









*The Abelard Poets*

**IN THE GLASS  
OF WINTER**



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DAVID JAFFIN

With an Introduction by Edward Lucie-Smith

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*For my parents*

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## Introduction

It is a matter for concern, as well as for curiosity, that the struggle to be modern has had, in the English language at least, such an intermittent success. Much consciously 'modernist' poetry written in English is forced and pretentious; but work which shuns experiment is often pretentious and boring. Things are different abroad. In France, the ethos of the Modern Movement permeates contemporary poetry as much as it does painting and sculpture, and developments in poetry have been inseparably linked with those which have taken place in the visual arts. Expressionist painting in Germany ran parallel with the development of Expressionism in literature, and especially in poetry; and the modernist development which Hitler checked has been taken up again with renewed vigour in the years since 1945, as we can see in the works of poets otherwise as different from one another as Enzensberger and Celan. In the literature of Spain and of the Spanish-speaking Americas the vitality of the poets—they range from the vigour of Neruda to the severity of Nicanor Parra—has perhaps surpassed that of the visual artists produced by the same group of cultures.

It will take many writers, not just one writer, to remedy this situation where English is concerned, but David Jaffin is certainly one of the few who seem to be aware of the problem. His poems are brief, and at a first reading look very simple. It is only as we re-read them that we realize how subtly he handles his linguistic material. Many of his most characteristic effects come from small but nevertheless vitally important displacements of words—from their usual function or their usual context. Here are some examples, chosen almost at random: 'Memory *lights* the scent/of lilac'—'When winter comes/  
We take a book *to ourselves*/From those long *covered* shelves/of silence'—'You touched/  
Your fingers *placed silence/in place*'.

This sensitivity to the weight and meanings of words, and the way in which the meaning can be

altered by a number of different factors: context, grammatical function, position in the line, the overall rhythm of the poem—here is something which makes it clear that David Jaffin has nothing to do with ‘academic poetry’ of a conventionally skilful kind.

One reason why we read poems is because they refresh the language, because they bring words alive, and rub off the tarnish which accumulates in daily usage. This cleansing function is one of the most important the poet can exercise, though it is not necessarily the one which will make his work immediately popular. David Jaffin’s characteristic spareness and economy make the reader particularly keenly aware of his concern for good language, which means fresh and immediate language. He deserves to be read because he improves and extends the instrument he uses.

Edward Lucie-Smith

[I]        PREFACE

The tentative light of the  
    winter dawn,  
Its cold truth I break with  
    this song;

Incomplete I left the  
    flower  
Before my lips could form  
    its presence.

GREEN SCARF

I am of the winter of  
    your eyes:

The mist  
    (the flower cold)

You circling on that  
    field,

Your green scarf  
    (this circled sun),

The sorrow of our love;

Why among the clouds so  
    shaped and solemn,

Memory lights the scent  
    of lilac?

## WHEN WINTER COMES

When winter comes  
We close the windows behind us,  
Seal off that last bit of cold  
    from within us  
And consider the warmth inside.

We are rooms then,  
With emptied spaces and shutters  
    without,  
Perfectly planned we stand to  
Within the centre of ourselves  
And turn that switch between  
    light and darkness.

When winter comes  
We take a book to ourselves  
From those long covered shelves  
    of silence  
And feel out the pages  
    of sound  
To our stretched out thoughts  
    recede,

Touch to each a quickened vein  
At a fire of our own  
    asking:  
Wine, and the wintered  
    winds without.

## GETTING OLD

You were getting old they  
told me,  
The fires gone from your face,  
Burned to the coolness of  
diminished flame,  
The heat in being constant,  
Coals that kept their purpose  
still;

You were getting old they  
told me,  
Hands less quick to grasp  
But slow to yield  
As if touch could replace that  
Active thought of yours—

And yes,  
They told me you sat by the  
fire now,  
Days on end, not thinking  
At all but watching those flames  
Diminish to their final  
glow.

## UPON A STILL GLASS

Ask in silence me,  
The words have whispered  
found

as breath upon a  
still glass

then cease to be.

## AT EASE

And that afternoon  
We sat at ease, I had waited  
Long for your coming,  
With hat in hand  
And the winds had blown  
Whatever thoughts I had,  
    away,  
Before you came and we took  
A loaf of bread between  
    us,  
Sliced it to the last frag-  
    ments of sun

And it was like looking  
    in,  
You talked and it was  
Like looking in a door we'd  
Already closed behind  
And all those seats were  
    filled before,  
The faces wanted to be  
    away

But you brought them nearer,  
Constantly nearer—  
Was it your hands,  
The quiet intonation of your  
    voice?

