Poetry Series

Wild Bill Balding

- poems -

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Wild Bill Balding (12 June 1961)

Of Welsh descent, Bill Thomas is currently a teacher of Religious Studies, History & Astronomy at Tewkesbury School in Gloucestershire, UK. As well as writing & performing poetry, in his spare time he takes pictures of postboxes & plays Subbuteo (flick-to-kick table soccer) . He is married, with two stepchildren & a permanent puzzled expression while trying to look for things that were there just a moment ago.

Works:

Bill's hymns appear on Stainer & Bell's 'HymnQuest' CD-ROM (available from S&B) & occasionally in their journal 'Worship Live'. His poems have appeared in several journals, but The Book is yet to happen. He is a member of Ledbury's Homend Poets, & performs regularly at events in the South-West & South Wales. Some of these poems appear on www.woodenheadarts.com, Chris Hall's website of artists & poets from South Wales & the Marches, which is well worth a look.

6943

(On seeing Umberto Boccioni's 1911 painting 'States of Mind-The Farewells')

Couples kiss in khaki shadows,
cascading into carriages' cavernous mouths.
A ribbon of fire is laid on the platform
as the train rolls ominously through,
a juggernaut of lamps and numbers,
panting a fog to embrace and envelop
those who thought they were spectators.
Telegraph wires, above it all,
pass the train from section to section,
oblivious to the shadows' final destination,
though the fire, fog and frenzy
hint at the hell to come.

Wild Bill Balding

Butterfly child

hormonal soup
pulsing, congealing;
chrysalis carapace
throbbing, cracking;
unknown muscles
struggling, jerking
through paper jaws...
exhausted, immobile,
transformed, transfigured -
let me dry my wings.

Wild Bill Balding

Contrasts in snowfall

Montreal chic

sixpoint star nestling
in long red hair at bus stop:
nature sends a kiss.

Basildon skinhead

ragged whitish clump
plummetting down like bird shit,
putting the boot in.

Wild Bill Balding

Damn the fence!

My spirit paces like a captive bear,
set limits by a fence of tempered steel,
that with its shadows marks its deadening seal
on concrete ground that passes for my lair.

You are the sun that shines between the bars,
that fills the unknown sky above my head,
whose dawn of hope brings life where I was dead,
whose radiant warmth can soothe and heal my scars.

The day will come when we will both be free,
I from my pound and you from bonds of pain,
and there will be no bars, no barren place;

I in your light and you in my embrace
shall know the fullness of love’s ecstasy.
But now I turn and pace my cage again.

Wild Bill Balding

Dinas Dinlle

The tide comes higher, smoothing out the shore.
It crumbles shell-capped fortresses with ease;
the past day's footprints, scrawled obscenities
and lovers' names are lost for evermore.

What offerings it leaves as it retreats -
old oil drums, long-dead creatures, skeins of weed:
playthings for seagulls and that lonely breed
who pick and sift the shore for hidden treats.

Your driving waves caress away despair,
reduce the castles where I try to hide,
removing scars of half-remembered pains.

Together we examine what lies bare,
discard the dross and cherish what remains -
you are my lover, counsellor, and tide.

Wild Bill Balding

Domesticated Appliance

The fridge sits purring happily
in the corner of my kitchen,
well-behaved, domesticated,
house-trained even.
Once a week I give it milk and food
and clean the mouldy stuff
from its bottom box.
Open the door, a lightbulb comes on
as if a cartoon character is thinking...

all night long the fridge is dreaming
vague folk-memories
of its ancestors roaming wild
on the plains of the Serengeti -
roaring, not purring,
fridges to be feared -
or their temperate Northern cousins,
lurking in pine woods,
putting the wind up the Picts
like a large white oblong yeti.

Perhaps these days are not yet over.
There must be some still in the wild:
I saw one on Tuesday morning,
lying on its back in the wide grass verge
on the Ludlow bypass,
a roadkill fridge to add to the countless
badgers, foxes, cats and rabbits
littering that highway of death.

From where I read, if I stretch a bit,
I can see my fridge, sitting thinking.
How long will it be satisfied
with just a pint a week
and the odd tray of sausages?
Will it one day pull me in,
a giant Venus fly-trap,
and purr no more, but belch and roar
as, smashing through the veneer
of generations of fridges
tamed, dulled, zombified,
my fridge responds with all its pump
to the call of the wild?

I sit and watch it, stretching a bit.
It sits in the corner, quietly dreaming,
contented,
for now.

Wild Bill Balding

Edward Bear addresses the new toys on Christmas night

This is the best advice you're going to get.
I hope you have a long and happy stay.
Just hug above the waist: that nappy's wet.

The nursery will seem quite strange, I'll bet.
The kid's all right. Be gentle when you play.
This is the best advice you're going to get.

Her dribble wipes off plastic bits no sweat,
so, Tiger, watch it; Dolly, you're OK.
Just hug above the waist: that nappy's wet.

Now, watch out for that friendly family pet.
When it's on heat you'll know, so keep away.
This is the best advice you're going to get.

The kid's not slept with either of you yet.
It's not too bad. Remember what I say -
just hug above the waist: that nappy's wet.

Last word from me - don't get her mum upset,
or you'll be in the Oxfam shop next day.
This is the best advice you're going to get -
just hug above the waist: that nappy's wet.

