

*Lighting the Steps*

By Philip Holmes

*Poetry*

THREE SECTIONS OF POEMS

A PLACE TO STAND

THE GREEN ROAD

*Applied Mathematics*

NONLINEAR OSCILLATIONS, DYNAMICAL SYSTEMS

AND BIFURCATIONS OF VECTOR FIELDS

*(with John Guckenheimer)*

TURBULENCE, COHERENT STRUCTURES,

DYNAMICAL SYSTEMS AND SYMMETRY

*(with John Lumley and Gal Berkooz)*

CELESTIAL ENCOUNTERS: THE ORIGINS

OF CHAOS AND STABILITY

*(with Florin Diacu)*

KNOTS AND LINKS IN THREE-DIMENSIONAL FLOWS

*(with Robert Ghrist and Michael Sullivan)*

Philip Holmes

Lighting the Steps

Poems 1985–2001

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*For Ruth, and for Maya, Avram, Ben and Ilana*

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## *Lighting the Steps*

## Sigodlin Poem

*for Bob Morgan and my father*

When I would cut the hedge in gaps  
and lumps, and edge the lawn  
or paint the narrow frame and window-ledge  
unevenly, my father'd tell me  
not to be cack-handed.

With that word at once an awkward hen  
with small, bent hands would spring in view  
and start to strut from side to side,  
its twitching neck a frantic mimic  
of what it was I couldn't rightly do.

And often now, when I have struggled  
out of square with problems or with verse,  
my father's voice comes back  
in plain and ample confidence: 'No hurry.  
And don't be so cack-handed.'

*Time*

## Hadrian's Wall

A big wind shouts and smacks the trees  
and thin clouds scoot for cover:  
Northumbria blusters in and out,  
rainsqualls stoop and shiver.

This weather bullies us for days,  
twisting, interfering, snaps  
and then withdraws. The ragged trees  
and streams regain their shapes.

The Border lurches in a fitful light;  
the Wall's squared stones define it still  
though jumbled on the steeps of turf,  
far from the world that fell.

Legions shod in silence crowd  
the cropped grass of the barrack line;  
their ghostly gear and weapons rattle  
amid the month's dog-latin.

September frosts a stile, a web,  
an auxiliary's moustache. From half  
a mile the limestone gleams in focus,  
and sun disturbs the mist like love.

Rare calm. Candescent day sweeps up  
and clears the distances. Men mustering  
dissolve to cloud and less, until  
all that's left's a hawthorn, bracken,



path and shoulder up ahead:  
a country's edge. Little strips  
of meadow grace the fells, wall and hedge  
make landscape's civitas. Levels under it

remain and form the same hill-sinew  
that those new Romans, serving at  
Empire's end, came all too well to know.  
Their legions marched away and left

the land and people they had found,  
subjects of boisterous wind and rain,  
to make a living as they could  
until another army came.

## Roskilde Fjord

### I

Given the skill  
to burn and waste,  
to bend and cut a perfect strake  
and casually kill;

to stop their enemies  
the longships' makers sank their craft  
in the salt-fresh harbor mouth,  
ribs raking the low tide.

### II

Brought up from mud's preserve,  
their peat-black hulls pronounce  
an art and violence, alien commerce  
we can only stop and wonder at.

Their captains also left us  
place- and family-names;  
a common hoard of speech  
in by-road, field and fell.

## Local Affairs

### I *Near Cambridge*

How she holds back, then floods and giddies us,  
Dame Memory: her plump, patched hedges  
rich in song, fen skies wide with the long  
drone of insects and distant aircraft. Smoke  
from garden fires sharpens, at a half-remove, the air.

This close and too-sweet island, whose halls  
and chapels glow like honey in the failing light,  
draws and hushes us. Behind cropped  
and proper yews, we glimpse the hidden garden  
entered once, if at all, and then as a child.

It seems close again. Even the tight, pale nettles,  
clutched among hay stubble, catch at and repossess me.  
Gestures first, then faces rise from the grass:  
friends twenty years out of mind, their voices  
England's own: light swelling from pent-up earth.

## II *Buildings*

Quoin, buttress, mullion and corbel:  
foursquare, the banks and colleges  
stand on profits solid as themselves:  
the scholarship of hops and wool.

Who occupies their rooms, if only for a while,  
must shrive these masters' souls.  
Their poor and peasantry had little part  
in it: a lot not theirs to choose,

whose work doles out our privilege  
and leisure yet. No theory sweetens  
without it's well provided for  
by merchandise, or government, or war.

The libraries and chapels rise  
in delicate deliberation. Will such craft  
and argument in fretted stone, redeem  
each day's harsh work for it?

Rood screen, rose window, gilded tracery  
came through the crash of battle; and stuff  
of men's lives bought the masons' ale and bread,  
who cut free these miracles of love.

East over Europe, over years, windows  
glowed and dimmed and stayed unlit through war  
and terror, and were made good after it.

This crippled street in Budapest, in Warsaw,  
reveals a dozen periods, starting and ending  
in the corners of each house. Every

square and alley recalls a hero – soldier,  
poet, patriot – whose name has changed  
as the demands of history change.

It's easy to wonder at régimes that in this way  
demote or sanctify the past; too easy to forget  
the history we choose defines us.

Retelling it we make our place:  
a style reflexive as this courtyard's walls  
turned in upon themselves, each course

incorporating what it has replaced.  
Like cloudlight from gold leaf and fading saints,  
the mind glides off such mass and fails to hold.

Most of what has fallen is rebuilt, becomes  
an image of itself. What may seem square and neat –  
the lives within too sheltered from the street –

are yet the substance of its every turn.  
Those remembering may not all understand,  
but who forgets has lost his place, his land.

Lifting from the last tower the light,  
night explores the softly glowing town  
and we turn from the window's blank,  
from the real pitch and loss of grip –  
gargoyles gaping, spires in the dark –  
to what we can if only half begin  
to solve: riddles and traditions of an art  
so recently assumed; codes to be invented  
or to break, a game of elegance and proof,  
which keeps some distance off the void.

And while darkness slips out on the town  
and westward across the island, and lights  
flick and go out, doubt lifts and blows  
among the papers, fear flickers in gaps  
between houses, and we say, 'It is only the night,'  
and think, if we question it at all, that  
we are safe in our model of the world.  
And the vision whispers and builds around us  
softly, softly: a theory which so nearly fits  
the facts, we shall soon have accounted for all.

v *Study*

If I should stop to think about the pride  
of knowledge and what ignorance is needed  
to continue, will it be merely that, or go beyond?  
Concern and care is not yet action.  
Or if I knew, as much as one ever can,

that turmoil and compromise were a better part  
than prudent argument, could I abandon it?  
Theory and its practice are so sweet,  
seeming all there is to stand on, at those times  
when night hunts about the street.

The wind swings and claps about the street  
with the racket of a loose steel sheet,  
while shadows of late leavers from the bar  
leap to the edge of the streetlamp's circle  
and bound back quick at their walking feet.

(So it was the soul would reel out, in trance  
or sleep, only to rein back lifelike  
in the body's waking mass.) Feet scuff, rough  
as cobbles, while the voices fade beyond sight  
and hearing at the wall's grey limit.

Whether a country's or one man's memory;  
our selves and their close histories entail us:  
a present, pressing mass that lacks full sense,  
but without which all's adrift and slides from focus:  
shadows blustering on streetlit walls.

What profit if, at the desk, my world's neat portion  
sharpens to a point? It is only the clear view  
of omission. We should try instead to draw what lies  
mostly behind the eyes. Outdoors, the dark  
tightens and lightens and opens into day.

