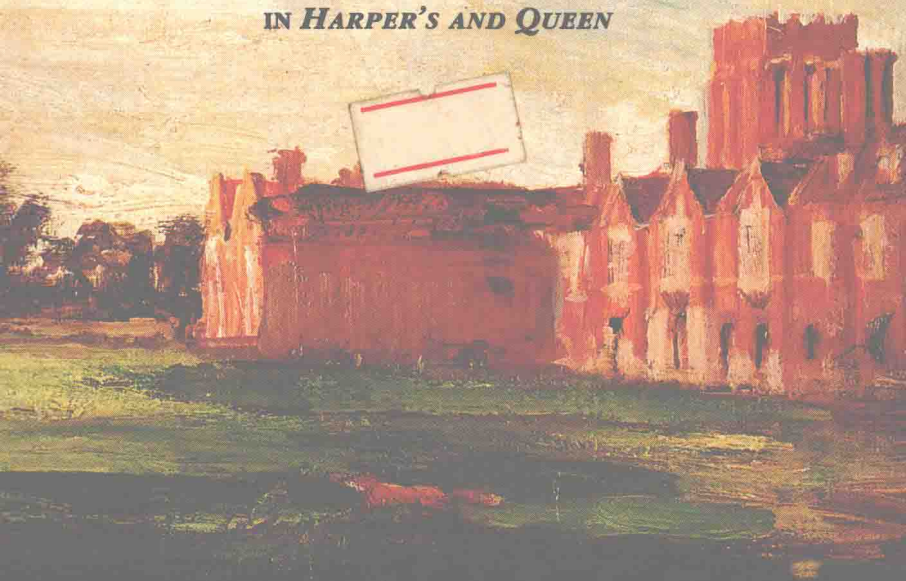


ANDREW MOTION

**'PURE PLEASURE: WRITTEN ALMOST ENTIRELY IN DIALOGUE, IT
IS SOPHISTICATED, FUNNY, SAD' – GABRIELE ANNAN
IN *HARPER'S AND QUEEN***



*The Pale
Companion*



THE PALE COMPANION

Andrew Motion



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The Pale Companion

Andrew Motion was born in London in 1952 and educated at University College, Oxford. He was a lecturer in English at the University of Hull from 1977 to 1981 and has been Editor of *Poetry Review*. He has published five books of poetry, *The Pleasure Steamers* (1978), *Independence* (1981), *Secret Narratives*, *Dangerous Play* (1984), winner of the Rhys Memorial Prize, and his latest collection, *Natural Causes* (1987); two critical studies, *The Poetry of Edward Thomas* (1978) and *Philip Larkin* (1982); and a biography of the Lamberts (1987). In 1981 he won the Arvon/*Observer* Poetry Prize and in 1987 the Somerset Maugham Award and the Dylan Thomas Award. He lives in London with his wife and their three children. *The Pale Companion* is his first novel.

For Jan Dalley

THESEUS: Go, Philostrate,
Stir up the Athenian youth to merriments.
Awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth.
Turn melancholy forth to funerals:
The pale companion is not for our pomp.

A Midsummer Night's Dream, Act I, Scene 1

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR



Dangerous Play Poems 1974–1984

Dangerous Play, which contains selections from Andrew Motion's three volumes to date, some new poems, and his autobiographical prose piece, *Skating*, won the John Llewelyn Rhys Memorial Prize for 1984, the first time in over twenty years that this award has gone to a collection of poetry.

War, grief, and love that has been interrupted or lost are Andrew Motion's recurring themes, in poems that can sometimes read as straight stories in verse but are more often 'secret narratives' which in the method of their telling create extraordinarily potent atmospheres of mystery or unease. Several of his poems – *Independence*, 'The Letter', 'Anne Frank Huis' – are already small classics. All of them conjure landscapes and precise emotions with such skill and such compelling intimacy that one reviewer writing in *The Times Literary Supplement* has acclaimed him as 'a natural heir to the tradition of Edward Thomas and Ivor Gurney'.

Chapter

1

A young dog fox trotted over the playing fields towards a massive, red-brick tower. It was a gatehouse, but the fox slipped through unnoticed, crossed a square lawn and came to the mouth of a long corridor. Hundreds of pieces of paper were pinned along one wall; parcels of dusty sunlight leant against the other. From the far end came a blank roar.

The fox slid nearer and the noise grew more complicated. There were squeals, yelps, tingling clashes. Then something slammed, heavy doors swung open and a bald man strode out with his hands behind his back. Other men followed in pairs, wearing gowns which bounced and fluttered.

‘Look at that!’ The bald man’s voice cracked down the corridor.