And they sat  
And we sat looking at the  
    same thing,  
At a word we'd focused on,  
And the candle on the table  
Standing at the middle  
Blew repeatedly upon its  
    own flame.



## THAT AFTERNOON IN SALZBURG

I sit in the afternoon.  
It could be a garden  
    here  
And the fountains would be on  
Turning their clear light  
As people pass  
Between rows of gardened grass

I sit where I am,  
Time and place are all the  
Same in this ordered  
    scene  
I sit and think  
Or I come and go between  
These rows of conscious  
    sounds

Nothing takes place.  
People pass, the fountains are  
Lit, on, flowers open out  
Their face to that all consuming  
    sun

But the shadows are gathering  
    sounds  
The still's become cold  
And I've grown conscious of  
These stones I'm looking at  
And sitting on  
The sun sinks, its tendered  
Light, a wind without a mark  
Quicker now, each time the  
Shadows break, people pass as  
Birds take flight  
                    fainter still  
    from here.

## WITH A CHANGE IN THE WINDS

Sadness came in the night  
With a change in the winds  
It left snow,  
It left a face of clearness,  
It deceived for its own sake.

And in the morning  
When we heard the men working  
Between the hills,  
Sounds that echoed out  
And birds that circled there  
Self enclosed in shadow

Where the winds crossed as  
waves of sound

Sadness came that night  
And we felt it between ourselves,  
Distances there that were  
Covered over too and deceptively  
clear.

## AT NIGHT BY THE FIRE

It is better not to say.  
Quietness at least conceals.  
It can be touched to  
The cloth work turn of  
    your hands  
At night by the fire  
When your face was a pause  
    in the shadows  
And flames sparkled their  
    thirst  
We remained to the corners of  
That room we called familiar  
    once  
Concealing ourselves there  
From the winds that told  
    without  
And the flames that burned  
    their cause away.

## THAT ROOM

There must be quiet  
And there must be beauty,  
Whichever way the world  
    goes  
Here it stays still,  
Here it is brought to and  
Here it shall find

As a chair in an empty  
    room,  
Hardly noticed at first  
Concealing space where  
You sat, you as you  
And drawn to within the  
Qualities of yourself.

Let us close that door now  
To silence and to beauty  
And to rest, and let us  
Listen in that calmed  
    stillness  
To the voice of our own  
    concealed voice.

I

The sun is broken,  
Its face of glass reflected the  
image I—

Not the I of myself,  
But the glass, the image  
reflected.

Fear is of two wings  
(flight but shadow)  
That distils this silence, the  
  
awkward pain—

Fear that these eyes would  
meet themselves

that dream was but fancy,  
of cloth woven

that when I touched your  
hand

It was only the wind,  
and i.

## DYING

It was that room again,  
The same and ever present and walked  
into

As the sea with its life like  
Sounds that could have been drawn even  
closer once

He stirred, the light  
Changed and his eyes were half  
expectant

As she came in his mind  
Down those corridors of  
sound

And he thought of summer then,  
The stillness of being loved,  
The counting out of things  
together, and after

(that light changed)

Not at a moment to be taken  
in hand  
Or with a switch

He lay in shadow  
Conscious of those sheets that  
couldn't cool

About him night closed it  
self round,  
The ringing out of stars  
And that bright, apparent  
moon

It was that room again,  
The same and ever present and  
walked into  
He prepared, he neared his  
own parting.

## CLOSED BEHIND

And when we went a bit further  
The fence closed behind.  
It swang, the way Robert Frost  
Wrote of birch swingers,  
But it closed. It wasn't our choice.  
We didn't even think of it then,  
Not till later, the sun had  
Climbed over the hill before us  
And winter was at its brightest  
Despite those shifting shades and  
The pastel sky that added a  
Tone of lightness to our step  
As we passed through the powdered  
Snow and noticed row upon row  
How that fence had widened itself out  
Until we were closed within

And when we went a bit further  
We came to a wood.  
It was light at first,  
Combs of birch stood at the sides  
But before we realized where we  
Were it had darkened,  
The trees became higher, the  
Snow deeper, the world  
Darker, and we couldn't think, not  
Even then, of turning back,  
We kept going on and on  
Deeper and deeper into that closing  
Darkness until at once  
I lit a flame to my fingers to  
Take that cold away  
And when I looked you weren't  
There and I turned round to where  
We'd been before, but  
Our steps had blown away.