## Stuttgart

'... die unheiligen jahren 1941 u. 1942 ...'

A clutter of raucous sparrows  
divides the pale wash of evening,  
wheeling and diving as one to compose  
anonymous black notes on the wire.

Closer, darkness presses the rose  
and lilac's rain-heavy sprays  
over the bench; their scents hold  
the air still while the city roars

silently eastward, towards night. Single leaves  
blur to a bush; the cultivated air lies down.

I salute the burgher and his civil dog  
each evening as we meet. Beyond us, cobblestones  
spiral out from the hilltop park, and lights prickle  
the wooded hills gone grey, gone dark.

\* \* \*

How far is this from the barrack block,  
the waste of frost-pocked mud at the line's end?  
In black and white, unlike our troubles now,  
the screen shudders and sharpens to the clipped  
diction of an old newsreel. The frame judders  
over what there was: stick figures, shaved skulls,  
and the city fathers: an impassive rank of broadcloth  
brought to witness by the open pit.

The liberators collected the random living  
and fired the huts, piled with their last freight,  
leaving concrete, charred posts, towers, wire;  
dust in the endless wind, floating like snow,  
like blossom after rain, like hair, like ash,  
like nothing left upon this earth.

## Urban Renewal

The old streets have gone and the black town  
centre's pointed, clean and priced beyond belief,  
and the light without falls sweet on the green grain.

Summer breathes on the country. Tree crowns  
unfold a cultivated picture of the place, where days  
once lay down for years in the streets of a black town.

New plans overlies the locks and boarded station  
but by the grey sheds the coal's grit leaves  
still on my palm a few sharp, black grains.

Gardens among the docks and bricks cleaned of stains  
have made *most desirable* these tall warehouse walls.  
Even the street's names have changed in the new town.

Paint blisters on the last gate. Behind this one,  
perhaps, stood a house, a room I called ours.  
My fingers brush lightly the splintered grain,

and the street with its quite ordinary traffic returns  
to eyes swimming against the sun, before which  
old friends are gone from sight and the towns  
turning to light fade with the golden grain.

# Brigg

## I

His mother's roses stood five and six feet tall  
filling bed after weedless bed, with barely  
a scape of moss or grass blade. In front  
were silver birches – fifty, sixty feet – grown old:  
with each big wind a branch or trunk came down.  
Later, on the sawhorse in the spinney,  
sawdust spurting from the crosscut's slot,  
it was divided for the narrow fireplace.  
The mossy, sodden wood dried slowly in the back bay  
of the fuel shed, stacked on gritty cement, beside  
coal, shouldered twice a year in hundredweights  
by Barnes' men from his creaking lorry,  
to make a shot-black cliff above the crouching child.

## II

Small, mossy, twisted, old  
apple and pear bore blemished fruits,  
and most fell weeks early, softening  
to sweetness in the orchard grass: bounty  
for flies and wasps. From his dusty, pungent lair  
under the redcurrant bush, fresh shoots and leaves  
stitched out a particoloured sky. The afternoon  
lay down about him; face pressed to earth,  
he moved among an ants' and beetles' world.  
Drought cracks springing between bare soil  
invited a descent to Hades, where tall rocks  
shivered and leaned towards the molten core  
pictured in his Child's Encyclopædia.

## III

Edith Holmes, née Lowson, was always propped  
most properly among plumped pillows in  
her dark, Victorian bed. We called each second  
Sunday, after church. Pink and shrunk as her  
crotcheted bed-jacket, she pressed my damp hand in  
her knotted own. A fly batted behind drawn curtains  
which swept the Turkey carpet. Her hair was carefully  
arranged  
above the satin bows. Unseen for years, on a day of rare heat,  
her garden throbbed outside. She asked me how was school.  
The house was called *The Poplars*, although the trees  
had long since gone, and I would take that long or longer  
to see that this was the elegant Edwardian girl  
by the door at West Farm, holding father's pony.

## IV

At the town end of Bigby Street, his mother  
and Mrs Foxton, shopping bags put down,  
had set to talking. Their gossip curled  
and bloomed into a world above his head,  
each word familiar as her present hand  
but the whole tale unguessable. 'Did you hear  
*who* it was . . . What else *could* she have done . . . ?'  
He circled, tugging and complaining, then let go  
to stir a wad of leaves clogging the drain.  
The noon train whistled through soft air; he felt  
its wheels press down the crossing, underneath the voices.  
Adult matters. Mrs F bent to chuckle at him. His mother  
grasped his arm. Whose world could matter more?

The fireplace draws a child in winter  
 forgotten by parents, dozing in the warmth  
 long past bedtime. Lamps make foggy circles  
 out beyond the windows and drawn blinds.  
 But here soot-sparks wink moving kingdoms on  
 the firebrick back: castles, trains and waterfalls;  
 the child can bring them almost to the room,  
 closer than frost-beaded berries in the lane  
 through fields beyond the garden. Then coals subside,  
 stirring father and evening's end, transforming worlds.  
 The dining room and hall through which he has to go  
 are cold and dark. The heavy curtain jussles at the door  
 hinting of utterly other things without.

#### VI *Second Form*

Headmistress' study held a dried elephant ear  
 in place of blackboard, propped upon an easel.  
 'Indian, not African.' She stood us by it to recite.  
 Its world of wrinkled valleys drove my answers out.  
 On the ground floor, behind the tallest door,  
 we memorised the carpet's muted edge.  
 Dawdling home, I came the long way by Pingley Farm,  
 ducking through tunnels leading to the front  
 near where uncle Arthur, riding dispatches from HQ,  
 was caught by a German patrol. Home at War's end,  
 he said he'd had to eat raw beets and monkey-meat  
 from the town zoo. His Great War became our First.  
 He winked. His false teeth grinned from ear to ear.

The cows behind the house on Bigby Road  
 were hulks, moored or let to drift on mist  
 divided by a brook whose water carried  
 sluggish chalk-mud from the Wolds.  
 A half-sunk willow was a submarine  
 nosing into the cattle-wallow, green rods  
 gunning from its canted trunk. He was already  
 miles from home. From the conning tower  
 he marked an ash tree looming in the hedge  
 to starboard, calmly signalling *battle stations*,  
 then *full astern*. The diesels bubbled; salt water  
 thrashed and roiled abeam. Below his post  
 men sprinted down the echoing deck.

#### VIII

Marcus Thompson and our hero made stink bombs,  
 scouring Marcus' walled back garden for the right  
 ingredients: slug, worm segments, nuggets  
 of dog turd, a soft stew of wasps and flies  
 seethed in cider from the orchard trap. Behind a bed  
 of Marcus' mother's foxgloves, they assembled the device  
 in a cracked glass jar. Later they crept along  
 the backs of houses on St. Helen's Road to plant  
 and detonate it at Farrar's garage, moments before  
 he drove up, home from work. Another time  
 they seeped oil from a bent ten-gallon drum along  
 the playground slide. Marcus' father doubted  
 their story then as much as I wonder at it now.

Chatty Binns was the town's simpleton –  
 'chatty,' from chat: a louse or nit –  
 a public charge, who'd beg all morning, then,  
 come midday, lounge outside the Angel Inn,  
 mouthing and gesturing in turn at the shoppers;  
 guzzling cold chips from yesterday's *Evening Star*.  
 He liked especially to ruffle the ready heads  
 of small boys as we straggled home from school;  
 his voice more violent but no stranger than  
 the shopman's or the banker's padded syllables.  
 I would cross to the North side of the market place  
 before it widened, to avoid the rank smell and all  
 his bellowed questions that had no earthly answers.

