

Alan Morrison

Blaze a Vanishing
and *The Tall Skies (De Höga Himlarna)*

SAMPLE



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I

The Tall Skies
(*De Höga Himlarna*)

for Matilda

The Tall Skies

Saxon *scop*, don't be afraid to walk under the tall skies —
Leave the anger and the sadness of that ragtag land behind;
Take in this crisper air; cherish the whispers of unprejudiced pines;
Let all those fears, formulas, damp anthems, resentful rhymes
Of that unhappy island fall away — lift your face up to the tall skies:
There's nothing to distrust here, no ulterior designs,
No smoke and mirrors, recriminations, falseness, smiling lies,
No aristocratic conspiracies or espionage of petty minds
(At least, not yet, in spite of moves to toe Moderate lines,
Trace capitalist star charts after decades of *demokratisk* design,
Cemented hegemonies of common purpose, egalitarian ties,
The novelties trailed by pilots of self-interest trip a thin disguise)
This sprawling land's no truck with strata — *statarna* had its time,
As the shadow of the ash tree, *samförstånd* is the Swedish twine
That weaves the commonweal of hearts together in a line
Straight as the angle of conversation — most made with the eyes;
No room for small talk in the long country of runic signs;
Opprobrium is soberly apportioned to those stars that rise
Too showily for public stomachs — no appetite to fetishise
Vain individuals' arrogated talents: none should advertise
Advantages — the lumberjack cuts every tree down to one size;
All's crystal clear and classless as the lake-reflected skies,
The stalking skies, azure fields of Fólkvangr stacked with white
Hayricks flamed with amber brilliances, Brisingamen-bright;
Palatial vaults of immeasurable blue, sun-striated cumuli,
Giant sails of stratospheric long-ships launched antrorse
 across the Nordic nebulae,
The skyward sea, the incandescent firmamental archetype
Of our island's watercolour welkin reproduction — atlas of light,
Staggering map of Gylfaginning, Asgard's pillared heights,
The indomitable distances that failed to circumscribe
The ancient *wicing*, scourge of our wincing race in Widsith's time —
Saxon *scop*, don't be scared of vaster scale, the Skaldic cries
That carry on sharp boreal winds where the sociable plover flies —
The tall skies will take you in, shake the clouds from your grey eyes...

[*Scop*: poet (Anglo-Saxon). *demokratisk*: democratic. *statarna*: pre-1940s Swedish system of agricultural serfdom. *samförstånd* [pr. *sam-fur-stond*: 'mutual understanding'. *wicing*: old Anglo-Saxon for *Viking*. *Skaldic*: from Viking *skald* (poet)].

The Dala Horses

Dalecarlians — the folk of Dalarna, the Swedish dales—
Hand-carve their wooden Dala Horses in flat-planed curvatures;
No two are the same; each dipped in primer: black, white, yellow,

Blue, green, or emblematic red; harnesses hand-painted
In ripple patterns of *kurbits*: pumpkins of biblical legend
With luscious gourds of scrolling foliage — then varnished:

Souvenirs individually carved in whittlers' rustic
Carpentries practised for three centuries, since the first
Was sculpted from pine as a toy tribute to eight-legged Sleipnir,

Odin's steed depicted in Icelandic *Edda* and Snorri
Sturluson's *Gylfaginning* — though the Dala Horse has four
Legs, in some lights their shadows make them eight. Shapes

And sizes vary, from the stout Nusnäs to the stately Rättvik
Hooves. Every Swedish house has its Dala Horse stood
On a mantelshelf or windowsill — as, at Yule, Swedish

Windows grow their seven-branched candelabra and Stars
Of David. And, at winter solstice, all Swedes celebrate
Sankta Lucia with tinselled Angel maids and white-robed

Star boys. Swedish rural houses are carved of wood, painted
In primrose yellow, pale green, periwinkle or traditional
Falu-red. Each Swede is equal to the next; all are addressed

By first names, no matter their ages — no titles here: this is
One nation as a family: all are welcomed, for all sprang
From the same ancestral Ash Tree. Ostentation, frowned-upon.