Another voice, lighter, asked: ‘What? Where?’

A finger pointed and the fox disappeared. ‘You missed it. Dirty great ginger tom. Must have come up from the village.’

The men flapped out into a quadrangle and went their separate ways through the brilliant afternoon.

Hundreds of boys poured into the corridor, and the hundreds of pieces of paper panicked on the wall. Couples were jostled apart, knots of friends untied.

‘Sod this,’ Francis muttered. ‘Jamie? Come on.’

A white face swung after him through a Gothic side door. ‘Fucking hell.’ Jamie brushed his lapels, peering down his bony nose. His voice was arch and metallic. ‘I mean – what *is* the point?’

They were in a small courtyard roofed with the leaves of a sycamore growing in the centre.

'You're not rushing, are you?' asked Francis.

'Nothing that can't wait. What about you?'

They strolled in a slow circle, Jamie the taller and darker of the two, his head lurching a little with each step, like a camel's.

'Oh, you know,' Francis shrugged. The air was stagnant under the thick tree-ceiling, and as the racket of boys faded he could hear other smaller noises: a fly buzzing against a gluey leaf; the creak of high branches.

Jamie raised his fists and flicked out a few gangling punches. 'Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee, I am the greatest, God bless me.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Boxing.'

'Your little friend?' Francis smoothed his fringe across his forehead.

'He's not little.' Jamie pretended to be hurt. 'And there's no need to sound like nanny.'

'I'm not.'

'You are.' Jamie stared up into the sycamore; the insides of his nostrils were raw and hairless. 'The usual for you, I suppose?'

'You know Keith and I've got a lot to do.'

'I do?'

Francis nodded sharply. 'Yes, you bloody do.'

They had come to a standstill. 'Are we going to have a tiff?' Jamie dabbed the pale mole on his cheek.

'No, Jamie.' Francis gritted his teeth. 'We are not going to have a tiff.'

'That's good, then.'

'You're just jealous.'

'I'm not jealous, in fact.'

'You are. You don't like him because I went off with him.'

'It's not the going off I mind . . . Just look out for him, that's all.' Jamie's mouth twitched. 'There's something about him, I . . .'

‘This is your friendly advice, is it?’ Francis interrupted. ‘Well, thanks. You don’t fancy him, that’s all it is.’

‘I couldn’t give a fuck about fancying him. If you want swarthy Greeks . . .’

‘He’s not a swarthy Greek.’ Francis flared up, then suddenly felt ridiculous and laughed. ‘His mother’s Greek. That’s all.’

‘Swarthyette, then.’ Jamie slapped his brow. ‘How should I know?’ Their irritation melted. The sycamore groaned above them, and slabs of light slipped across their faces.

Francis rubbed him on the arm affectionately. ‘Come on. People will start talking.’

Jamie led the way down the covered corridor. An older boy was standing by the door into the quadrangle, his gown slung across his shoulder.

‘Look at Middleton,’ whispered Jamie. ‘The winnet.’

‘Middleton. The only man in England with pubic hair on his head.’

‘Elecktrickle banana,’ Francis sang softly.

‘Mayne!’

Francis shielded his eyes from the sun.

‘Mayne, come here. And you, Jamieson. Both of you come here.’ Middleton was pointing at the ground in front of him as if summoning a dog to heel. His furiously curly blond hair was plastered with oil and gleamed like a helmet. ‘What are you two plotting?’

Francis looked at Jamie, wide-eyed and baffled. ‘Nothing, Middleton. Did it look as though we were, Middleton? We were just talking.’

‘That’s right, Middleton. Just talking.’

‘You’re always smirking together, you two. It’s not liked.’

‘No, Middleton.’ Francis stared expressionlessly at the crisp ridge of hair. ‘We were talking about sculpture. For the magazine.’

Middleton thrust out his chin. ‘Just watch yourselves, that’s all. Just watch yourselves.’

Francis, suppressing the urge to curtsy, saw Jamie’s head

dip beside him as he turned away. 'Philistine,' Jamie whispered.

'Fascist.'

'Hitler.'

'Mrs Hitler.'

Jamie snorted. 'What the hell, though. Look - we've missed the rush hour.' They had reached the cement hub at the centre of the quadrangle; the paths on every side of them were empty. He stepped forward, holding his breath.

Francis smiled and lifted one hand. 'Ciao.'

'Ciao, then.'

As Francis slid into King's Tower he could still hear the metal clips on Jamie's heels, tick-tocking out of the quadrangle. Like stilettos, he had thought in the old days, when their faintest echo had made his heart skitter. A blind whizzed up inside his head and he saw Jamie last winter, spreading a tartan rug on the mud-dotted floor of a boot-room they had never used before. He was surprised it was all so clear; the only light that evening had come from a butterscotch lamp outside the window. 'You look like a sucked sweet,' Jamie had said.