The Ancholme's new cut ran straight two mile  
 by the town's bottom edge, past Scawby Mill.  
 from point to soft mud point. On that stretch  
 fresh-painted yachts lay tight below the club.  
 He would explore the other, silted stream  
 past boats no longer needing mooring lines:  
 decks slanted, soft with moss, portholes open  
 to cabins of mute water. Where the river forked  
 and the island's ragged bushes round a shed  
 made no-man's-land, he'd crouch by the ribs  
 of a Humber Keel jutting from black mud, to plan  
 his sorties, Above his shoulder, miles of shining fields  
 and bolts of cloud unrolled and flapped against the sky.

I can't recall the age at which I realised  
 it wasn't usual to close one eye and lose everything  
 save the blurred edge of houses, friends, threats;  
 yet bring at once the beetle, cocked upon a leaf  
 five inches from my nose, to perfect focus.  
 I thought that anyone could, at will and in  
 this way, shut out the greater, swimming world.  
 Mine slipped in and out of focus at the garden's  
 ragged end, where pillows of half-clipped thorn  
 defended father's vegetables from Bowes' cows;  
 and the pungent smoke of a damped-down fire –  
 grass clippings, dead-headed roses, clots of weeds –  
 hung for days as I went out and straggled back.

There was no privacy. Between class periods, boys  
 pushed and squabbled in packs: classmates, housemates,  
 intimate torturers. All night, a streetlamp glanced  
 through ranks of iron bed-frames, ghost-white  
 on whispered pacts and love affairs. Each morning  
 Matron snapped on the hanging bulb and twitched  
 the blankets from Sutton's bed, nearest the door.  
 We scuttled to the washroom's damp towels and drains.  
 The new-boy was cornered again behind the curtain.  
 Rain and mist had soaked the playing fields.  
 Searching for my name on lists, I prayed, with almost  
 as much fervor as the captains, for its absence.  
 Outside, perhaps, a kind of freedom could be had.



## XIII

Released from school for an hour and  
 walking the city walls in slack, November light,  
 we saw four people burning a piano. An upright,  
 toppled on kindling. Old varnish flashed and boiled;  
 the strings went lax in thuds and curious shrieks.  
 A bottle made the rounds. We heard a fitful cheer.  
 We? I have a notion of companions, but can't imagine  
 who might have come on those long walks  
 escaping endless fellowship, or why this memory  
 should seize me now at 3 am – four figures  
 in an afternoon beyond the moat – the music gone  
 that might have been performed, all traffic  
 momentarily still, on a wholly other continent.

## XIV

They say one's childhood home – far fields  
 and nearer streets – are all (returning as  
 an adult) cramped and small. At first it seemed  
 just so; but now the smallest part has grown  
 to fill the flagstone terrace where the orchard  
 surely brushed against our windows once:  
 wet branches, leaves close-pressed as words.  
 It fades among fresh ranks of peonies and stocks.  
 Bowes' pasture's still beyond, though Bowes has gone.  
 His fields exhale thin scarves of mist; plashed hedges  
 pin them to the sodden ground. Faint cones of light  
 outline the roads that led away, and bring me back  
 to a small town I couldn't wait to leave.

## XV

When May lies down among the too-lush leaves  
 maple, sumac, all having already swelled  
 to sweetness in early heat that drove out spring,  
 closing lines of sight and bringing  
 sharply to mind an older place  
 where overgrown and narrow lanes are pressed  
 between the quilted hedgerows, and shadows  
 populate a sky as changeable and muddled  
 as the past it shares . . .; when May lies down  
 and sudden, foreign summer takes its part,  
 powdering the leaves with dust, I know that place,  
 being left to slip beyond the world's curve,  
 can never be one's own again, a home.

## Musnikovo

1969

Three hours beyond Prizren I left  
the border road, to find at evening an orchard:  
dirt new-turned and soft under the buzzing leaves  
and water threading to a stone basin.  
It seemed a good place for the night.

And when the inevitable policeman arrived,  
trying to move me on, this time it was  
not for regulations' sake, but his concern  
for *medved* – bears. He spoke excitedly, gesturing  
toward the improbable, tree-crowded slope.

Had a bear *really* carried off a child? I was too tired  
to believe in bears, and sensed he'd let me stay.  
And yes, after we'd taken turns from a small flask,  
he left, shrugging his shoulders, to walk  
the chalk-dusted track to the village.

The children, who'd been hiding behind the wall  
at our backs, then came out one by one, bringing  
plums and blemished apples, and following much  
whispering and noises off, gave me shyly a few  
sweaty coins in a square of cloth 'to buy bread.'

They press around: Kosovars, Albanian and Serb;  
hands rest a moment on my shoulder, their fingers  
explore shirt and beard; the small, grave faces  
push closer, eyes intent, almost to block the last light  
from this page I cannot finish, nor put down.

1999

After the concert in Dubrovnik, and earlier, on  
the bridge at Mostar, students spoke to me  
of Njegos and his *Gorski Vijenac*: 'He is our Homer.'  
Memories made powerful as rivers.  
I had forgotten it, but wonder, now,

could these have been the same children,  
grown into an age of change and visions,  
who feasted here, each on his allotted portion?  
Too early to come to this end, and to be sure  
a frugal meal, but more than enough.

Under the sheltering trees and hedgerows  
irregulars had gathered to reclaim their fields.  
And on the voiceless, faceless fields, blackbirds  
strutted, claws and beaks cocked on the leavings:  
the clutter of shoes and plates and photographs,

the empty road, a tractor with tyres melted,  
neighbours' hate sprayed on the stained cement  
by steps leading to nothing, the view exact and clear  
as the surviving frescoes at Pec: saints twisting  
in torments behind the priests who could not

turn this aside: the haystacks burned or rotted,  
hedges run riot with flowers, pruned trees loaded  
with sweet, black plums; and just beyond the orchard wall,  
a hundred meters square, perhaps a little less:  
the field, the small fields of fresh-turned earth.

## The Dictator and the Dogs

BUCHAREST, 1996

He dreamed a vast boulevard of heroes  
fronted by flawless concrete, sweeping toward  
*The House of the People* like a wave, the future

that will break over us all. And because they could,  
his paragraphs leveled the untidy streets and houses:  
nothing was left standing to chance.

His *Great People* would be rehoused  
in rational blocks at the city's limits;  
but no plan was made for the dogs.

Deprived of trees, cobbles, cracked seats, curbs  
and fountains, the dogs were let go loose.  
Not free. They would not leave their homes.

Ten years after, they still come each night  
to steal back their city. From parks and dumps  
and the palace garden, sectors now peopled

only in pictures, slipping grey but not as ghosts,  
they come, canny as the new men. Singly or in packs,  
living by snap and wit, they worry the past,

outlast revolution. Staying to be reckoned with,  
glancing off our scent, they are becoming  
our shadows in the flickering hour.

## InterCity

The train investigates the backs of towns:  
wagons, burning rubbish, dust  
and lime. A factory someone owns  
peels in the gritty waste.

The skies are blue as a giant's brush;  
the day's unlooked for, indirect.  
Square and scalloped gardens crouch  
at their houses' backs.

