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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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, rains squalls 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

1 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.

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 de

fi

ines 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.
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 overlie 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.

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.
Brigg

I

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 crotched 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.

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 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.
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.

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 ten-gallon drum along the playground slide. Marcus' father doubted their story then as much as I wonder at it now.

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.
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,
inimate 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.
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.

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.

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 Vjenac: '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.
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.
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 transparent 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

1

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.

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.
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 Ginkgo's shade beyond paper walls.

Bamboo brushtrokes, 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.

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.
**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-smeared boy peers though 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-swarming 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 flootlit 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 roll 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.

*   *   *

63
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
cessing 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, knuckled,
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 intractible 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


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

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 Brig: a small market town in North Lincolnshire (now called South Humberside), England. In part 1, a spinney is a small planting of trees; in vi, ‘second form’ (UK) = ‘second grade’ (US); in vii, 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 Çatalhüyük, 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.’
Bah-vanda-sava-nee-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.

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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