

George Barker

In Memory of David Archer

To lift a hand
to those who have gone before us
those friends and
oddfellows to whom
only death can restore us
(I have heard
as in day dreams
them calling sometimes for us
out of a silence that seems
like a dead chorus)
to lift a hand in farewell
for them at the black bell
neither you David nor I
found this a hard thing to do—
for they, most of them, died
in a sort of twisted pride
or as they lifted up
the whisky in the cup
or turning a handsome head
in honour among the dead
so that, with the wave
of a hand toward the grave
you and I, as they went
down out of the present,
could seem to call:
“Stand up and speak well
in the empty hall
of heaven or empty hell
for us all.”
But, David, I am at
such a loss, such a loss
that I cannot, I can not
lift a hand or a word
as you descend
the under ground
and one way stair
to that dead end
where
the friend is found.
Are you there
now? Dear friend
it does not matter where
you are for better or
worse where you are
there can be there
no more of the withering
belief (O withering arm
and withering leaf!)
or the withering Upas tree
of life,
no more ever again

of that pain.
The decent dirt
David unlike the lovers
will not desert you nor
the grave stone hurt
you but with love convert
you into stone, into
the dust and earth
of which both life and death
know the worth.
The dark streets at night
echoing our tread
seem for a moment bright
with what we said
and what we might
even have done, but the light
and dream of those times
is gone
and it was not done.
The familiar vision faded
and is forgotten in
our failure, so degraded
that ideal by
our delusion, so humiliated
we by what we knew
was both foregone and fated,
that in the end
what you saw, my friend,
was that life itself
was the vision
that you hated.
All the gifts of red
roses and blank
cheques and bed
fellows grew rank
and went bad
and you and they
sank down in the grey
ends of a day
that stank as it died
in the guttering
palace. I think
that all you leave
behind you in the evening
is a darkened room
empty save for old
newspapers and cigarette ends
and in the gloom
the enormous gold
urn of your heart
in which lie the ashes of your friends.

Donald Davie

His Themes

His themes? Ah yes he had themes.
It was what we all liked about him.
Especially I liked it.
One knew, nearly always one knew
what he was talking about, and he talked
in such a ringing voice.

*What did he talk about? What,
just what, were his themes?
Oh, of the most important!*

Loss was one of his themes;
he told us, as any bard should,
the story of our people
(tribe), he had memorised
chronologies, genealogies,
the names and deeds of heroes,
the succession of our kings,
our priests, the sept of our pipers,
the mediations . . . and this
while, young and old,
we extolled the immediate, meaning
the unremembering. *Yes,
and what was his theme? His theme, you said, was . . . ?*
Loss. Loss was his theme.

And duty. He taught us our duty;
he taught us, as any
legislator should,
the rules of hygiene, the clean
and the unclean meats, the times and
the means of fumigation,
of strewing and spreading, of fires,
and what to do with the old
and how to dispose of the dead
and how to live with our losses
uncomplaining . . . and this
while, young and old,
we did our best to be free,
meaning unruly. *Yes,
and what was his theme? What did you say his theme was?*
Duty. His theme was duty.

Fear also. Fear was a theme;
he taught us, as all seers must,
continual apprehension:
of one another, of
our womenfolk and our
male children, of
the next clan over the mountains
and of the mountains, also