Hands link in Commonality. Few are as contented in
Their places as the Swedes; nor as free, for their humility.
The snow coats the bone-creaking antlers of the elk and he

Shakes it off like dust from a mantelshelf... At first glance
This folkloric kingdom might appear a nation of sameness,
Of flat-carved character — but look closer: each Swede is

Painstakingly sculpted with distinctive grooving,
Painted in startling patterns catching on straying stares
Alert to shades no camera captures: the calm mystiques

Of uncomplaining smiles; watchful sagas of mist-blue eyes,
Like sapphires in isinglass —keeping steep vigils over
Rangier distances of taller faces; guarded angers

As crags under hushed rapids —gimleted fragilities
Gradually unfurling flags to more haggard insignias
Than creaseless symmetries misinterpreted by English eyes

As congruence; but something more sublimely binding,
Unspoken scalloping of minds: Togetherness that can't be
Lassoed and broken in with stirrups of Class, nor gripped

With wrangling saddles of ermined deference: anathemas
To the Swedish —as rhetoric which pays *samförstånd* wished
Lip-service, while stoking its own *folkhem* with kindling

Resentments. Rhubarb libertarians see uniformity
In one homologous tribe —so opt for two or three:
Shopkeepers hoodwinked into thinking replicated tins

Prettified with different labels contain different things:
Conformity by margins. Carved variations sharpen if
Framed in the wider lens... Younger Swedes may nurse cravings

For individuating, but these flare brief as winter daylights
Pinched between velvet gloves of ever-lengthening evenings —
Artificial lights lure some to greener grasses, but Swedish

Stables brim with brighter straws: transmigration of the self
To the greater need, carves out the Swede... You can adjust
To appreciate the nuances of enchanted Dalecarlian crafts,

Charismatic magics, craftsmanly charms; bite the bits
Of hubris to trace the subtle curlicues of the *kurbits*;
Throw off the harnesses of false appearances and statuses —

Stride into the unimpeded pastures of the Dala Horses.

Bitter Almonds

i.m. Daniel "Dan" Andersson (1888–1920)

Dalecarlian-carved; a *säckpipa* of hooped stilts glistened in pink
Afterbirth; cast apart, casualty of witchcraft; cotton-spun through
Nuptial thralls: the slash and burn of forest Finns on his father's side

And the iron-forging rumour of a Walloon shadowing thrown
Notions of his hoisted eyes. Frowning mouth soured by the bit
Digging into his tongue, but no harness could restrain this
Equid chomping poems to apple-sharp frumenty. Blåbandist
Rubric: toured with Forest Flower at fourteen, proselytising
Sobriety from Gothenburg to Grimsby. Baptised "Black Jim" for
Sobriquet. First/last books: *Piston Beware // He Left* — Runic code?
Odic coincidence? Bard of charcoal burners, slept at Hotel Hellman
Not noticing a prussic scent: the brain's bouquet of bitter almonds.

[*säckpipa* [pr. *sek-pee-pa*]: bagpipes. *Blåbandist* [pr. *Blaw-bundist*]: a Swedish sect of teetotal evangelical Christians].

Dalecarlian Carpentry

There's a shop window in Stockholm lit late into the evening,
Filled with a miniature population of wood-carved figures,
Mostly proletarian characters, farmers, fishermen,
Housewives in flowery blouses and aprons, and some
Caricatures of famous political figures — Winston Churchill
With cigar, Stalin in scarlet *kosovorotka*, and a khaki Fidel
Castro, belt-tightening — no doubt to feed more cosmopolitan
Appetites with satirical flourishes: anthropomorphic
Specimens of Swedish flat-plan woodcarving, similar
To that applied by Dalecarlians to their colourfully
Painted horses, wooden equids of the flat-plane county...
Such skills have passed down through hobbies of old country folk,
Cottage industries to factory productions — and
This strange shop, that never sleeps yet always seems closed,
Is testament to times' demands for such rustic handicrafts.