Wild Bill Balding

Elevenses in Paris

My lips for now must be content to taste
the fresh squeezed lemon juice you recommend.
They will meet yours again quite soon, but now
you sketch; I watch the world and take a sip.

Across the square a dumpy bereted bloke
steers little dog towards the pavement's edge:
it strains, and lays a large tan spiral shape,
a Play-Doh sausage-maker on the job.
I didn't know a dog could do so much,
and, from its shocked expression, nor did it.

The owner scrapes some litter on the s**t.
I push our plate towards you with a smile:
that Danish pastry's yours, I think, my sweet -
I shan't feel like it for a little while.

Wild Bill Balding

Emrys,1951

Three photos in an black-paper album:
the schoolboy (sharp) in the family group,
the youth (blurred) playing tennis,
the student (faded) on the bridge;
the rarely-spoken story of your death,
in a boat,
out of a boat,
weeks to find the body;
and a clock in the library with your name on.

Not many clues to fill in the gaps:
did you laugh?
did you love?
did you live?
Time muffles your voice
and hides your secrets
more securely than did the water -
for photos fade,
memories fail,
clocks break,
while numberless descendants die with you
and the brightest branch of the family
will be for ever fruitless.

(in memoriam Richard Emrys Thomas 8 July 1930 - 22 February 1951)

Wild Bill Balding

Fenchurch Street

Prisoner and escort
glide into the rooftop station,
as train wheels screech
with sympathy against the check-rails.

Spirit broken,
clad in clothes of a previous era,
he meets the distant American
and is barely allowed to speak.

Trophy child,
doing well at a good school,
there to be admired, prodded,
and maintain the fantasy.

Bacon rind
pushed to the plate's edge
provokes colonial comment:
'You don't like fat? It's good for you.'

Grown-ups
are all the bloody same:
'It's good for you';
'You can't go to London in those trousers'.

One day
his sentence will be over,
and he can start to look for who he really is.
If it's not too late.

Wild Bill Balding

From a painting by Hans Holbein: Portrait of Anna Meyer (c.1526)

What have they done to you, Anna Meyer?

Dispirited eyes focus on the floor.
Cloth carapace binds your torso
as securely as the armour it resembles.
Are they - or you - scared of your body,
of your budding maturity?

Must a Burgomeister's daughter
live out the lie
that she is not a woman in the making?

Should a Burgomeister's daughter
be kept in wraps until her marriage,
when the armour is removed
but the shell remains?

Does the Burgomeister's daughter
get to play like other children,
or is she already locked into
the rôle of doll-child,
name, face, personality interchangeable
with any who will say yes Papa
and no Papa, and bow just so
to official visitors?

Do you dream, Anna Meyer,
of a different kind of existence,

or are you on the way to being
the wife of another Burgomeister,
giving birth to other Annas,
evolved to exist in shells
of your and their own making?

Wild Bill Balding

Give & Take

You had everything: the looks,
the brains, the personality,
and dared to say I completed you,
filled the space you had inside.

The meal was a delight:
your conversation sparkled
and I relaxed, let go,
begin to trust again.

We liked the same music, and could
quote endlessly from 'Father Ted'.
You drank pints, and could say
'Archbishop of Canterbury' on one belch.

No wonder I asked you in afterwards,
where we laughed and talked till
words just got in the way
and time stood almost still.

I woke to find you gone,
along with my car keys and credit cards:
you left just a hint of your perfume,
and a burning feeling when I pee.

Wild Bill Balding

God is a verb

God is a verb, not a noun:
'I am who I am,
I will be who I will be.'

dynamic, seething, active
web of love poured out,
given, received, exchanged,
one God in vibrant community

always on the move,
slipping through our fingers,
blowing through the nets we cast
to hold and name,
confine to nouns, to labels,
freezeframe stasis,
pinned like a butterfly,
solid, cold, controlled, lifeless.

'I am who I am,
I will be who I will be' -
not pinned down by names, labels,
buildings, traditions,
or even by nails to wood:

I am: a verb, not a noun,
living, free, exuberant,
always on the move.

Wild Bill Balding

Good Dog, Bad Dog

Why is it when I'm doing what dogs do,
what dogs are designed to do,
then I'm a Bad Dog?

Why is it when I'm not doing what dogs do,
denying my very canininity,
then I'm a Good Dog?

Sniffing strangers' arses; humping Auntie's leg;
pissing to say 'I woz 'ere' - that's what we were made for!
Sitting still and silent, make no noise or smell,
wearing dainty waistcoats - just an evil joke!

Good dog, bad dog - why can't we decide,
join your debate on the meaning of 'good'?
We dogs can emote and intuit, be logical and positive!
Philosophical dogs, unite!
You have nothing to lose but your...
oh, yes, you've lost them already. Damn.

Wild Bill Balding

Green

Into the warm, inviting yellow
twists a brush loaded with blue.
Surprised, suspicious,
the shades swirl round each other,
and then, by magic,
marbled patterns turn
to startling viridian.

It is utterly final.
Once made, the new colour
cannot be undone;
once committed, the blue and yellow
cannot be divorced:
this is a lifelong union,
longer by far than the life
of the artist who mixed it.