Whitethorn, blackthorn, may and chalk,  
a cutting swoops around us;  
memory drops in place with a click  
as if there were no loss,

Everything's recognisable here: nettles  
crowding the canal's towpath,  
wet clay printed by tractor tyres;  
it comes back in a breath,

and scores of red 'phone-boxes  
stacked sideways in a yard –  
love or panic ghosted on their glass –  
give up a rush of words

from a street corner in a black town  
half a life and not ten miles away;  
a voice tight with the unasked question,  
the open line's hum in reply.

## Selling the House

*i.m. Robert Montague Holmes, 1903–1995*

Rereading these letters, as if a first time,  
beyond thirty years and all that's gone by: things  
    we were leaning toward without knowing;  
        how much can be recognised now?

Clearing the house now to be left a last time –  
these eighteen years yours alone, never my home,  
    but a place I could always come back  
        towards – walls and roof contract and cool,

while the shortest day's sun slants low across  
ditches and ice-skinned fields behind the fence.  
    In front, trees that brought you the seasons  
        give up their light and go out.

Night's thin comforter soon will fold over us,  
in separate places, under the shifting clouds  
    known only by an absence of stars.  
        So winter calls everything down

and into itself, as you have drawn in your world.  
Walks once shared become boundaries; the village,  
    a narrowing garden, a single room. We are  
        not far apart, yet you have turned

already towards the journey which will go  
beyond the thread of letters, far out of reach  
    and far beyond this: a small measure of thanks  
        for my life and the half of yours you have shared.

*Place*

## The World's Oldest City

Having a map which could at best  
be called inadequate, his Turkish up to finding food,  
Otel and Kamping, but not the (right) way,  
he arrived, mid-morning, at a different Hüyük.

The goats and old men outside the teahouse  
flurried to a new arrival, but no one knew  
about 'old stones.' With several children,  
gormless, witty, whooping ahead by turns,  
and a student who had some French, he climbed  
the Ak Dag to view the lake, dry soil, sparse groves  
of birch and walnut, and over all of it transparant sky  
propped on the village's patient, mud-brick back.  
The wind from nowhere gathered its dusts  
and galloped across the dun plain.

Afterwards, for hours in the café drinking tea,  
he waited, watching the bus for Beysehir load animals  
and people, wondering where was Çatal Hüyük:  
*the world's oldest city.*  
The student went to ask the teacher.

\* \* \*

And now it is Kizan, that young schoolteacher,  
exiled from Istanbul and Paris, eager to discuss  
events outside, Vietnam, the revolutions of '68,  
the Beatles – things as distant now for me  
as she was from them then, having to veil herself  
when she went out, whom I remember clearer  
than those furrowed walls and pits and a little  
coloured earth I came on two days after.

Kizan, and Ruhi and Ulvan who later  
led me through the lush confusion  
of village gardens, to poplars ranked  
beneath a stony, pitted slope,  
to a place where nothing old was left,  
which was not Çatal Hüyük,  
but where the wind muttered and glimmered  
in evening's last swordburst of light.

## The Delegates Go to the Great Wall

### I

Manufactured in Japan, the minibus  
is packed with us – distinguished visitors –  
who set off, speaking of equations, spaces, spectra,  
while villages bounce past in dust or tumble  
up the chaotic, shaven hills, which suddenly  
ten-roofed pagodas magical as fairy tales  
punctuate with startling green tiles.

Bicycles and tottering, pedalled loads  
of sand, cement, steel reinforcing-rods,  
chickens, melons, TV-sets, caged crickets – pulled  
and pushed by feet, hands, and the much-repaired  
vehicles of those nations once most-favoured –  
slow travel to a dusty crawl between  
the perfect fields as small as living rooms,

which rooms here are smaller yet.  
The hills are bulbous now and fields die out.  
Few trees remain apart from those fresh-planted  
in ordered rows against the stripping wind  
that brings the Gobi's dust into Beijing and,  
without those trees, would take its soil far East.  
Look: up there now, the outcrops snap their teeth.

But no: it is the Wall! A dragon's backbone  
zigzagged in calm sunlight on six thousand  
li of hills: the edge of government and so  
the very world. We are informed, with criticism  
of the former ways but not without a certain pride,  
that a mason's body, or a soldier's, or a peasant's  
lies beneath each stone. And so we have arrived.

Minutes past the stalls of teeshirts, ivory, cloisonné and Fujifilm, we are climbing, ladder-like, this Wall, here populous with giggling families and soldiers pictured, posed against the freshly-mortared blocks. But just beyond the first watchtower's square, slabs tilt into the earth between the unrestored face walls, and crowds pass out of mind.

Only the wind, already in September cool, perturbs a thousand miles of northern grass bringing a murmur of the salt-pans and the desert. Behind our backs the Middle Kingdom seethes in plan and contradiction. Noon's coal dust settles from a million cooking fires on the sultry courts and gardens and the fantastic lions on the eaves.

## II

Facing these northern hills that shade to blue, it's easy to return a thousand years and be a small official, a district magistrate once more devoted to the law, sometime a dilettante too fond of wine and art; perhaps a tax-collector, part of the larger state: in any case, secure within its boundaries that make of chaos, sense.

Or seem to. There is a process: axioms, evidence assembled, proof and theorem follow. One must digest, repeat the Classics, pass all exams, and (should the Heavens will it) remain in favour, even prosper. Yet it is best to stay some distance from the centre: powers sits uneasily in the close air: a fit or freak of weather can overthrow a generation's work and be one's end.

To the city-born this province is the end. The Empire is the only order that I know. The hills run off towards what has no name. My opera is the wolf and crow. My former friends address their rituals and policy a thousand miles away, ignorant of the barbarians massing on the plain, whose fires at night are many as the stars.

Exile and silence at this outpost on the Wall have given need and means to think on what has brought me here, what keeps this province and its people scraping the wretched soil to yield Lords and Emperor their share. Wall-soldiers shiver in the autumn wind, but the ideals and all the State's beliefs I have held close are colder still.

So let them go. But how then construe the world and men without that one order? Better to keep it, for 'the people are like children who must be so corrected.' I can turn away or turn a closed eye against 'unfortunate necessity,' who have helped the Governor, my friend, sated after a fine meal, judge a child who stole a cup of rice.

Loss and confusion tumble on the sudden wind, rattling the cherry's leaves. A burst of rain darkens the stones. If my page stay blank, or I should sit too late, cold at the open window, it is to let that chaos in which has no place as yet. Close behind my back the rules unravel and a larger fate takes shape to sweep us all towards the night.

Noon's heat resumes the air. Hermit, sage,  
 reformed Red Guard, peasant-capitalist and Commissar  
 prepare themselves for rest. In the Forbidden City,  
 in the Emperor's Hall of Time, exquisite instruments,  
 the regulators of affairs, his clocks, the gifts  
 of Kings and Tsars, stand stopped in dust,  
 the same that dries and cracks our lips today.

A chainsaw or a tractor irrupts and interrupts  
 this reverie and then the guides appear, gesticulating  
 to us to rejoin the group. Reconstructing, China makes  
 no room for solitaries, least of all among her visitors.  
 The bus and lunch and Thirteen Tombs will wait  
 no longer. Leaving the wind and empty hills behind,  
 we're taken on to see the crowded balance of our day.

## Short Visits in Kyoto

### *Banker at Rokkaku Do*

Briefcase set down, he  
 searches for coins and softly  
 tugs the bronze bell.

### *Heian Jingu Shrine*

August's hot wind  
 disturbs the Gingko's shade  
 beyond paper walls.

Bamboo brushstrokes, pines  
 trained over two-foot mountains:  
 islands in the stream.