This is a shop and a workshop: wood-shavings speckling
A smooth citrine tile floor like sprinklings of candy-peel
On a butterscotch tart; a desk-light beaming from the back
Through a doorway gap, where, partly visible by his shirt-
Creased elbow, the nocturnal woodcarver sits craned
Painting his figures into the night — demonstrably a flat-plane
Apostle of the pioneering craft of the Tryggs: a family
Who moved from out in the sticks to Stockholm with
Their little nation of wood-carved citizens; then, later,
Emigrated to Canada to widen their trade, by then, one
Of considerable returns...

It had all started with Carl
Johan Trygg, one of nine children of a poor family in
A village in Närke, who left home at twelve to earn a living —
First as a clockmaker, then shoemaker, laundry boy,
And hand in a logging mill, where, in his spare time,
He carved rough-hewn figures from basswood and pine,
Likenesses of his acquaintances, but mostly hobos,
His signatures — by eighteen he was exhibiting his wood folk
In stone Stockholm, and thereafter the figurines grew
Lucratively collectible... Later, his sons, Nils, Lars, Carl
Olaf, and a female relative, Ellen, all took up the trade,

Having inherited Carl Johan's gift: the almost-mystical
Ability to transform blocks of wood into uncannily
Expressive, inanimate miniature characters with florid
Faces in vibrant paints, apparelled in robust patterns
Of rural plaid; a wood-carved *statare* mounted on plinths
Of wooden blocks, signed underneath — Trygg's
Was a magical artistry akin to the Lokian ilk
Of Dalecarlian carpentry and handicrafts: to sculpt himself
And his whittled kin from their shapeless agricultural caste
Into individuals, inspirited with rough-hewn personalities,
Using only the flat-planed sculpting knife of his wits
And imaginative industry; and home-made paints
Pestled from crushed berries: Nature was his studio,
Where he breathed his brethren into life: gouged souls
For them from wounds of basswood, planed their gnarly
Textures to smoother finishes varnished
Into bucolic curios for rich collectors sprung among
The landowners, those makers of their yokes as thralls
Displaced by the partitions, now the speculators
Of the products crafted with their liberated tools...

[*kosovorotka*: Russian skewed-collared shirt. *statare* [pr: *sta-ta-reh*]: 'estate workers'; the agricultural serfs who were paid 'in kind' under the *statare* system].

Strykjärnet

I. *The Flat Iron*

Strykjärnet, the “flat iron”, mustard-coloured *Arbetets*
Museum (of Work) — but nothing so atomist or
Utilitarian as its name might suggest to scorched ears
Of tourists from The Country of the Grind where
The red-top headline’s king (Woden’s Workfare State) —
Temple of mutual effort, a celebration of the dignity
Of labour, the nobleness of hand and brain beating time
And metal together to Bragi’s Skaldic metre, Thor’s
Proletarian hammer striking Viking anvil with each tock
Of the common metronome. Folke Bensow’s giant dolls house
Of industry: heptagonal edifice built to fit the shape
Of the craggy outcrop of Laxholmen, in Holmbrogränd;
Its basement, subterranean, welded deep into the submerged
Rock of this serendipitous island (called Strykbrädan:
The “ironing board”): it appears to sit on the mirroring
Surface of Motala ström, chimneys launched from the water:
Phallic outposts of sprung production; hardy antennae
Of artisanship; unfinished pillars, cropped fulcrum
Falling fathoms short of propping cotton-spun clouds,
Truncated, hollowed-out to spout posthumous smoke,
Throw mechanical echoes of phantom machinery,
Invisible belching billows from a poltergeist factory
Haunted by tools of the textile trade, clinks and clanks
Of paper manufacturing. According to the brochure,
The purpose of this industrial reliquary is ‘not
To collect things but preserve them’: this is implicit in
The immaculately life-like mummifications of man-made
Items, authentic in makers and operators’ absences;
Cryptic equipment bereft of hands’ manual translations...

[Pr. *Arbetets: Arr-beart-ets. Strykjärnet: Strook-yair-net. Holmbrogränd: Holm-broo-grend. Strykbrädan: Strook-brair-dan. Next pages: ängest: un-gest. Aftonbladet: Af-ton-blar-det*].