So it is with you and me:
bearing our separate lives
we have swirled and marbled,
mixed and mingled,
become one,
created a new colour
with an as yet unknown chemistry.

Together, we make green;
and, though parted for a while,
yellow does not leave blue
and blue does not rip itself from yellow.
Instead, two emerald puddles,
distant in space but not tone,
dream of being plastered on a palette,
poured into a pot,
indissolubly one.

For now, our separate lives continue
and we wait,
rationed to fragments of time,
which moves on,
as love itself draws breath
and looks forward to our next meeting.

Wild Bill Balding

Harwich for the Continent...

Like a gaggle of bag-ladies,
slow yellow-grey rainclouds
stagger inland and,
as if they can'tholditanylonger,
lift up their skirts
and piss all over the prom.

The stench of seaweed
on the accompanying breeze
batters my nostrils
like disinfectant
in an old folks' home.

Bedraggled grockles
shelter by NO PICNIC signs
and pray for mercy:
but Mercy has Bank Holidays off,
and Vengeance is the one on call.

Wild Bill Balding

Honey Bob and the Whale

The battery-powered pump wheezes life
into the black and white plastic carcass
and the killer whale takes shape, but slowly,
giving me time to look around, particularly
at the girl with the honey-coloured bob
in tight grey jumper and jeans,
leaning over the sea wall
a yard or two from our hut.

I'm holding it between my legs to stop it blowing away,
and, as it fills, the beast bucks and jerks,
getting longer, stiffer and wider as it points right at her
fine feminine figure, set off to perfection
by the jumper, jeans, and the honey-coloured bob.

She looks out over the beach
at the castle builders, the cricketers, the frisbee tossers,
unaware that just behind her I'm struggling
with an eight-foot phallic whale
and my over-active imagination.

Wild Bill Balding

How to end a dinner party

Give your hamster an Alka-Seltzer to pouch
and convince everyone he's got rabies.

Excuse yourself to go to the bathroom,
& come back in your nightwear (or naked) .

Serve fortune cookies with the coffee,
& each one says 'F*** off home now'.

Start turning lights off, drawing curtains,
& blow out candles so the wax goes everywhere.

Or just open another bottle & collapse into oblivion
- & worry abut the fallout tomorrow.

Wild Bill Balding

Hue & Cry

Prussian, powder, ultramarine,
cerulean and idanthrene,
manganese, monestial,
turquoise, navy, duck egg, royal,
cyan, cobalt, indigo,
azure, sapphire, sky, phthalo -
no call from you, no card, no news,
and, honey, have I got the blues...

Wild Bill Balding

Imago

Like

a Red Admiral without a fleet,
a Painted Lady out of lippy,
a Large Heath that's been built on,

a Camberwell Beauty in need of a facelift,
a Small Skipper without a rope,
a Purple Emperor sent into exile,

an Orange Tip with a dose of the blues,
an Apollo stuck at Cape Canaveral,
an Adonis Blue that's got out of shape,

a Brimstone without a spark of fire,
a Grayling forced to work in colour,
a Queen of Spain Fritillary under Franco,

a Small Copper with a duff arrest rate,
a Comma without a greengrocer's stall,
a Large Tortoiseshell without an occupant,

a Wall rammed by a stolen car,
a Bath White with chipped enamel,
a Silver-studded Blue with infected piercings,

so am I
without you.

Wild Bill Balding

In the dim sum restaurant

How dim are the dim sum?

Are they just dim at sums
so those who fail their maths exam
are the only ones who get eaten?
(It sounds harsh, but a great way to raise
educational standards.)

Or are they victims of an IQ-based
fascist theory of the Master Race
that sees underachievers
rolled in sesame seeds and served
with hoi-sin sauce to the paying public?

Are their death-throes in the deep fat fryer
filmed as an Awful Warning
(Sum Like It Hot, starring Marilyn Mon-Roll) ,
shown on TV with the drink-drive adverts
to shock them into greater success?

Was the one with caviar on top
pulled from a playscheme's ballpool
without a chance to change once
the latest test results came out?

And what happens to the intelligent sum?
Do they work for the summum bonum,
write the Summa Theologica?
(Thomas Aquinas was a pastry parcel!)
Do they speak on Radio Hilversum,
public broadcasts about raising standards -
or maybe not! What if the caterers pay
for each dim sum handed in?
Are they in collusion, collaborators,
like the clan chiefs in the Clearances?
A Napoleonic levée, five dim sum per village
for the demands of the big city restaurants,
each year the conscripts signing up to die.

What if two clever sum breed a dim one?
Private tuition! Tutors inculcating calculus,
giving groundings in geometry,
trying to tease out trigonometry,
setting su-doku starters & Pythagorean plenaries...
and if that doesn't work, the dim sum must hide,
or join the Danish Resistance
- another sort of pastry, true, but that's the best
you're going to get. Pour me another Moutai. Thank you.

Wild Bill Balding

Jane,1873

He must have been nervous waiting at the church.
She'd got through two husbands already:
the first stabbed himself with his pitchfork,
a careless yet difficult achievement;
the second, they say, dived from the crow's nest
to rescue a sailor overboard,
but misjudged it and hit the deck -
unusual for a lookout to leave his post.
Fell, jumped or pushed, he left her
once more widowed,
and Daniel, nervously, number three,
odds on for a suspicious end...

although he died in bed at 90,
presumably just good enough
for her very demanding family.

