

## *The Old Fools*

What do they think has happened, the old fools,  
To make them like this? Do they somehow suppose  
It's more grown-up when your mouth hangs open and drools,  
And you keep on pissing yourself, and can't remember  
Who called this morning? Or that, if they only chose,  
They could alter things back to when they danced all night,  
Or went to their wedding, or sloped arms some September?  
Or do they fancy there's really been no change,  
And they've always behaved as if they were crippled or tight,  
Or sat through days of thin continuous dreaming  
Watching light move? If they don't (and they can't), it's strange:  
    Why aren't they screaming?

At death, you break up: the bits that were you  
Start speeding away from each other for ever  
With no one to see. It's only oblivion, true:  
We had it before, but then it was going to end,  
And was all the time merging with a unique endeavour  
To bring to bloom the million-petalled flower  
Of being here. Next time you can't pretend  
There'll be anything else. And these are the first signs:  
Not knowing how, not hearing who, the power  
Of choosing gone. Their looks show that they're for it:  
Ash hair, toad hands, prune face dried into lines—  
    How can they ignore it?

Perhaps being old is having lighted rooms  
Inside your head, and people in them, acting.

People you know, yet can't quite name; each looms  
Like a deep loss restored, from known doors turning,  
Setting down a lamp, smiling from a stair, extracting  
A known book from the shelves; or sometimes only  
The rooms themselves, chairs and a fire burning,  
The blown bush at the window, or the sun's  
Faint friendliness on the wall some lonely  
Rain-ceased midsummer evening. That is where they live:  
Not here and now, but where all happened once.

    This is why they give

An air of baffled absence, trying to be there  
Yet being here. For the rooms grow farther, leaving  
Incompetent cold, the constant wear and tear  
Of taken breath, and them crouching below  
Extinction's alp, the old fools, never perceiving  
How near it is. This must be what keeps them quiet:  
The peak that stays in view wherever we go  
For them is rising ground. Can they never tell  
What is dragging them back, and how it will end? Not at night?  
Not when the strangers come? Never, throughout  
The whole hideous inverted childhood? Well,

    We shall find out.