Francis climbed the last few steps of the tower to his dormitory and stretched towards the chipped double doors. They burst violently open towards him.

'Christ! Look out, O'Brien.' Francis flushed, wringing one hand. 'Nearly knocked my fucking arm off. Fucking gorilla.'

O'Brien had changed into the regulation dark blue tracksuit and was massaging his heart. Black hair spurted in the V of the tracksuit top.

'You're really an obscenity, Shagger.' Francis glared into the small, waxy face. The skin was like cheese melting under a grill. 'Really an obscenity. Come and talk to me while I change.'

O'Brien tottered backwards, crashing open the double doors. 'Approach and enter.' He flung out an arm, ushering Francis into the bare dormitory aisle, then leapt to his side and lurched along, hunching one shoulder.

The dormitory was divided every few feet by green wooden

walls which stopped short of the ceiling. When they reached Francis' cubicle O'Brien flung himself at the sliding door as if he meant to climb it, and hurled it to one side.

'Sit there.' Francis tapped the lid of a boot-box at the foot of his bed and O'Brien collapsed on to it. 'Just don't piss around. I didn't ask you here to listen to your bollocks.'

'I should hope not.'

'So you can calm down.'

'I'll try.'

'And be sensible for a minute.'

'Sensible, yes.' O'Brien composed his hands neatly in his lap like a child on best behaviour.

'I asked you here because I wanted to hear news about ...' Francis mouthed 'the bomb factory', then tugged off his shirt and rootled in his chest of drawers. When he straightened again O'Brien was gazing at him uncomprehendingly.

'Bum oratory?'

'You needn't give me any crap, Shagger. If you don't want to tell me, just don't, OK?'

O'Brien pursed his lips. On the crown of his head, his mousy hair was already thin. Silence crackled in the empty cubicles around them.

'Well, don't then.' Francis unbuttoned his flies.

O'Brien made a frenzied rattling at the back of his throat, slid off the boot-box and hopped to the window. Francis turned his back and wriggled naked into his tracksuit trousers.

'These your people?' O'Brien had lounged against the window-sill and was holding a hinged red-leather photograph frame.

Francis sank on to his bed to tie up his gym shoes. 'Yes.' He knew nothing about O'Brien's family. Wasn't his mother dead? 'They're pretty ordinary.'

'No such thing.' O'Brien was vehement.

'What?'

'No such thing as an ordinary family.'

'What, you know about it, do you?'

O'Brien didn't answer but nodded at a picture. 'This your Dad?'

Francis stood up and took the photograph frame, laying it flat on the sill. O'Brien rested a finger on a grey-haired, moustached man outside a flint-covered cottage; he had a colourless drink in one hand and was wearing a beige cardigan with leather buttons up the front.

'No. That's my Auntie Kathleen.'

'Oooh, pardon me,' said O'Brien swooping.

'Well, of course it's my Dad, you pillock.'

'Army, isn't he?'

'How do you know?'

'You told me before.'

'Why ask then?'

'I like it, that's all.'

'Tool,' Francis said indulgently, and smiled at the picture. 'He's retired now, anyway.'

'In disgrace?'

'Far from it. He's just old.' Francis hesitated. 'What about yours?'

'Nothing really.' O'Brien was clipped. 'What does he do now, yours?'

'Fuck all. Just sits about saying how busy he is. Gardens a bit I suppose. He has a housekeeper who does most things for him. Cooking and whatnot.'

'Where's the picture?'

'Porlock. We were on holiday. We used to hire a cottage down there sometimes.'

'Oh, I've been there,' said O'Brien, full of enthusiasm. 'Porlock Hill.'

'Yes! It's amazing isn't it? Incredibly steep. Did your car boil over?'

'Not really.' O'Brien paused, colouring slightly. 'We were in a coach.'

Francis spoke without thinking. 'What, a trippers' coach?'

'Yes, that's right,' O'Brien bridled. 'A trippers' coach. We can't all be like you and hire cottages everywhere we go.'

'I'm sorry,' said Francis, offended. 'I didn't mean it like that.'

O'Brien shrugged and turned back to the photographs. 'And here's your Mum.' He pointed to a woman in a windowseat. Her shirt was tweaked up and knotted above a gash of brown stomach. She was wearing three-quarter-length white trousers.

'You know Adele. Everyone does. She's very . . .'

'You call her Adele?'

'Oh yes.'

'Since when?'

