
Lawrie, me, the vaporetto;
I couldn't bring it to the boil,

to catch the feeling there between us,
up and down the Grand Canal;
the rocking of the gondolas
kept on turning out banal.

The four-stress or the five-stress line
couldn't quite get Lawrie right;
nor do much to shift the grief
that lay beside me every night.

It took three years and nothing less
to settle all that in the past
and see, no disrespect to Ted,
that Lawrie was my first and last.

All of us have poems somewhere;
often in some deeper place.
For years I taught Geography.
It, and Ted's straightforward face,

held me from my "inner self",
fending off all rhapsodies —
as you'd remember, Sarah, with
my little grandsons round your knees.

Anyway, this tutor wore
a gentle, slow, ironic smile
despite the strength of his convictions
on matters of poetic style.

Buoyed by my sweet year with Lawrie,
I could perhaps have made a tilt ...
since Lawrie kindly freed me from
all notions of pre-emptive guilt.

The sins we really have to wear,
those little meannesses of mind,
are not so much between the sheets;
that's bedding we can leave behind.

But Sam, the tutor, was attached
to someone younger by ten years,
He'd found his Shirley Dunne already.
One learns how not to bring on tears.

He did, however, teach me how
to master my tetrameters,
avoiding, with more stringent pen,
the doggerel of amateurs.

A few old friends had joined the class
as if to show I'd been forgiven
for 'all that silliness with Lawrie'.
They liked to show me how they'd striven

to overcome their consciences,
their friends' collective disapproval,
to show that each of them was not
the first to call for my removal.

Envy is a simple thing
in both the spirit and the letter.
Their decency did not, however,
make their verses any better.

They'd been good friends and some remain so.
Sadly though, their feel for metre
was not among their stronger points,
Mildred, Ivy, Pearl and Rita.

Their sentiments were always suspect.
Everything was cute and cuter —
Sunsets, nature, long-lost dogs,
few of which impressed our tutor.

But, dear daughters, I digress.
It happens in a place like this,
talking in non sequiturs
and one step short of the abyss.

And you, dear Jane, I know have seen
the strategies they use in here
to settle our collective nerves
as each confronts that final fear.

The music that they sometimes bring —
“Danny Boy” plus Irish blarney —
is not baroque; nor neither quite
the liquid silk of Mantovani;

a difference that I had with Lawrie.
For him, the heaven-bound baroque;
for me, sweet strings of Hollywood
(which he always considered schlock).

These quatrains I am writing here
are far from an apology
for what you’ve heard my lawyer say.
You’ll find there’s no theology

that might convincingly explain
the document that you’ve just read,
New Testament, or Old one either.
Nothing Jesus did or said

could quite convey the way I think.
Your father cannot take the blame;
nor I, for how you both turned out.
It would have happened all the same.

Aspiration, aspiration,
the upward, ever upward trend,
the pleasures of a new Mercedes
sweeping sweetly through a bend,

the smile with which to quickly say
'Of course, my boys both go Grammar',
the joy a new apartment brings
delivered by an agent's hammer.

I know, dear Sarah and dear Jane,
you've long foreseen me on a gurney,
heading off for one last 'op',
the brilliant power of your attorney

ensuring that whatever happened
my small flat came to you to share
without, you hoped, too much unseemly
tearing of each other's hair

since that's the way with avarice;
not just the lawyer's lively pounce,
but how, no matter what the sum,
possession is what really counts.

My lovely flat (OK, "apartment"),
its eighty-three square metres neat,
two bedrooms and a single bathroom,
is not a sign of your defeat

but somewhere I was well contented,
somewhere fine, in time, to die,
waiting for an ambulance
and quite determined not to cry,

a flat that I was forced to sell
six months ago to raise the bond
to check myself in here, a place
of which you know I'm far from fond.

I know, of course, you would have helped.
I've had your sort of help before
but this way I'd be always sure
it was my own foot in the door.

You've seen it now — a motel room —
though good enough for what I need,
a place to keep my head in trim
or seriously go to seed ...

but not before I have, I hope,
seen more of my young Giles and Jack
who, back when I discovered Lawrie,
showed what you two seemed to lack,

an openness, a sense of humour,
a will to take things as they came,
not a deep censoriousness
or shiver at some small ill-fame.

I've kept in touch with them by email
off and on these past few years;
They've got their own lives now, of course;
our contact's slightly in arrears.

They got me started with a mobile
(not quite the Generation Next);
we swap an SMS or two;
I don't yet do predictive text.

Last month I tracked them down in Carlton
and flew them up by Tiger Air.
They're not quite what you wished for, Sarah,
but neither ought you to despair.