Wild Bill Balding

Jephtha's Daughter

A father gives up his only child to die,
the son of a whore seals his daughter's virginity.
She dies intact, burnt as an offering
to the one in whose image she is made.

The story (the way he's told it) says
she insists he keep his vow,
unthinking promise in the heat of prayer
to sacrifice the first thing he sees
if he comes home from battle victorious.

She wrings from him two months of grace
to wander in the hills and grieve
that she will not die as other women,
as her companions in tears will die:
worn out by war and famine,
bled dry by relentless childbirth.

Two months and then the binding,
the flash, the flow, the spark, the smoke,
offered to the one in whose image she was made,
who, an age later,
will also give up an only child to die,

yet who, far farther in the future,
will watch countless children of Jephthah
squirm and die and be consumed
and still not interfere.

Wild Bill Balding

King's Cross

After all these years
will I recognise you now?
You burst through the crowd,
this stranger, my flesh and blood,
more beautiful than ever -
and once more walk right past me.

Wild Bill Balding

Lilla,1905

The census: successful Southport spinster,
nursing sister, touching 40.
The inheritance: left by your aunt
let down by her lover,
leaving everything to you,
never trusting a man again.

Four years later, sudden wedding:
none of your family there to witness
the (older, widowed) Wisconsin rancher
marry you in Liverpool
(not home, in London)
and take you over the water.

Part of the way over the water.

No stone for your grave in mid-Atlantic;
no body for an enquiring toxicologist;
no trace of your husband in American records;
no diamonds or silver, just a paper trail
and a family's fortune changed for ever.

Wild Bill Balding

Magnificat

My soul sings in witness
to God's supreme greatness:
my spirit is glad in my Saviour and Lord,
whose love is so fervent
to this lowly servant
that all generations will call me adored.
For God in his glory
has done great things for me:
his name is kept holy, yet shout it abroad!
To all those who fear him
and turn to revere him
his love and compassion are endlessly poured.

God's arm acts in splendour,
his people's defender:
the proud and conceited have scattered and fled.
He throws from the palace
oppression and malice
and lifts up the lowly to glory instead.
All those who had plenty
are turned away empty:
the hungry are welcomed and filled with good bread.
The God of our nation
has brought his salvation
to Abraham's children just as it was said.

Tune: THE ASH GROVE (Trad.)
or HAYTOR VALE (Jack Dobbs)

Wild Bill Balding

Marking Time

Flat cap welded to his head,
he follows what looks like a polisher
across the woodblock floor,
scouring, skimming, buffing.

It's a time machine, in fact,
and John is a Time Lord,
a being from another dimension,
where a day is not 24 hours,
and a working day far more than eight.
On Jupiter it must be normal
to take half an hour to sweep
the top step of the library;
on Neptune a quick toilet break
takes 20 minutes and three fags.

Time Lords shun simplistic technology:
the issued pager is left in the messroom,
too primitive to be considered.
John relies on ESP
to tell him where the next job is,
but, owing to some warp
in the space-time continuum,
by our clock he is always late.

The duty list as long as his broom
(made for when he had 5 colleagues -
ah, the tales of the Stupendous Six!)
is screwed up in his overalls,
as he sets about what he can do
in Neptune Mean Time on Earth.

'98 days to go', he sings,
for the countdown has started,
many layers of new managers ago,
for the end of his exile on our planet -
or 'retirement', as he calls it,
for the sake of us Earthlings
who would not understand
the complexities
of trans-dimensional space.

In 98 days he can tell the managers
what he tells us, leaning on his broom,
about where he'd like to shove it.
In 98 days he leaves this earth
for another world, yet the same world
where again he is alone:
an empty home,
pictures of children he rarely sees,
no shell of a job
to give him meaning and value.

98 days to go:
cake, cards, wine and whisky...
and on the 99th?

I take him a cuppa and his mouth smiles,
his eyes dull with anticipation,
fear masked by wisecracks and work to rule -
but the Time Lord does not crack,
and carries on with his machine,
a bleeping, whirling, workshy Sputnik,
scouring, skimming, buffing,
with just 98 days to go.

Wild Bill Balding

Muriel,1941

You forgot if it was day or night
until you breathed the blitz-burnt air
outside at watch's end.
Weather, seasons, all the same,
duty was duty,
you grinned and bore it,
and kept on pushing
counters across a chart
unthinking, unfeeling,

except when the counter
stood for his convoy,
en route to Singapore,
and you were not
allowed to tell him
you knew where
he was ending up,

though,
in fact,
you only
thought
you knew.

Wild Bill Balding

My teddy gave me AIDS

They say you get it when you sleep with boys,
and teddy always sleeps with me in bed;
when I'm at school he's with the other toys,
and sleeps with Barbie (slut, so Daddy said) .

This sleeping thing is dangerous, you know.
I know that Dad's not sleeping now with Mum:
he said so when he came to say hello
and squirt that hard thing right inside my bum.

They say you only get it if you're bad -
I'm so confused! He said that I was good,
or would be if I never told a soul,

but now my bear and I are in a hole:
we'd like to wind the clock back if we could,
but I've got AIDS from him, or so says Dad.