II. *The Moomin Floor*

Not all in this industrial Aladdin's Cave is hinged on trade:
Take the lift just one floor up and the visitor is spirited
Into the curious magical world of the polemical Moomins:
Stout white little trolls who look like hippopotamuses,
Dreamt up by pinched-nosed Tove Jansson, immigrant
Finn from Helsinki, as satirical animations for Nordic
Children, infant travellers well-versed early in the nervous
Swerves of parents' mental adventures, quiet violences
Of introspection... Interspersed with the light relief of Einar
Nerman's postcards in bold poster colours for all occasions,
And his blazes of cover jackets for storybooks by Selma
Lagerlöf — Fauvist spectrums tutored by Matisse; and
The Yuletide morality cartoon, *Sagan om Karl-Bertil Jonssons
Julafton* (*The Story of Karl-Bertil Jonsson's Christmas Eve*):
Tage Danielsson and Per Åhlin's tale of a ginger-coiffed
Post office sorting boy inspired by the deeds of Robin Hood
To re-parcel all the presents of the rich with the addresses
Of the poor — a Christmas redistribution of gifts which rustles
Plenty of festive epiphanies... But most memorable:
The Moomins, mooning bohemians who loved nature and
Diversity, yet were depicted forever on the verge
Of melancholy. Moominvalley was adumbrated by
The hill-shaped Groke, an amorphous mound of Nordic gloom
With glowing ember eyes, which froze the ground wherever it moved,
While everything that touched it expired. The conformist
Hemulens who liked to boss everyone around.
The introverted Snork who changed colour according to mood.
The mushroom-like Hattifatteners who roamed in groups
And turned electric when struck by lightning. The Muddler,
An anxious button collector who lived with his wife, Fuzzy,
In a coffee-tin. Snufkin, a peripatetic philosopher
Who believed in travelling light so not to complicate things.
And Little My whose mouth formed aphorisms: "Possessions
Mean worries and luggage bags one has to drag along" — food
For a race of philosophical children hypnotised
By the hurdy-gurdy of Jansson's Finnish burr; wiser Little Times
Brought up to tropes of obsessional trolls; imaginatively
Traumatised with best intentions through animated antidotes
To future bruises, cartoon inoculations against adult

Ångest (angst), neurosis, steered away from intolerance
And conformity (foundations of imprisoned consciousness).
Those Moomintrolls were grown out of Jansson's childhood terrors
Cultivated by her uncle trying to frighten her off pilfering
From the larder at night: "They live in the kitchen and breathe
Cold air down the back of your neck". The 'Moomin' had
Metamorphosed through a Hippo-line of grotesquer forebears:
Through 'Proto-Moomin', back to the more abstracted 'Snork',
Or 'Niisku', a dialectical caricature scrawled on the wall
Of the family toilet with KANT scratched underneath it
(Following her brother's triumph in a philosophical argument),
Intended to depict, for her, the 'ugliest creature imaginable',
A more angularly cut ancestor with symbolically missing tail...

III. *The Satirical Floor*

The museum's magic lift (outwardly industrial but wide enough
To fit all types of imaginations) transports visitors to sample
Pictorial lampoons, political cartoons, satirical solace for
Jaded adults: Ewart "EWK" Karlsson's chiaroscuro
Caricatures, excavated sketches immaculately drawn,
Painstakingly shaded (you can almost hear his ink-pen faintly
Scratching as you look at them). Karlsson pictures are veterans
Of mass circulations through Swedish newspapers, *Land* — and
Aftonbladet: that rarest thing, a left-wing tabloid lapped up by
(A kind of) proletariat, at least back in its halcyon days
When Karlsson illustrated it with graphic warnings against
The swarms of global capitalism. After his time, it drifted,
Circuitously, first to 'the centre-right' (our English 'centre')
After being snatched up by Swedish Match, manufacturers
Of moist *snus* (snuff) and chewing tobacco. Thereafter, it went
'Neutral'. Then was later rescued by the Swedish Trade Union
Confederation, swerving left again. Lambasted by Ingmar
Bergman as "a rubbish yellow paper" in his memoir *Laterna
Magica*, for splashing on his tax affairs, which sent him
Packing into self-exile — Napoleon of the cutting-rooms.
No capitalist incursions against labour rights or ecology
Escaped Karlsson's scathing caricaturing. The sketch that plants
Itself most lingeringly is of the last pine tree left standing
Amid a blasted landscape of stumps (a lumberjacks' graveyard);
Its cramped branches stacked with avian survivors