## IN LIGHT

You were alone in a room.  
The light lit you  
It fell where you were  
And folded your hands  
together  
Creating a moment

You touched  
Your fingers placed silence  
in place  
Rethinking sounds  
Recollecting thoughts

You closed that door  
quietly, behind  
Went out, into the  
sun

Your dress creased  
Your mind absorbed light  
Your fingers ceased to  
think  
For themselves

As you stepped quickly in-  
stead  
Aside from what you  
thought

And were gone in a  
Moment of shadow and  
shade.



## LATE HARVEST

The last fruit is almost in,  
The fields will be stubble  
    and stone  
And what we've forgotten to take,  
    dried,

The trees will loose their leaves  
As you did for me once,  
    your hair,  
And that sun will turn cold,  
    to touch.

Let us walk now,  
Let us take hands, for we are  
    less than this.

## AT THE GATE

Here, waiting at the gate  
The sun slipped quickly through  
    my hands  
As the scales of a fish  
Left shining in light

Steel touched I stood  
Where the sky had ceased to  
    move in me  
Its clustered sounds of  
    snow  
The stroking of the winds

Trees stepped, footwise  
    higher  
For the leaves to turn  
Their stillness

    out

And the gate,  
Prefigured, cold watching  
    night.

## ENCOUNTERED

That day  
Cold and clear as a conscious  
flame

I feared as I fear myself now,  
Not knowing how it came to  
this,

Cold and clear  
As light that wants itself, a  
Brightness without cause you  
came,

Eyes wanton flame,  
Nearer to my own than this  
That flesh I called  
myself,

Marbled/spoken stone see-  
ing presence there.

## 19 DAYS

For 19 days  
We didn't see the sun

It disappeared over  
night we grew closer

to ourselves  
in the cold mist

followed our steps  
from behind

listening to sound  
the touched-presence of

stone

What we couldn't see  
we felt, even

if the cold numbed  
our hands we went

without hats  
that space could be heard

We kept close together  
breathing the warmed air

We wanted rooms to be  
lit when we came,

identified their space

We stood before mir-  
rors hours at

a time looking at  
our eyes those 19 days

without sun.

## LADDER

That ladder  
led its way from  
place to place

of former chance,  
traced the  
cause (barely con-

strued) deci-  
phered then,

hands held fast  
feet secure

One wanted more  
scope toward

the top it  
came, that lad-

der led the  
same way down.

## CITIES

This time we had to pass  
walls we couldn't climb

They were preconceived  
as an eye that closes  
with a switch

They stared through  
fountains, hollowed  
stillness as a woman

petitions coldness with  
the touch of a na-  
ked hand

Night descended still  
without stars

the moon a foil  
to itself.

## NEARING SPRING

A man's picture  
Taken in the papers, worn  
with the print,

A pipe leaning beside  
on a tray  
Pursuing its own aimless  
way in that emptied  
room

No one sits there,  
A radio could be on  
The curtains could be hung  
to appear bright

Perhaps a cat's  
Creeping along the roof,  
Keeping its paws close  
to its own sounds

And perhaps the rain's been  
turned on  
And there's a vacancy of  
light,  
A dullness of grass

Nearing spring  
I could read it from your  
face,  
What's been worn and  
Where the print's  
coming loose.

## ON HIS ILLNESS

He felt the leaves  
    run dry,  
In the blue sunlight

He was cold to thought,  
The abstractions of  
    time

He asked if the flower  
    could bleed its

    scent away.

## AQUARIUM

They've never thought that way,  
Light means nothing to them  
only the borders of sound,  
The cold rimmed glass

As they run  
That flash of steel their  
    prismic thoughts  
Closed in to the sun of their own  
    unconscious selves

Those scales, that  
Light means nothing to them  
only the borders of sound,  
The cold rimmed glass.



## STEPS IN SNOW

There were steps there  
That led across the snow, clearly,  
From this house to the road.