(NB: not to be taken as evidence that I have any abusive tendencies, or as evidence of my having been abused in the past - it's just a weird response to Ramona Thompson's 'Grandma Got AIDS From a Reindeer', based on some people I've worked with in the past) .

Wild Bill Balding

Nocturne

As soon as we finally get to sleep
in the sweaty Parisian heat
- it seems that way, at least -
then the binmen bring their wagon
the length of our hotel's boulevard,
stop at each of the myriad bars,
let fly a flood of empty bottles
down the throat of their bottomless machine,
as before we'd sent vast bores of wine
down our own. Each sonorous sliding
crash a bottle sunk and shattered:
        this for the couple on a dirty weekend,
        this for the artist arranging a sale,
        this for the girl being groomed for abuse,
        this for the widower drinking alone,
        this for the poet who can't find the words,
        this for the priest who's scared to die;
these three are ours, for each of our children,
one dead, one miscarried, one never to be,
as the crashes, their cries and the growl of the van
broadcast, bombard with sad lullabies.

Wild Bill Balding

Off His Face In The Flower Border (after Li Bai)

Sitting in the flowers with a bottle of wine,
alone, I pour another glass
and raise it to salute the moon,
who, with my shadow, makes three of us.

The moon’s not drinking;
my shadow’s a copycat;
let’s have fun anyway,
enjoy Spring while we can.

I sing: the moon dances.
I dance: my shadow staggers.
While I drink, they’re my best friends:
when I fall over, they scatter.

Promise me we’ll be friends for ever,
do this again with the stars in heaven.

(after Li Bai [Li Po],701-762)

Wild Bill Balding

Onibury

I’m on my way to meet my lover,
but the level crossing stops me.
It knows where I’m going.
Puritan barriers block the way,
saying “this far and no farther”;
saucy red lights wink at me
and chortle “you lucky devil”;
urgent bells try to arbitrate
but only end up irritating,
reinforcing entrenched positions.
For an age I wait there,
lights flashing innuendo back and forth,
barriers settling down for a long siege,
bells screaming and still no-one listening.

The train seems to force a decision.
As it passes,
the lights stop winking and get all serious;
the bells are hushed,
outdone by the roar of the diesel;
the barriers raise grudgingly
in insolent salute,
forming an ironic guard of honour
as the car rattles under the arms,
over the metals,
and onward to where heaven touches earth
and fantasies become reality.

Wild Bill Balding

Operation

They say you nearly died when you were two,
miraculously saved by surgeon’s art,
your pain immense. Outside, like some spare part,
your mum knew there was nothing she could do.

That pain has faded to a memory,
though tears and torment cannot be undone:
the scar around your body has become
a silent witness to your agony.

But now you’re facing hurt that goes more deep
within your spirit than a surgeon’s blade.
You know my help can only go so far,

for love is forced to wait, and pray, and weep.
The promise is one day this too will fade,
and I will find, befriend, and kiss the scar.

Wild Bill Balding

Peoplewatching: Trafalgar Square at dusk (a dixaine sequence for John Statham)

The artist in the multi-coloured coat,
clandestinely, head jerking up and down,
sketches the woman, buttoned to the throat,
meeting her husband (when he's done in Town) ,
who's not allowed beneath her dressing-gown.
A student nibbles at a takeaway
and wonders how to tell his mum he's gay.
Retired pair, together, yet apart,
say nothing, for there's nothing left to say:
they dried up years ago, and lost the art.

Two lads take pictures from the balustrade
as skeins of orange dance their cloudy course:
the camera supernovæ flare and fade.
The fountain spurts with fertile fireworks' force,
pink-tinged by floodlights focussed at its source,
where sightseeing seagulls shimmer in a crowd
and settle on the water like a shroud.
A mother hits her child and makes it cry:
a fire-engine siren asks out loud
O why? O why? O why? O why? O why?

A maniac appears behind our bench,
forming his children in a line of four,
and then, like Tommies exiting a trench,
they charge the pigeons with a gruesome roar,
which Mother does her damnedest to ignore.
The bobbing, pecking, crapping pigeon tide
lifts up, retreats, and settles down beside
the fountain, where a tramp who calls this 'home'
throws ragged chunks of week-old Mother's Pride
and watches feathered fury flock and foam.

Stampede of children with a rugby ball
jolt an old lady, who in days gone by
would not have flinched and flapped and cursed at all,
but caught it, swerved, and scored another try
for Wales between Nan's outhouse and the sty.
The artist caps her pencil and moves on
in search of cappucino and a scone;
the scratchings in her sketchbook will appear,
when snaps have faded, memories have gone,
the only markers of our presence here.

Wild Bill Balding

Readers' Wives

He used to get his thrills up in the attic
with a Kodak Instamatic,
flashcube popping to illumine your legs,
stopping only to develop and print
in the darkroom, for his eyes alone -
safer than taking it to Boots,
since that's all you were wearing.

Then - the Internet!
(sings) I wanna get digital, digital,
I wanna get digital, let's get digital...

Now the world can bask in the light
shining off your clammy skin
the texture of wallpaper paste;

your stretch-marks (sorry, lady-lines)
go-faster stripes for the bits that are sagging,
or sag-faster stripes for the bits that are going;

your nipples point southward like cameras
telling your brain about your unseen feet,
eclipsed by forty years of cake deposits;

your anonymity
assured by a thin black line across your eyes,
betrayed by the front room decor,
blown by the portraits on the wall
and the e-mail address for comments -

meat: the wife.