Of a forest holocaust, last emissaries of near-extinct
Subspecies — crow, owl, robin, cuckoo, chaffinch, starling, sparrow,
Wood-pigeon, all spiral-eyed, worry-ringed, traumatised — what
Collective noun for these highly strung birds but a *crisis* of wings?

IV. *Arbete*

Smoking a stout cigarette (that might have suited a Moomin
As an allegorical accessory, as it did for their chimneying
Creator), I drag in a shaft of sunlight, then launch the butt
Into acid-hissing swim in the silky waters wobbling
Below with yellowy reflections of the *Arbetets* Museum
And its whirling wood-decked bridge that links its heptagonal
Hive of archiving — a co-operative run on volunteering,
The Swedish type, so, by stipend — to the mainland. I think
On how industrious Kronos took the svenska from Varangian
Silver stripped during raids in Samarkand to the minters
Of the krona. I'm partial to causality; particularly when
Away from home, adrift from familiarity: it soothes my nerves
To root my thoughts from spot to spot, to find a foothold,
A firm refuge to ground me. And each place my shadow falls
Another plants itself, casts centrifugally, ever taller,
With the intensifying light — the sixth sense of anxiety
Has a way of stimulating second sight; perhaps a vestigial
Saxon gland once vibrated spontaneously, like cats' whiskers,
To alert them to propinquities of longships. Now long-consigned
To the English collective unconscious; low thyroids of social
Tolerance vented through shadow-projections of vicarious
Vices onto victims of administrative vandalism:
The urban "*churn*" of tenants evicted through "*gentrification*",
All to "*Make Work Pay*", According to edicts of Conservatives,
And their anglicised Germanic dictums: *Arbeit Macht Frei*,
Grist for "*useless eaters*" — far cry from the Swedish
Collectivist view that a society of shared values
Makes every man and woman *want* to work, no blackmails
Necessary. Boreal labour strives towards natural rewards
Of leisure, where true inspirited *arbete* by itself's the forge
In which all citizens mould their freedoms through fruits
Distributed equably. Work doesn't make us free (except
From stigma). Freedom's no employee; it's irrepressibly
Self-expressive, like a child. Only creativity sets us free.

Per Brahe Bauer

i.m. John Bauer (1882–1918)

Jönköping was a matchstick city, but its phosphorous fumes were
Obfuscated by fragrances from father's charcuterie

Heaping up in our damp apartment —phantom abattoir not for
faint

Nostrils. My sister Anna wasn't revived with smelling salts, but I

Brushed her back to life in paint: flaxen Princess Tuvstarr,
foundling in

A nightgown, tiptoeing *grön tårta* moss of organ-piped woods; or
touring

Underground grottos with gross-proboscised trolls... She grew into
Esther

Ellquist. Together we planted Bengt —but turbulence took us to
Stockholm:

Rather than risk the train after Getå, we boarded the morrow's
ghost ship, *Per Brahe*...

[Jönköping: pr. *Yun-shep-ing*. *grön tårta* [pr. *grurn torta*] (green cake), or *princesstårta* (princess cake): a traditional Swedish cake covered with marzipan (usually green) and filled with sponge, jam, custard and cream. *Getå* [pr. *Year-taw*]: site of the worst train crash in Swedish history on 1st October 1918. *Per Brahe*: a steamer shipwrecked on 20th October, 1918].