I remember how they looked at first,  
The impression that they made of  
Distinctness, freshness

That I could almost feel the  
Boots meet that crush of snow and  
The clear impressions they

Left, after. And  
Then it froze, winter sank to  
Its deepest point and

Those steps hardened then,  
Without person, intombed in a  
Certain stillness as the

Mark of a previous age.  
And now it's melting, that path  
Itself is thawing and it

No longer meets the road,  
And it doesn't quite start from  
The house, and at times  
Between it can't really find  
Its own way out.

## IN THE GLASS OF WINTER

He had never heard himself.

Everything has sound he  
thought, the trees

need wind the clouds  
snow but they can be

heard.

When he was 8  
he saw himself once

in a mirror  
imagined his death

Eyes can't see them-  
selves without glass

He knew he'd put this  
edge to himself

It took 4 years  
before he began to listen

usually in the rain

if he heard hard enough  
and saw shadows

He thought he'd felt  
himself

but once a bird passed  
and he knew he was

gone

Or if he listened  
long enough

there was only rain

But now  
at 36 he's stopped

listening

he's put the shades  
where he wants

but at night  
every once in a while

He looks at the moon  
touches the dark

and's afraid.

## AGING

The day closed as a curtain  
folded at either end

certain to meet at the  
middle—

Winds waste away  
out there

You found the light and  
combed your hair,

pursued thoughts that  
weren't there;

Time recedes, as  
touch

You felt very much  
that way

(without feeling at all)

Except the bright of  
day

closed as a curtain  
folded at either

end.

## MISCONCEIVED

As we sat by the fire,  
Preserved the winter's flame

I touched your hand  
observed the same

Forgot precisely the ad-  
equate name for such

feelings;

Presumed the presence of  
flowers

assumed it was May,  
But you, my dear

exclaimed  
That's a long time

away.

## ESTABLISHED

Can you imagine her now  
With children steeped from head to  
toe  
In a flowing gown and  
All that regalia of justice,

She who spat upon her mother's knee,  
Who taught her masters oft  
A lesson or two,  
Extended her tongue (when she was  
still quite young) between  
The upper teeth and the garlicked  
Dungeons of her lower mouth?

Can you imagine her now  
Treading the church with a drawn down  
brow  
And all the appearance of a somewhat  
contemplation  
When she used to kick between the chairs  
And mimic the worthy airs of an  
elder generation?

Can you think of her as stately  
And fine, jewelled and gowned  
In the prismic order of  
the present?

## ALL BEFORE

She had danced it all before.  
Swung softly to the  
    right  
Hips swayed, asked casually  
If you liked the featured  
    parts,  
The prettied portions of her  
Face appearing on the  
    family page

At length she crossed  
    her legs,  
Adjusted the smile  
Paused awhile raising that  
    glass  
To those turned up  
lips flittered away among  
    the guests.

BALLROOM SCENE (AFTER  
FRANCESCO DE GUARDI)

The world's turned cold,  
Naked for the mind  
And the eye to be-

hold its solitary light

As truth once told,  
disenchanted;

Touch defined,  
Crystalled light the  
Mind as glass

To its cause, insuf-  
ficiently.



## BRIDGE

The winds are sharp,  
The waters cut with a  
blade

The sky should be steel  
blue

Whatever I touch shines  
cold in my hands

Thoughts edged in glass  
The mirrored frame of  
fear

This cold glistens its  
Sound and the waves are moved  
by swans

Tucked in their wings  
As persons closed in the folds of  
their coats

A bridge crosses the water  
from either side  
Steps that can't be heard

We've told to ourselves  
And don't lead as sounds,  
to.

ON A WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON

Somewhere he's sitting and thinking  
himself out

on a park bench

beneath barren trees  
and self accustomed stones

on a Wednesday afternoon.

He hears the sounds of his  
own thoughts

He's listening closely.

Shadows blow in the wind  
quickly

His hand touches wood.

He's trying to stand  
now

Children jump squares be-  
side him

A fountain should be on  
but isn't

He turns now and's going  
home.

## VACANCIES OF SOUND

This room is dying in  
    my heat  
The sun draws its flames  
    from me

Flowers stain  
that I cut with my bare  
    hands

in the window's light

As a fire rubbed to the  
quick of its own

    thirst

The colours run  
Into pools of stagnant  
    streams

I close the windows for my  
eyes to look out of

    nothing within  
except the vacancies of  
    sound

The city held from its  
breath as a wind with  
    out touch

I sleep the final sleep  
    of death.