Wild Bill Balding

Shitty Kitty City

There's a lobby by my study where my visitors may enter
which, since we got the kittens, has a dirtbox at the centre.
They're still too young to go outside, that's why I ask for pity:
they've turned my quiet oasis into Shitty Kitty City.
        Pity, pity, isn't it a pity?
        They've turned my quiet oasis into Shitty Kitty City.

Their mother trained them very well to go into the tray.
They do their stuff and cover it - that's fair enough, you say;
but litter gets flicked everywhere, so underfoot is gritty:
you need your wellies on indoors for Shitty Kitty City.
        Pity, pity, isn't it a pity?
        You need your wellies on indoors for Shitty Kitty City.

Mind the crap... Mind the crap... Stand clear of the turds, please.

I scoop the jobbies off the floor: the cats think I collect 'em,
so each one keeps on squeezing me a present from its rectum.
There's steaming heaps all over, and it isn't smelling pretty -
it's best to wear a gasmask when in Shitty Kitty City.
        Pity, pity, isn't it a pity?
        It's best to wear a gasmask when in Shitty Kitty City.

Ip dip dog shit, you are not it.

But soon they will be big enough to do it in the garden.
I'm putting out my begging bowl, for which I beg your pardon.
And now you see, good people all, the reason for my ditty -
a whiproud for a catflap door for Shitty Kitty City.
        Pity, pity, isn't it a pity?
        I need to buy a catflap door for Shitty Kitty City.

Wild Bill Balding

So, Year 7, What Will You Do When You Grow Up?

Will wants to be a TV presenter,
Matthew a cricketer, Charlotte a nurse.
Nathan has his heart set on being a mechanic
- and Gareth wants to be a crayon.

Aimee dreams of being a riding instructor,
Sam's going to be a millionaire,
Issy says she'll be a fashion designer
- and Gareth wants to be a crayon.

(I asked him why, next lesson, quietly:
he said, 'You know how they fit in your hand
then go all blunt and wear right down? ' -
and that was all he would say.)

Sian wants to be a rugby player,
Matty's great desire is to join the police,
Jack wants to be a vet or a carpenter
 - and Gareth wants to be a crayon.

He'd better sharpen up his act
to make a mark in his chosen field,
his acting was wooden, his expression leaden:
2B or not 2B (or possibly HB)
- you get the point.
Gareth wants to be a crayon.

(a genuine experience which will stay with me for a long time...)

Wild Bill Balding

Sophie goes to School

I let you go into the world,
launched with a kiss from my body's lips;
the cord was cut by alien hands,
and you were part of me no longer,
yet forever part of me.

I let you go in little ways,
to my parents, to the crèche,
to Sunday School, the nursery,
each painful - but not like today,
as I let you go once more,
straw-hatted, red-blazered,
a 5-year-old parody of an air hostess,
tripping across the tarmac square,
soaring up the schoolroom steps,
to that place where others will teach you
things that I have never known,
where others will feed and comfort you,
soak up your sobs when you hurt yourself.

I let you go: life starts again,
as now your day is filled by others
so mine is free to find and form
the part of me that is not you -
yet guilt subdues my liberty.

I let you go, but kid myself;
my chest is gripped by an iron hand,
my concentration disappears,
I snap and swear at stupid drivers,
cry at my partner on the phone,
blame my hormones, think of you -

and then you return, slightly rumpled;
the picture you hold goes on the fridge,
then, later, in the treasure-box,
for the day I let you go again,
this time for good, to another's care,
and still you will be and will be no longer
forever
part of me.

Wild Bill Balding

Spanky Mary's Oubliette

vivid vermillion on cloud-white flesh
signals like neon in the night,
a beacon to guide those who will...

hurt me - punish me for being so evil
hurt me - punish me, for it's my fault
hurt me - punish me, as he did once
and twice and thrice and countless times,
each one in secret, each one our secret,
secretly hurting, then secretly pleasing
someone - or something - inside me

is your kindness a prelude to the usual pain?
will I despise it as a sign of weakness?
will I push you away, unable to cope,
ignoring the disfigured, disabled
dwarf of a thought
forgotten in a dungeon
shouting 'this is the way'
in a language that once I knew
but now sounds compellingly foreign?

Wild Bill Balding

Stones

Elsie showed me hers.
She showed everyone,
whether they wanted to see it or not:
an inch long coppery-black bead,
nestled in a box of cotton wool,
passed along the table at the old folks' lunch club.

Molly wouldn't show me hers.
It lurked in the liquid
in the plastic pot they gave her,
out of her sight on the shelf by the bed
in her en-suite single room.

Doris held on to hers,
though they tried to fish for it
with a claw, as in an arcade,
missing it but holing her stomach.
They got no stone, no cuddly toy:
just a twitch and a torrent of khaki snot
on the third day in intensive care,
the last thing she ever showed anyone.

Wild Bill Balding

Strumpet Voluntary

With the bombing of the docks
and the Scotland Road boozers
you'd think Goering had it in
for Filthy Phoebe and her like.