Knoparmoj [pr. *kanoop-arr-moi*]

Soot ghosts of Norrköping's industrial past: a photograph
Of charred-faced Swedish chimney sweeps circa 1900s,
Begrimed and brow-beaten, caramelised by paucity,
Insolent-eyed with that special acrid proletarian pride
So challenging to those who have never had to forge their own
Dogged egos through the grind of growth-eroding labour.
Barefoot in rags, cramped bags of bone and bloody-minded
Industry. Undernourished blond-haired shadows, scrubbed up
With coal tar soap. Grubby water babies, resuscitated
Into industrious life with pumps of smoke, weaned on char-black
Spittle. Prone to rickets and consumption for want of milk
And calcium. Black-lunged soot-nosed helpers of Prometheus;
Fire-licked refuseniks of Loki's fickle gifts; sweepers
Of the dampers used to trap and harness its sacred properties
Of light and warmth; to brush and keep the soot from clogging
Up the chimneys and throwing smoke back into shuttered rooms;
To halt the restless flames — ever attempting escape from
The grate, chased by Furies of muscular Nordic winds —
From stoking themselves into berserker frenzies, spreading
Raging amber tongues through slumbering houses. So up
The sooty pitch-black shafts those spluttering children climbed,
Grip to grip, up the sheer brick mountainsides, blind.
The unluckiest among them trapped until they starved,
Then thinned, slid down in a cloud of soot, black-plumed crows,
All feathers and bones. So to most this daily workplace was
A charnel house in waiting; a dormant cremating oven,
A sepulchre from which sweeps sometimes had to be hacked out
By psychopomp employers; wily pallbearers scraping pennies
From boy-corpses' eyes... From the Sixteenth century on,
Small, nimble proletarian troll-children were apprenticed
To sweeps at eight years old; moulded in moleskin shirts and
Trousers with leather patches at the knees and on the seats,
To protect them from the heat — the balls of their bare un-pumiced
Heels, so thick with hard-skin they needed no such protection —
And baggy caps to keep their straw hair from catching, or
Blackening with soot. As for their faces, arms and legs,
They rarely washed them: proudly wore their dirty skins as
Trophies of their chores. This sacred trade's sacramental tools:

Lead line, sweep-broom, scraper. By about eighteen,
Those who'd survived into adulthood were promoted
To journeymen: Viking-whiskered, angular-visaged with
Tall white staves and black mouths where butter couldn't melt,
Just turned to mud, all food smoked before washed down.

But their oiled tongues inherited a slangy Glossolalia
Indigenous to their trade —language of the ravens,
Untranslatable to other mortals, understood only by them.
Morphemes of the psychopomp in floppy hat and grey-blue cloak:
Odin, the Thought-God (Shaper of Wyrð, bender of Orlog,
Who hanged himself on the Great Ash Tree Yggdrasil to gain
The wisdom and omnipotence of the runes). A “*working
Language*”, complicated, occlusive, occulting, kept locked
To their families, like Masonic ceremonies. They called it
“*Knoparmoj*”, a ‘sociolect’, the workers’ Skaldic dialect,
Spoken in the Swedish sweepers’ soot-togged brogue
Punctuated with glottal stops of black spit (although once
Smuggled into poetry by Alf Ragnar “Sten” (Rock)
Henrikson in his *Anacka*). A tongue, no doubt, with equivalents
Throughout the industrialised globe... Now long lost with phantom
Trades —apart from driftwood salvaged for the marketing game:
“*Pants*” and “*sneakers*”. Forgotten by the world’s labourers
Unburdened by the onus of indisputably trumped struggles,
Invalidated dialectics of tub-thumped pasts, verbal barriers
Once raised, now lowered to whispers of deference, or
Scrapings caught in quaint echoes of unvisited museums...
It no more matters, now Lotto can immortalise any random
Aspirant, amber any ambition, arrest any extravagance,
Avarice or tragic glance of graspless Midas suicides
In celebrity aspic, or glossy isinglass of gossip magazines.
Ever since Loki the Trickster let the craven and misanthropic
Harness fire for furnace, forge and foundry, wield molten
Hammer on lava-avid anvil, to meld iron and steel, make
Armouries while stripping labour of dignity —*this* they called
“*Progress*”... *Knoparmoj* succumbed to a humbled dumbness
Among human commodities brainwashed by dialectics
Conducted through idiots’ lanterns; gadgets washing plastic
Rains. Blue-overalled Lotus-eating wage-slaves, aphasic
Camels happy to carry cans for *kapitalists*’ gains —
They pawned their sacred Tongue for caravans, humps and grains.