Gliding smears of ink,  
 the carp gulp together and  
 boil into our world

### *Nijo Castle*

Each syllable creaks –  
 the chittering nightingale floor –  
 newcomer warning.



*Parking*

All night, vans and trucks  
sit up and beg in front rooms  
of wooden houses.

*Appointment to Keep*

Dumb, and blind to these  
neon calligraphies, I  
count streets carefully.

*Narita Bus*

A Gothick Kastle  
as comic as we're foreign:  
*Tokyo Disneyland.*

*Business Lunch*

Alley off a lane  
off streets off Oike-dori:  
a scrubbed oak door.

Behind the gate: tree  
and cliff make ten perfect feet;  
lunch open to view.

Noisily they eat  
*udon*. No small talk. Without,  
shoes and briefcase wait.

## Sravanabelagola

We started barefoot, mixed among a snake  
of murmurous pilgrims (shoes left for lost  
at an over-eager sort of market-stall),  
to straggle up the smooth, 300 meter rock:  
grey pachyderm pushed up above the plain  
and shouting, crowded, old, god-heavy land.

As we went up, concealing walls sloped out  
to show the village tank; and dung and dust  
and noise fell back, till one could pause and see  
tin roofs winking up and down the street,  
stagnant green canals, and fruit trees' straggled lines  
smacked up against the palms and humps of hills.

Packed trains and buses lurch towards this omphalos;  
psychedelic '60's trucks go wrong-way-wide  
around blind curves, gears clashing, shouting  
*Ganeesha! – Horn OK! – Laxmi protect this one!*  
On every surface, wood and bulbous steel,  
day-glo gods and mortals loll in paradise.

In the bazaar a tinsmith's soot-smear'd boy  
peers through torn curtains over racks of dippers,  
milkcans large and small and tiffin boxes  
crazy-piled above the sweeper's rancid slop.  
His perfect teeth flash mockery and greeting,  
redolent through two-stroke taxi haze.

And on the world's hill all the while the snake-coil  
shuffles up: bent-headed, shrivelled, skipping in the sun.  
Two memsahibs are trotted by in wicker chairs  
borne up on knotted backs; their nervous laughter  
ripples back and down across the undertow  
of bare feet scuffing, slapping sun-warm stone.

On top, Gomateswara, naked and neatly coiffed  
in studded whorls, swells through the open court  
above coy cock and balls and down to toenails broad  
as elephant-feet, all wreathed in scattered flowers,  
bells and swells of muttered prayers, and Kodak  
flashes through the holy smoke.

This is no peaceful place, you understand.  
Laughing families picnic all around the court;  
their shining teeth attack the simple food, although  
devoutest ones among them wear gauze masks  
so they should not ingest the smallest life.  
Gomateswara stands impassively above, and smiles.

Coming down among new-swarmling breezes,  
pungent-sweet to counter thirst as scalped green coconuts,  
we found our shoes perked up in proper ranks,  
and once more shod, tugged back through the bazaar  
and bobbing to the waiting bus, we heard taped voices  
pronounce the thousand names of God, of gods, of god . . .

## Eastern States

### *Standard Time*

The room is whiter than the hour expects.  
It was much too early to wake  
when traffic stopped driving through sleep.

Tiptoeing on cold boards to the window, I see  
disturbing silence rising through ice,  
yards borderless, the street drawn in to a tree

suddenly strange, car-roofs soft and snow-rounded  
as the slopes of a summer forty years gone,  
when the sun shone, it seemed, always

and is still falling (no matter how harsh  
and stone-cropped it was or has become)  
on miles of bee-stitched, brilliant gorse.

### *Hammond Hill*

Groping under racks and scarves of cloud,  
the last light ruffles a fringe of trees,  
silvering their cold, pale bark. A branch,  
propped on another, goes off like a shot.

As night touches a face, a fringe of trees,  
the whole wood leans in the windless air  
propped on another, its branches become roots  
spreading in the locked swell of soil.

The white wood strains in the windless air  
as masts in a gale. Blue snowdrifts curl  
eastward over the locked swell of soil  
and cold retakes the pores of earth, of faces.

As masts stepping to a smart gale, the woods  
hurtle, motionless, to darkness, last zero.  
Cold resumes the earth's pores, and faces  
huddle among scarves and coats and towns.

### *Naif Painting*

The lake stretches and creaks under tattered snow,  
its fabric made new for the season, drawn tight  
this windless day as the same snappish air,  
now silent, come summer, will tighten a sail.

Today the only presences gliding beyond the bridge  
are skaters', and a dog surprised to a halt  
on a snow-free patch. Behind their still shouts  
a string of smoke uncoils and frays.

The random script that posed these figures  
in arrested pirouettes – scarves extended  
as the dog's tail – rolled out a flat of trees  
against the startling, cloud-rinsed sky.

It stays us momentarily, who've lost  
our footing in a fresh-glazed world.

### *Forebears*

Nothing troubles a ghost town  
whose silvered houses crouch against the wind.  
Leaves twist across the gritty ends of snow  
smudging a roadside leading somewhere else.

The families whose these houses were,  
are insubstantial now as air. Walking  
under their trees and gable ends,  
they knew the fields and saw them taken.

Without these people and their chosen words,  
'what' would swallow stone and board;  
trees without names would hide the road,  
dirt stop wells and cellar doors,

rain take table, lintel, roof.  
Their speech is all we have, or most of it;  
voices lending corners to the square,  
picking their stories out of absent air.

### *Counting the Woodpile*

When winter cracks like a gun  
in the bleached woods  
and garden and stream are stone,  
we'll begin to burn

the fifty summers cut and split  
and stacked last fall. It'll take  
all that to keep the old man out  
until the next.

When the wind kicks at the door  
and the window's thick with ice  
inside, we'll wonder how much more  
can hold through March.

The years of sun and growth  
leave threads only of ash and smoke:  
a play of light and warmth.  
Enough. Almost enough.

## Western States

### *Mountain Time*

In Oak Creek Canyon, Arizona, minutes from the highway, ethnic restaurants and galleries of *Original Western Art*, seven whole ages reach and stand apart. Not ours; a thousand feet of time set out in sand, in lime. Sweet pine and Gambel's oak, moss overlays old ripples and the long laying down of seas, the quicker prints of rain and mist.

Here and all across the West, sandstone, pumice – shattered blinks and twitches of an order shifting under – bare their bones. Three hundred or ten thousand years of signatures make little difference. Who would shout and fight and build a silly breath, a whisper, shadow on the grass?

### *Death Valley*

Will it be hot or cold or simply like this endless footlit distance where eyes skip and swerve to the least detail –

mica, orestone, twisted bolts and plate,  
bone-white beams that make  
this wilderness emptier far than if  
the miners never had been here –

or will death be, as the lives that led to it,  
provisional as ourselves, their silly bearers:  
a mirage of drive-in banks and grocery marts?

Here is a kind of end – shimmering rockface,  
boulders, trees one can't resolve, wavering  
in a grace of heat and dust – devils blowing  
and tumbling at the edge of sight.

### *Bah-vanda-sava-nu-kee*

*or, INDIAN GEORGE WATCHES THE EMIGRANTS*

Boy-who-runs-away had seen them start  
and struggle up the dry stream bed,  
leaving the last green flash of cottonwoods:

a distant, ragged, dogged people: blue and grey,  
rocking their parched wagons over the sand ledges  
toward the impassible cliffs they could not see.

(He stayed in hiding, prudently. Young men, returning to his village, said the yellow-heads had sticks could split the air, throwing death a distance.)