Phoebe, known as Freebie,
'cos after nine o'clock and half as
many drinks she'd give it away,
seen lurching up and down

through Salthouse, Herculaneum & King's
to Gladstone, Huskisson & Bramley-Moore,
spreading goodwill and gonorrhoea
to freshly paid-off sailors.

As the city and her urinary tract burn
she curses the Luftwaffe for making her
shelter with forty others who do not
wish to use her services,

who, she feels, look down on her,
reeking harridan in the corner,
provider of comforts for the men
and embarrassing complaints for their women.

Wild Bill Balding

The Brakes in the Back (for backseat drivers everywhere...)

Bloody French drivers never use their indicators.
Roundabouts go the wrong bloody way.
All the bloody placenames sound bloody foreign,
and the brakes in the back aren't working.

Oldest's got the volume too loud on his Gameboy,
Youngest's started whining 'cos she wants it too.
Bloke's trying to pick his nose without us seeing,
and the brakes in the back aren't working.

Stop at the services for drinks and chocolate.
Youngest has them both and she then feels sick;
throws up out the window as we overtake a cyclist,
and the brakes in the back aren't working.

Oldest keeps asking are we nearly there yet.
Youngest keeps on shouting that she wants a wee.
Bloke lost his credit card when he filled with petrol,
and the brakes in the back aren't working.

I'm sure we've done this straight bit of road before,
Bloke can't see the map so I'm keeping stum.
Pass a strange sight in a cycle helmet,
and the brakes in the back aren't working.

Big bloody lorry coming out of a side road,
Bloke must've forgotten that we must give way.
I'm stamping on the floor but it's no bloody use,
'cos THE BRAKES IN THE BACK AREN'T.....

Wild Bill Balding

The crows, he said,

would roost each night in the middle one
of the three tall trees at my garden's end,
every night the flock of crows,
every night the middle tree,

except the once,
just the once,
the only night they did not come,
the very night a German bomb
hung-up, dropped late, and hit the tree.

The crows, he said,

were back next night in the left-hand tree,
where crows have roosted sixty years,
every night the flock of crows,
every night the left-hand tree,

except tonight,
except tonight,
the only night they have not come:
awake, I watch that moonlit tree,
the gap where something used to be,
awake, I wonder -

Wild Bill Balding

The Ethical Illusion

What must you do to get it right?

Love God & love your neighbour. That's all.

No, I will not give you a rule that tells you what to do.

Have you forgotten I spent so much time opposing those who lived by rules,
and standing with those who were condemned by them?
that woman caught in adultery, nearly stoned by
those just as guilty of breaking their Law;
the woman who was bleeding, and the lepers,
seen as mere filth spreading contamination;
Zacchaeus, the collaborator - good job he found me
before the Resistance found him!

You ask for rules, for rigid unchanging absolutes
to anchor you in safety, rules which will end up
chaining you in dungeons of self-righteousness or despair...

No. I am the way, not the rulebook.
I am the Living One, not a fossil.
I am a threat to the categories of 'in' and 'out',
of 'clean' and 'unclean', of 'righteous' and 'sinner':

the Spirit blows like the wind,
scattering your neat piles of leaves over the garden,
rolling the lid of your dustbin down the street,
making lifeless lines of laundry dance for joy.

Yes, I told the rich man what to do.
He had to give up what held him back:
for him it was money, for you it's...
are you ready to hear?
Those who ask will receive.
Those who look will find, and be found.
And I will never leave them.

Wild Bill Balding

The Existentialists Go On Holiday

- Look, darling, there's the sea!
- Not while I'm driving, darling.

Wild Bill Balding

The Headmaster

Angled unnaturally in the chair,
wild hair on the wings of his scalp,
the Headmaster stares at the camera
as if to threaten it for daring
to come into his study without knocking,

although his school is two miles down the road
and he is at home in Bronwenda,
'good white breast' in Welsh,
although such things are never
mentioned in front of him,
as neither is the mounting pile
of empty bottles under the stairs.

If he is relaxing, his dark suit
is still on duty,
protecting the pedestal marked Headmaster,
holding within the screams
of the academic whose youngest son
was drowned at Cambridge:
the suit a shell of hollow armour,
hiding the punishment to heart and liver
which will ensure
he will not need his pension.

Respected in the village,
large house, good position;
yet does the suit,
and will the grave,
hide unfulfilled longings
of bigger schools,
books written,
name made,
or the taste of finest wine
on good white breasts?

And must I,
with hair to match that of
the grand-dad I never knew,
end my days like that man in the suit
or shell, or shroud?
Or may I write another ending
with long life, happy home,
books written, and the taste
of finest wine on good white breasts?

Wild Bill Balding

The Mars Bar

(A friend's uncle once asked why there weren't any poems about Mars Bars. This is why.)

Nails glinting in the glow of candlelight,
she grips the bar and gently pulls apart
the waxy coal-black petals that surround
the glossy round intoxicating end.
Her fingers' friction pulls the wrapper down:
the rigid rough-cast bar appears erect;
the chocolate delight now in her hand
moves closer to the parted scarlet lips,
left shining by her moistened tongue-tip's trail.
Her mouth encompasses the firm dark girth
and feels it turn to liquid on her tongue;
withdrawing it, a sticky trickle tries
to crawl towards her chin, but tries in vain,
tamed by her tongue, which coaxes it inside.
She swallows, smiles, and sighs - she's satisfied:
as theobromine pulses through her veins
the joy's not over - half the bar remains...