Flight of the Albatross
i.m. Harry Martinson (1904–1978)

How can a flower grow without a root? Look to the autodidact:
Abruptly thrust from school at just thirteen, but who continues
Reading, eating literature, to feed an appetite for paper
Raptures, the addictive ink-fumed mysticism of print. Book curds
Yellowed with knowledge, sap-dripped in maple of mucilage.

Malmö salvaged him after jumping phantom ships, ill-starred
Aniaras of *Härskare Jim*: arrested vagrant at twenty-one.
Rootless as a chugging tramp, nomadic amid mosquitoes,
Tugged by sails of malarial imagination incubated
In tubercle blood. He wrote himself to Gothenburg — where he
made a
Name, in *Brand* magazine, then pledged it to Moa. At Johannesdal,
Sank anchors for a decade —one which rooted neurotic blooms:
Obsessions' *Nässlorna blomma* bruised him into absence... His
Nobel of dotage, an albatross, Seppukued with a pair of scissors.

[*Härskare* [pr. *Hash-ka-reh*]: Lord, hence allusion to the novel *Lord Jim* by Joseph Conrad. *Nässlorna blomma*: *Flowering Nettles*, the title of Martinson's debut novel of 1935 *Seppuku*: Japanese *hari-kari* (ritualistic suicide)].

Now, Ivar Was a Traveller...
i.m. Ivar Lo-Johansson (1901–1990)

In kind — paltry payment for the unwaged *statare* whom
Valkyries of *kapitalism* picked off to work grabbed lands;
Agricultural slaves, beetroot-eaters, viewed as the lowest
Rung of Swede; who ploughed the long shadows before *folkhemmet*

Lifted the fogs of serfdom from the iced fields. Up to then,
Odin lingered on, eyes bloodshot with tears like lingonberries

Jewelled in dew, for how his world's sorrows rose, flowered from
Open wounds to words of a hobo-boy from Ösmo; bicycling
Hawker of wares whose green evening verses vented spleen
Against settled folk, those rooted to the spot like standing stones,
Never venturing out of their valleys to travel, even though those
Soils were carpeted with thistles. He'd grow into the stonemason's
Skaldic wisdom, to know it was the stone that drove the blow
Of the tool: a Christ he sculpted on a fount refused to frown,
No chisel could chip its smile. No valley could carve out Ivar Lo.

[Ösmo: pr. *Ers-mor*].

Blasting Cap

i.m. Alfred Nobel (1833–1896)

After reading his obituary in place of his brother's, in terse French —
'Le marchand de la mort est mort ...the man who became rich by finding
Faster ways to kill more people'* — he grew peaky at how he'd be
Remembered: Sweden's inventor of dynamite and gelignite/ self-
Enriched boffin of Bofors. His challenge: reinvent himself before
Death sealed it: mint his coin for eminence in science, letters, and, at

Bertha Kinsky's request, the promotion of peace: blue-touch hope of
Explosives that lit his glittering career. Bombs with white doves.
Romantics triumphed first, through criteria unverifiable by
Nobel's absence: literature "*in an ideal direction*" ("*i idealisk riktning*").
Hermeneutics of later panels were more intrepid than the Swedish
Academy's narrow interpretation, "*idealistisk*": took in Modernist
Refuseniks. Nobel called for works that "*benefit humankind*" — or
in his pidgin
Darwinese: *'two-legged tailless apes spinning on a revolving earth
projectile...'*

Nathan Söderblom: *'His restless spirit hardly followed the sweet rest
for which*

Others came here...'. Nobel on himself: *'Alfred — pitiful creature,
should have*

*Been suffocated at birth when he made his howling entrance' ... 'Important
Events in his life: None'*. But his mind had been combustible as
Liberties with hidden tripwires. His bust's absent scalp blown by a
blasting cap.