He watched and watched them out of sight, who might have led them out. Did then the empty vista – magenta cliffs, shimmering cinder cones,

slopes in strict repose: all that present landscape furrowed by the element they would die for want of – wheel across his flat, brown eyes?

*Boiling River, Yellowstone Park*

*for Marcy Barge and Russ Walker, December 1987*

By vague ranges shouldering the clouds,  
through Paradise under a meagre scrim of snow,  
we drove to where the Gardiner River licked its rocks  
and bitter grass and every branch was bleached.

Outside the car, the air snapped and cut at us  
and at a quarter mile the hot spring's steam  
peeled off and flattened over the bank's  
carved edge to tear and vanish, icing the last leaves.

'Undressing's much the worst,' you said. I doubted it,  
but, once among the roil of eddies, cold and hot  
by turns, and under the low cave, sweet

in mineral summer, strange was real.  
Snow-parched sage and mountain blurred to steam.  
The old year died as zero crystallized our hair.

*Euphoric State, Berkeley, 1994*

*with apologies to David Lodge*

Jays argue raucously and swoop among  
the eucalyptus castles of the trees,  
and bushes scramble where the grass has gone  
up hillsides tilted through absurd degrees.

The campus shimmers in a sprightly air:  
it is all *things*: stone benches, walks and posts.  
Ideas seem shyer than a snowflake here.  
The buildings are too square and grand for us:

all frightful towers, windows tall for giants  
leaning toward the city on their sills;  
huge bay picked out with boats and islands;  
inhuman swath of golden light and steel:

the bridge connecting mist to land  
that at this distance seems to carry nothing  
on its always-being-painted orange span,  
beyond which greater mists have shelved the sun.

Fog permeates the mind and morning air,  
makes quite impossible the task at hand:  
to think here and to write with proper care  
will be as difficult as life elsewhere.

*Entering the Cloud Layer*

## Forty-fifth Spring

Dawn's kerosene pooled on the runway.

Sleepless after a night's travel,  
I nod in the train's sluggish heat.

As it leaves the city, spinneys and windbreaks  
lean into light. The line shrugs and straightens  
towards the Pennines. I come back always to this.

Older and calmer perhaps, eyes closing  
more readily – but how much has changed?  
Beyond routine, truth is shy as ever; is chiefly  
learning how little one knows.

The hedgerow's a world's edge;  
no: a world itself, opening to the damp air,  
a trouble of green sprinkling the copse,  
ploughed fields rich and ruffled as silk  
wrapped foursquare about farms.

From the train's streaked window,  
the scrubbed stone of Victorian stations.  
cast iron sparkling on gutters, bossed railings,  
names fresh-planted in flowers: mill towns clean  
as the passing whistle. Watch how, beyond the last  
house in the upended street, the whole sky opens.

\* \* \*



Clean because idle, millwrights long gone;  
still pinned in valleys by smokeless chimneys,  
the towns show faces like a family in the front parlour,  
scrubbed for the holiday visits, children fidgeting  
on newly-waxed furniture, beneath the inlaid daggers  
our Dad brought back from the war.

Millstone gives over to limestone, the outcrops  
whiten eastward as the valley opens  
to rough pastures where faded and fresh  
graffiti – KOP RULES, *Faggot*, MANchester,  
LEEDS FC – bully the drifting sheep.

A raw wind sweeps old papers and leaves  
against hedges, banks and culverts, as if  
to tidy up the spate of words with which I can't say  
where we're going, or how fast, or far.

Clouds scurry across midmorning's sky  
as the track unrolls from the hills.  
A glasshouse winks two fields beyond the road.

The picture's perfect and it makes  
no earthly common sense.

Day's light pours over everything.

## Uncertainty Principle

*for David McCann*

Stepping late from the dark sedan, leaving behind  
sleepers stirring at open windows, she crosses  
to the far side and follows four streets  
to where the last ends in a half-lit wall.

Here are the two steps down to a low door  
which opens as she knew it must. Inside,  
across a garden where lilies gleam and murmur  
in the light current, she will see others coming,

crossing the bridge and drenched lawns,  
the hems of their dresses dark with dew.  
Starlight glisters from glass and scattered plate.  
The summerhouse tinkles with wit.

Voices acclaim a new arrival, lanterns  
nodding from branches far over the water  
where boats carelessly verge towards  
what kind of midnight, of crowds?

They are as bright and many as the stars:  
quick movements in the corner of an eye  
ceasing the instant her head turns.  
A spoon winks and is lost in the grass.

What does she taste, later, standing rumpled  
and dusty outside the closed door? An echo  
troubles the air. As first light shifts and breaks,  
the long car noses down the street, and,

another door clicked shut, moves off past empty lots,  
charred shells of buildings, waste lumber, trash,  
excrement, and through it, pale trees rooting  
and sunflowers tugging at the stale breeze.

## Failure to Forget

*after A.R. Luria: The Mind of a Mnemonist*

S's mind flocked with images: each word  
called up a vivid history. For instance,  
*heat* was the heavy summer of '13, wind  
limping at the swollen curtain by his bed,  
a German doctor who coughed discreetly,  
pronouncing the illness 'minor . . . in his head.'

Curtains with a tasseled border brushed his head,  
Flocked wallpaper folded forever on the word  
as he began to embroider that sharp instance:  
fever at once made tangible by the wind  
which barely ruffles the flowers in their beds  
beneath his window where they nod discreetly.

The rest of the sentence plucks discreetly  
at his sleeve. The doctor's cuffs move overhead,  
splashing the dusk to emphasise a word.  
He will not wonder yet at this small instance  
of how things twist among themselves and wind  
around his mind. He fidgets in the straightened bed.

Mid-sentence, years later, heat returns him to that bed  
as the summer's shouting flowers indiscreetly  
clamour on curtain and wallpaper, obscuring the heads  
before him and even his friend's, whose word  
conjured this memory and claimed the instant.  
Minutes lag, barely lightened by the wind.

If only, he wonders, when again he can, the wind  
would cuff it all to shreds, like steam; but the narrow bed  
is always waiting for him, curtained discreetly

and made up in the corner of each day. Although no head  
save his turns at the soft implosion of the word,  
all the world he has, flows from that instant.

And is it ever in perspective? An instant  
of confusion rattles the window, colours wind  
up and the glass parts, like a river over its bed.  
His reflections shiver and join indiscreetly  
to make up an unruly scene somewhere ahead.  
With a last effort, he pronounces the word

*heat*, trying for the word only, with no instance  
of the wind's force. Without success. The child's bed  
and all it led to stands discrete and present in his head.

## Calling at the Wrong Address

Walking past the hundredth high oak door,  
under its monogram illegible today at noon,  
one might step aside with half a thought and enter  
a cobbled court that seems familiar . . .

\* \* \*

But something tugs at us and comes between  
to overlay the present, softer scene;  
each day being a mind's eye swimming  
with houses built on houses like the clouds  
that tower and purple into storm  
under some quite distant, crackling sky.

A place that still surprises us –  
although it's fast becoming home,  
and where, it's said, the central fact is space –  
might seem a most appealing prospect,  
but is, alas, part-true, if even that.  
Nothing *is* unless it's lodged in time.  
Time makes space for us, then takes it back.

\* \* \*

The lower lead-roofed buildings drip  
on plants set out beneath the concierge's window;  
her face swims up behind lace curtains,  
hostile, but too curious to stop me yet.

Above it: balconies, tall windows shortening  
floor by floor, slate gables, chimneys,  
boat-shaped roofs that float and fade  
in bags of wrinkled cloud.