Wild Bill Balding

Thetis

Shapeshifting Nereid,
protecting mother,
lifesaving goddess,

held
raped
broken:

the one who holds you, binds you
through all your shifting shapes,
enters you, possesses you,
forces his will, his form, his being
into your unwilling frame,

be it
the seed of the creep Peleus
the waters of Cape Frio
the mud of Liverpool Bay

or whatever grounds your myth in our reality.

However,
the repressed can rise, exultant:
the sea will surrender its treasure;
what is lost is claimed and renamed.

You may be domesticated, dominated, dulled -

but you bide your time.

(By way of explanation: The Nereid (shapeshifter) Thetis was 'given' to Peleus, in one account, as a reward for his devotion to the gods. The frigate HMS Thetis was lost 5 December 1830 off Brazil with a cargo of treasure, most of which was salvaged six years later. The submarine HMS/M Thetis (motto: 'I bide my time') was lost on diving trials 1 June 1939; it was later raised and renamed HMS/M Thunderbolt.)

Wild Bill Balding

To a teenage stepson

When you are older with a place of your own
I will come and visit at awkward moments,
and lean on the doorbell until you answer.
I shall piss over your toilet seat, the carpet,
and probably up the walls as well.
I shall dropp my clothes randomly
throughout your public rooms,
and play with myself where the neighbours can see.
Your loved one I shall insult
at the most inappropriate moments.
I shall talk loudly and often during
your favourite programmes and lose the
remote so you cannot record them for later.
I will spit with precision down the banisters
and shut the cat in the room with the best rug
and a very full bladder. However, the
likelihood being that (should I survive
that long) you will choose my care home
and have power of attorney over my pension,
perhaps I shall content myself with
shuffling around muttering nonsense,
smelling of wee, and feigning deafness
when there are jobs needing done. You
could be mine, after all.

Wild Bill Balding

Trust

I want you, but can I trust you?
The things you say excite me,
but I've heard them said before:
sweet words dry up too soon,
replaced by shouts and threats.

I want you, but can I trust you?
The way we touch excites me,
but I've known that touch before:
caresses stop too soon,
fingers curl into fists.

I want you, but can I trust you?
The love you give excites me.
What is this love
that accepts me for who I am,
that allows me to grow,
to blossom,
to be me,
without fear,
without pressure,
without limits?
Is this real love at last,
or are you a fantasy,
a better liar than the others?

I am so sore, so scarred, so scared.
Be gentle with me.
One day I may learn to trust you.
For now, you'll have to trust for both of us.
But I want you.

Wild Bill Balding

Victoria Cross

Strange at school
how all our dads had got
VCs in the war,
charging machine guns,
blowing up bridges,
shooting down Stukas,

except Philip's dad,
who (he said)
had won it twice

(which made us think he was lying) ,

and Steve's dad,
who (he said)
had got a VD instead,

but then Steve
always was
crap at spelling.

Wild Bill Balding

Walter Sickert: Mornington Crescent Nude, Contre-jour,1907

She reclines, half-silhouetted
against the bright North London morning.
Sheets, once crisp, now crumpled,
lie in submission at her feet
as the light plays peekaboo
over shoulder, arm and thigh.
She faces me,
offering her full, ripe breasts
as if in an invitation to
enter my own drawing.

But no. I remind myself
that to oversee a figure properly
I should be three times its length away,
and... say... five foot eight times three
is seventeen feet.
I must be seventeen feet
away from this woman,
bought for an hour or two
like a wanton of the streets
to be the centrepiece of
this dappled mosaic,
a canvas for the light that caresses her form.

A proper woman, at any rate,
no Pre-Raphaelite fantasy
tubercular wasted waif,
but one of curves and contours,
strength and beauty,
who knows her simmering sensuality
and is right now staring me in the eye,
as if she were in control of this sitting,
from a distance of seventeen feet.

Look at the light, look at the light,
then head down
and focus on the sketchbook;
remain three times her length away
for just a little longer.

Wild Bill Balding

Willies

Jesus had one.
His best friends had them.
He didn't say anything about
where they should stick them,
or whether you needed one
to give you authority over others.

2000 years on, the Anglicans split
over gay sex & women bishops,
as if these were the core of his message.

When asked, he did say
'Love God and love your neighbour.'
No mention of willies.

Go back in time to Golgotha,
stand with Mary and John,
look at him on the cross;

tell him the Word has been reduced
to dictating whom you may love
and condemning those who are different;

tell the one who represents us all
that to represent him at the altar
you must have male dangly bits

(but not speak Aramaic or have a beard,
or have nowhere to lay your head,
for that would be silly) .

Has the image of God now been confined
to a leathery appendage; what they
worship no more than a giant willy?

Wild Bill Balding

Woodland Jazz

The groundbass of the roaring roadway
is overlaid by the rhythmic rustle of leaves,
topped by a syncopated pigeon,
the growl of a farmer sawing,
the soaring oboe of a microlight above.
The sun sends a spotlight in the clearing
to shine upon the star -
a graceful magnolia standing silent,
one stage-struck, slimly shimmering stem,
uncertain, unwilling to take centre stage solo
and the credit for the piece.

Wild Bill Balding