

Joyce Sutphen

HAMPSTEAD SONNETS
(The Real Thing)

That was the day I knew, although even
earlier – in Bristol, after we'd been
to Cornwall and back again – I could tell
something was happening to us, something
I wasn't expecting, something unplanned,
uncharted, and entirely amazing.
(I've looked up that word, "amazing," and put
it in another poem which explains
what happened much better than this will.) You
came down to London from the North although
I never thought you would come, and I was
waiting when you rang the bell, and I was there
on Hampstead Heath watching the sun go down,
and then we went inside and fell in love.

We went inside and fell in love – easy
as I am telling it. Our shoulders touched
or didn't touch – it doesn't matter now –
but I could hardly breathe. I think I swooned
(when I'd never believed it possible);
I think my face went pale. I think my heart
was beating wildly – yes, I'm sure it was.
Next day, we went to Richmond and to Kew
and walked through the palm house and the gardens,
admiring the gryphons and other beasts,
finding the pagoda disappointing,
the cactus houses overdone, but the
rhododendron grove was perfect: look at
the two of us, surrounded by flowers.

Later, the picture of the two of us
surrounded by all those flowers would go
into the fire with the other pictures
he found. Later, the letters that you wrote
would escape the fire and go for years
unread. Later – but what's the point? Later
is now, and now is too late to wonder what
we might have done with that amazing love
that came to us when we least expected
it, when we didn't know how rare it was,

when we – but I really most blame myself –
were afraid of saying the truth, afraid
the whole world would come down on its pillars,
afraid to hurt anyone else but us.

Anyone else but us might have made it
work; anyone else but me might have said
“Yes, wait,” and anyone but you might have
asked again, but because of the distance,
because of the differences, because
of the dangers, the darkness, the dread nights
of the soul, I let all those things swallow
our words, and then, for many years silence
was all there was between us. Your letters
(and you’ll never know how fiercely I fought
to keep them) went first to a friend’s closet
and then, when I made the break I couldn’t
make earlier, to my own apartment,
and then to my house where I live alone.

I live alone by choice and for pleasure,
and you have the life I had when we met.
I was a wife then; now you’re a husband
and the father of daughters, just as you
planned. Sometimes I remember us walking
on a beach in Cornwall, gathering slate
(“for pure and useless beauty,” you proclaimed)
and how we went for tea and scones later
and how later we slept on the cliff’s edge,
and (years later) I met you on a bridge
over the Thames just as I was thinking
of how once we had walked there together,
just as I wondered if that amazing
love we’d had was (yes) the real thing.