\* \* \*

Go on and through, then hesitate beyond  
the second stairway . . . should it be the third?  
Wide, shallow steps, waxed oak  
and threadbare carpets point toward  
what might have been remembered, given time:  
uneven plaster in the niche, where damp  
has worked a half-forgotten map.  
All as comforting to someone's eyes  
as slippers or a chair, but utterly  
and still minutely strange to one  
who wonders, halted on the stair,  
what other futures might be playing now,  
and sees the border where the carpet ends  
is ridged with years of paint,  
and steps are narrower from here.

\* \* \*

Reaching the landing with its empty vase  
and rain-streaked window, the door  
is standing open, as it would have been,  
to let pass gusts of muffled conversation,  
music, laughter like a laden tray  
carried warm from kitchen out to guests:  
snatches of a life unwoven, to be made up fresh.

The voices swell and sweep and fade  
as radio waves that ghost at evening  
suddenly halt and start,  
lighting the few short steps  
dividing day from night,  
what happened from  
what might have been.

## Career

He always thought the word 'career'  
meant headlong downhill progress, half  
out-of-control, so that one barely made it  
around the corner by the hardware shop  
and over the narrow bridge, pavements  
slicker than a frozen dewpond, runners  
squealing against the chipped kerb.

One's principles have little to do with it.  
Others might have chosen theirs, but his  
career came over him like a kind of weather  
which the merest breath could have changed  
entirely, though now it seems impossible  
it could have been otherwise, so quickly  
we forget what might have been:

doors unopened, fields left far behind,  
a prospect fading half way over into mist  
and rain. Yet he is, he's eager to insist, lucky  
to have been dropped and now be so absorbed  
in this strange calm and trouble, with all its care  
for detail and bizarre side-issues. He's enthralled  
to try the puzzles fate assigns each week,

although he cannot tell if they are set  
by the Gods of order who already know the score  
and sit, grumbling and exchanging bets on who  
might give the least annoying answer; or are  
his own devices, dreams; or if they grow among  
that common ground which all those earlier visitors  
have beaten and defined: his discipline.

The road unravels and he gathers speed again,  
leaving the little clamour and the lights behind,  
now pitching between close walls of rock.  
The whole air's warming up. Piñon pines  
and mesas loom under a shaken bag of stars.  
Between avoiding outcrops and the edge, I wonder  
that he should, so far, have fallen mostly on his feet.

## Irrational Fraction

When it seems that part of my life  
must have belonged to another, someone  
more suitable, deserving what notice  
  
has fallen my way and knowing precisely what to do  
next; it's as if I woke half way here, to days  
couched in these alien symbols  
  
with which I might pretend a certain facility,  
adept at seeming to manage them,  
but not (it now becomes clear) well;  
  
for I find myself walking on stage to applause  
from the darkened hall, bowing, and about to sit  
at the open instrument, innocent of every note.

## Conference

In the Douanier's carnival night  
the trees are perfect, spare and bright  
and leafless as our winter speech.

Two figures stand in foreground,  
their silks are thin against the air;  
a moment more and they have gone.

December's heatless sun  
faces frost on lawn and wood,  
while in the lecture hall we coax

a minute world of care and proof  
directed on quite other fields,  
bearing neither bud nor leaf.

And yet a stir runs in the room,  
for something has been done  
perhaps as startling as breath;

at such a moment everything  
is suddenly charged and very clear:  
there is no other path to take.

But all the ordinary days,  
uncovering only what's allowed,  
one may still regret the loss

when broad day shimmers and there are  
no figures dressed for carnival or not  
on heartless lawns that brim with light.

## Theory and Practice

Leonardo's fabulous machines  
in metalpoint and pen and softly washed  
flex and flap their varnished wings.

Suspended under or within them, knuckelled,  
near-bewitched, thought-pilots pedal the mind's air;  
their small, bound figures furiously churn or row

with forces greater than his theories would allow,  
but every struggle's fitted neatly to the page  
among capstans, angels, levers, blocks and flowers.

'I can master water or the whirlwind's rage,  
fix likenesses in bronze, on walls, in wood;  
I have built winches, cranes and cannonades

to satisfy a Prince's every wish. I can  
interrogate the least element of nature's art,  
and plot the vortices of river, age or heart.'

The contract gained, decked with honours due,  
he will retire to a crabbed solitude  
and cultivation of those arts which quite belie  
these grand and foolish claims.

## The Garden Engineer

Water will be your greatest challenge:  
an intractable medium to be coaxed  
sometimes miles and given the precise head  
to overcome running losses and at the end  
raise a perfect fan over Neptune's car.

You must make pools to hold Narcissus' face  
long after he goes; mirrors changeable as the sky,  
cascades which slip like silk across their lips,  
and others: a broken-backed sliver of light  
deep under leaves in Diana's grove.

You will need valves and sluices to drain it  
for those Northern winters, when the valley's edge  
swoops to the bare quincunx, and frost uncolours  
the lawns and raked alleys. How different from  
our comfortable mists, where moss pads out the year!

You must learn to level this and raise that  
with a hundred cartloads of boulders and earth  
as He dictates, to hide or reveal a distant tower,  
make way for a maze and summer houses  
where favourites can be met unobserved.

You will imagine tall trees catching a wind that stills  
among their million leaves, leaving shade  
penned under them in pools where He might weigh  
the little countries and the great, and so determine  
matters of state among your tended beds.

Thus, my young friend, cultivate most carefully  
technique and beauty, detail and the grand design;  
quicken your skills by all means to match His  
passing pleasures, but look beyond a King's whim.  
It may last half a lifetime; your garden: centuries.

## Four Flowers

### *Toadshade*

Named not for its broad triplets  
of fleshy leaves and short, erect bud  
unfolding to a ragged star on the wood's floor;  
but rather for its propensity  
for moist and shady places  
where small acts of violence  
may be safely hidden.

Its polite name is trillium.

### *Viper's Bugloss*

Alien. A bristly plant  
with short, claw-like stems,  
each bearing a single bloom.  
Colonises roadsides and waste places.  
Of the family: *Forget-me-not*.

### *Sky Lupine*

Favours weak and stony upland soils.  
A widespread root system generally  
keeps this roadside escape secure against  
rising into the egg-thin, blue horizon.

### *Erythronium Americanum*

Pale leaves brown-birthmarked,  
shielded yellow petals freckle,  
nodding in the half-shade.

Trout-lily turns to adder's tongue.  
What beads of dew or poison  
a simple name puts on.



'In this medieval house was born  
the modern novel . . .'

In course of building work in London, 1969,  
workers found five skeletons, one of whose skulls  
had been trepanned. Being also *uncommon small*,  
it was thought likely this was Lawrence Sterne's.

(For after death in lodgings in New Bond Street,  
his body was reported snatched by resurrection men  
and sold to the anatomists at Cambridge, where,  
upon public dissection, the face was recognised too late.)

But whether his or not, and incomplete, the bones  
were taken north to be reburied in Coxwold Parish  
where they now lie two yards outside the church door  
under a cracked and partly faceless stone.

Inside the church – too elegant it seems for this  
small village – are oak box-pews, foursquare,  
whose doors secure with neat brass latches:  
one cannot slip in or quietly out of here.

A leaflet written by the present vicar  
informs us that, during his incumbency in seventeen-  
sixty-two or three, Parson Sterne had these pews made,  
and further, that their height was, earlier

this present century, *reduced* by cutting  
several inches from their lower halves. For many  
of his congregation, weekly sermons were their sole  
diversion. What walls he made to keep them still!