'Ever.'

O'Brien whistled softly. 'Far out.'

'She asked us to.' Francis glanced down into the empty quadrangle. The shadows of small clouds loafed across the grass like the shapes of fish swimming above them. The clock-tower struck a quarter and the single note disappeared without a ripple. 'Come on,' he said, suddenly restless. 'I'm meeting someone. Anyway, you'll see her on Sunday if you're at the ten o'clock.'

'Going out?'

'She wants to show off her new husband.'

'New new?'

'A few months.'

'You seem to be taking it like a man.'

Francis closed the photograph frame absent-mindedly. 'I'm used to it.'

'God. What number is this then?'

'Three.'

O'Brien was impressed. 'Shit. What does he do?'

'Don't know really. Something to do with books.'

'Selling them, you mean?'

'Before that. When they've only just been written. He sort of manages writers.'

'Any money in it?'

'Seems to be. He's stinking rich. He's American.' Francis laughed. 'Better than the last one though. The last one was Scottish. This one's a cricketer.'

‘An American cricketer?’ O’Brien grimaced.

‘I know, it’s weird, isn’t it. He’s one of those Yanks who wants to be really English, you know. Drives a Rover, drinks beer. It’s a bit pathetic if you ask me. Still, at least it’s cricket, not something else. Darts or something. That’s where we’re going on Sunday – to watch him play.’

‘Lucky old you,’ said O’Brien sarcastically.

‘Well, I like it,’ Francis insisted. ‘And anyway, we’re meeting Catherine there.’

O’Brien whipped the photograph frame open again, and kissed a red-haired girl standing on a pebble beach. ‘Oh, Catherine,’ he mumbled.

Francis punched him hard on the shoulder, snatched the frame and wiped away the wet O of the kiss with his sleeve. ‘You’ve soaked it, you pervert.’

‘I have not.’ O’Brien fingered his shoulder. ‘Just paying my respects. I know you like it really.’

‘Bollocks.’

‘You do. Everybody fancying her and everything.’ O’Brien darted to the cubicle door, gripped it with one hand and plunged the other deep into a tracksuit pocket. ‘Oh yes,’ he said, lisping absurdly. ‘Mayne’s twin? Rather a temptress I should say. The fair Catherine. Rather a temptress.’ He jiggled the hand inside his tracksuit. ‘Even the great Keith Ogilvie succumbed I think? Am I right?’

Francis lunged at him, but O’Brien sprang away up the aisle yelling, ‘Even the great Keith Ogilvie. Even the great Keith Ogilvie.’

Francis peered into the small mirror above his wash-basin, licked his finger and ran it across his eyebrows, smoothing them. They were darker than the straw-coloured hair on his head, and nowhere near joined in the middle like O’Brien’s. He practised the slow smile he would give Keith, gradually tightening and stretching his lips and only parting them reluctantly. He wished his face was thinner and his nose more definite; but it would change, Adele said, it was only

puppy fat. He smiled again; he was late and Keith would be wondering where he was.

At the end of the dormitory aisle Francis passed Miss Rhodes' sitting-room. She would have heard O'Brien, of course, but it didn't matter. She wouldn't understand. He had already begun to stick out his tongue when her door eased cautiously open.

'Good afternoon, Matron,' he said to the bodiless grey head, clamping his mouth shut as if he had swallowed a fly. Television voices yattered in the room behind her.

'Oh, it's you, Mayne.' The Scottish accent, which parents found soothing, was far-fetched. Francis made an effort not to imitate it.

'Yes, it's me all right. Just off out – rather late I'm afraid; I got held up.' There were tears shining on Miss Rhodes' cheeks like blips of wax. He frowned at her: 'Is everything OK?'

Miss Rhodes shook her head. 'Oh, it's terrible,' she moaned. Her top lip, muzzy with dark hair, quivered. 'Terrible.'

'What is? What's terrible?'

The door crept wider. 'You'd better come in.'

Francis had no curiosity about the room. He glimpsed a row of neatly folded socks on a white shelf like hamsters in a pet shop, and a fat, fleshy-leaved plant. 'It's there,' she said listlessly, pointing at the television.

Francis saw a man lying on a glistening floor, surrounded by people kneeling. After several seconds he recognized him as Bobby Kennedy. Was this a play? If it was, they'd made a mistake – it wasn't Bobby Kennedy who'd been shot, it was John.

'What's happening?'

'It's poor Bobby,' whispered Miss Rhodes, clasping her hands across her stomach. 'They've shot poor Bobby.'

'Is he dead?' Francis asked, but he could see that he wasn't. Someone looking like a waiter, someone foreign, with