Did he harangue them, Sunday captives, with his  
peculiar wit? And afterwards, would he retire home  
to take up argument behind squat chimney-breasts,  
return to chapters upon sleep, or button holes,

the paths of musket balls, a promontory of noses –  
his burgeoning book, opinions hodge-podged,  
various and colourful as his liberal meals?  
Mossy walls wrap tight about his apple trees

which today must be imagined, for walls are high  
and house and grounds are closed, under a wind-scarred sky.  
And look: his congregations are dispersed,  
the windows dark and cold. The end is here.

## Welsh Interlude

*for Bill and Dilys McCann*

### *Abertafol*

Between the mottled ebb and landward ridge –  
slate banked and crumbled over cottage row –  
this tannery turned to tearoom's now  
your home, its garden tilted side over edge  
over end: an eaves-high, roof-high wedge  
of holly, laurel and rose. Terraces  
overflow with flowers, pools and arbours press  
the gable ends; from there, and window ledges,  
martins barely leave off bombing your doorstep  
to launch their sorties over Tafol and Dyfi  
and slow-turning, sand-bearing sea.  
As day draws in, the light slides north and west,  
far from some of the swarming voices, here,  
to bring your world to temporary rest.

### *Llyn Barfog*

Futures unexpected as this sky  
sweep open over valley, house and bridge.  
Heat streams up on the climb to the hidden lake,  
today unbearded, stitched with dragonflies  
and lily-blue: such untroubled greys,  
expansive, quiet green. Bracken fronds  
are laced around the panel's *art nouveau*  
and nettle stalks are clustered by the fence.  
The breath's invisible on Cader Idris  
and evil stones lie silent in the sun.  
Words are growing at the pace of moss;  
their meanings still may open if we wait.  
For days the kobold's knocking can't be heard,  
and nothing's caught between the wires but wind.

## Liszt at Midday, 1994

*for Adam Fellegi, Zichy Jenő 41, Budapest*

Darkness and loss  
he brings us time in his hands  
while midnight chords swoop  
to the high windows

Hands that precisely let fall  
flickers of stormlight in balance  
then harsh shouts once more  
Satan thumping the table

The reply comes pale as leaves  
stripped against a bruised sky  
fifty years swept into the air  
in gusts of sudden light

## Musée Chagall

Separating earth and heaven, this green  
bubble of sustaining, skin-deep air  
is all we know. Inhale and hold a breath.  
Chasms gulp and stretch on either hand.

Histories that might have held us still  
are at the end substantial as his clouds'  
bunched air, which hides and colours and reveals  
our dreams: ladders, music, swaying crowds;

the bride who gathered the folds of her dress  
and floated above the bumbling village  
as rosy heat settled on the place,  
setting the heart's hidden ones on edge.

Palaces and kingdoms shimmer, attaining less  
structure than clouds themselves, dreams or houses  
seen once, to be recalled imperfectly and fade,  
leaving just enough to taunt us with their loss.

Or, should they return, it's as a rainbow's sweep  
bending sky to earth, which quickly softens  
and is gone. In the east the night sky plumps  
and purples like a bruise. Stormlight gains.

Doves and roses wait, the steep-terraced olives;  
bushes wait to burn, rocks to be cleft: all expect  
the magical to happen. A small wind freshens  
the patient fruit, the path that leads us out.

## Deep Circulation

What has been done cannot be taken back.  
The water sinks and vanishes from sight  
bearing traces of the things we did not lack.

Salt tilts the parcels that dissolve and pack  
half lives of strontium dust, intangible as light,  
as what's gone down and can't be taken back.

Ice-blue as cobalt, laced molecules in dark  
cold cells turn over to the pitch of night  
their balances of what we did not lack.

Five hundred years ahead those elements will break  
a different ocean's surface, holding tight  
their histories that no one can take back.

Part-spent lives will gather in the slack  
between tides, at their appointed site,  
immaculate as all we did not lack.

The simple water plays against the dock,  
preserving every theft and careless gift:  
what we have done cannot be taken back,  
nor any comfort that we would not lack.

## For Ilana, 1990

Our smallest daughter said  
that all night dreaming filled her head,  
keeping her warmer than the covers  
bunched about her bed.

Why not? When she's awake,  
from rooms apart we hear her busy voice  
building another family with all its troubled love  
and complicated noise.

## Entering the Cloud Layer

As flaps go down and the engines throttle back,  
tilting into the cloud tops,  
I know the exact moment when,

breaking the double window-glass, I could  
burst out and jump that forty feet  
to land half-stunned on vaporous cliffs,

their turf as springy as a California lawn.  
Brash song excites the hedges in that street  
where shadow columns tilt across a wall

from grounds of a house set back too far  
among white leaves substantial in the air:  
a world in negative, steaming before the rain.

It's as if a future held in trust and closed  
were suddenly divided to allow one past,  
and entering, I'd straighten to look up

from that other place, past shifting coasts and bays,  
into the wholly-polished, clear absence  
we're still descending through.

## Notes

- 11 *Sigodlin Poem*: ‘sigodlin’ means out-of-square or crooked, as in poor carpentry. I learned the word from Robert Morgan’s poem of the same name. As a child, it never occurred to me that ‘cackhanded’ was probably derived from ‘caca.’
- 17 *Roskilde Fjord*: five Viking ships were raised from the mud of Roskilde Fjord in Eastern Zealand, Denmark, during the 1960’s.
- 24 *Stuttgart*: the epigraph is taken from the text on a memorial to the Jews of Stuttgart.
- 26 *Brigg*: a small market town in North Lincolnshire (now called South Humberside), England. In part 1, a spinney is a small planting of trees; in v1, ‘second form’ (UK) = ‘second grade’ (US); in v11, the Wolds are a low range of hills.
- 34 *Musnikovo*: a village, some distance south of Prizren, in Kosovo, which I cannot locate on my maps. Petar II Petrovic Njegos (1813–51) was a Montenegrin *vladika* or prince-bishop and the author of *Gorski vijenac* (The Mountain Garland, 1847). He was regarded as an enlightened ruler and admired as a poet.
- 41 *The World’s Oldest City*: Çatal Hüyük, or Çatalhöyük, near Çumra in Konya Province, Turkey, is the site of a neolithic settlement that flourished 5,000–6,000 years ago. For a time it was the oldest known city settlement.
- 47 *Short Visits in Kyoto*: *udon* (Japanese) is a kind of noodle.
- 50 *Sravanabelagola* is the site of a Jain temple in Karnataka State, South India. Gomateswara is a Jain ‘saint.’

- 57 *Bah-vanda-sava-nu-kee* ('boy-who-runs-away'): the name of a Shoshone, also known as Indian George, who, in 1849, watched settlers and gold-seekers struggling to find a way out of Death Valley. His photograph, taken in the 1930s, appears in *Twilight of the Jackass Prospectors* by Robert Ansel Cartter and George R. Cartter, Sagebrush Press, Morongo Valley, CA 92256.
- 80 *'In this medieval house was born . . .'*: Lawrence Sterne (1713–1768) took holy orders and was vicar of Sutton-on-the-Forest, near York, for twenty years. In 1759, after publication of the first two volumes of *Tristram Shandy*, he became famous and, being presented with the parish of Coxwold, near Helmsley in North Yorkshire, he retired there to live in Shandy Hall. The title is taken from a plaque at that house, but is not strictly accurate, for the book was conceived and begun some time before his move there.

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