**'The merchant of death is dead'*

Infractions of a Camera Eye
i.m. Ingmar Bergman (1918–2007)

“Infractions” — his father’s coinage for transgressions hewn from Nomenclature to sculpt aural neurotics out of Christians. Guilt-gripped trophies of Lutheran patriarchs. But the *Laterna Magica* of Ingmar’s imagination was his infant antidote to Antinomianism. It danced in carved dark of punishment closets. Religious grotesque, moral phantasmagorias, graven anguishing —

Bursting with potential for Rembrandtian treatments. Brooding Expositions of blasted skerries. Billowing sands by Baltic seas. *Rauks* of craggy Fårö. Swishing pines in angsty summers. Gables of marble-beaten brows: the crag-carved visage of von Sydow’s Menhiric face; the dark molasses of Ingrid Thulin’s eyes. Through A glass, starkly in Fischer and Nykvist’s brutalist black and white. No sympathetic tones. Just nerves rubbed raw in bone-bleached light.

[*Antinomianism*: the Protestant-Calvanist belief that moral law need not apply to an *elect* predestined to salvation through *Grace* or ‘faith alone’. *Rauks* [pr. *rowks*]: rocks, or crags. Pr. Fårö: *Faw-reh*].

Swedish Folk Song Suite

i. Prelude in Allemande

In 1846, William Thoms patented the term '*folklore*' —
After the Swede, Peter Wieselgren, had coined it years before
In 1834. Its musical application came via Germanic '*Volk*'
(*'The people as a whole'*) from Johann Gottfried Herder
To evoke its harmonic commonality, chiming with
Romanticism. Percy Scholes, Cecil Sharp and Bartók
Appreciated in the *folkloric* echoes of the countryside
Distinct from town or city: something more authentic
Than urbane baroque. Charles Seeger heard in its brisk
Fiddlers' allegros, a stout-hearted, spirited music
Of the rural underclasses. But more: something in it
Tapped a primal vein, an aural fundamentality,
A strain of ancestral past uniting all under one name.

Lush adaptations sprang through florid chords of Grieg's
Norwegian sound-fjords, and gallivanting *Siegfrieds*
Repatriated to Norse Sigurd. Old Swedish village
Waltzes and folk songs collected by Gunnar Arvid Hahn,
Recapitulated in latter day Scandinavian variations:
His vibrant '*Brudvals från Ragunda*'. The spirit-lift of Olof
Wilhelm Peterson-Berger's '*Frösöblomster*' ('Frösö blossoms') —
Its sprightly refrain bristling with sharp airs from Jämtland.
The craggy Romanticism of Hugo Alfvén's '*Skärgårdssågen*'.

The *hambo*. The Gammaldans. The Swedish *schottis* partnered
Dance: women kneeling in black shawls and white aprons,
Clapping; the men in broad-brimmed hats, black worsted
Waistcoats, britches and white shin stockings, weaving
Through them to the waltz of fiddles, violins, accordions.
Alternately spirit-lifting/wistful, verdant transcendental
Combinations of buoyant brass, haunting woodwind and
Winnowing strings. Something of the Skaldic —even Viking—
In folkloric compositions. The rustic spirit of spontaneity;
But one only just frustrated, skillfully, on the ever-verging
Edge by corals of shivering refrains, not quite ejaculated.

ii. *Scandi-Courante*

That captivating vastness Scandinavian, carved from
Stalking skies and rangy distances of crawling forests,
Jutting crags and lakes of liquid silver: part-captured
Tantalisingly just out-of-reach in the rumpled Lilliputian
Hills, dwarf swards and burrowing woods of Woden's
Crinkled realm, through more wounded movements: mood-songs,
Tone-poems, Anglo-Saxon adaptations. Folk songs rooted
In Varangian wisdoms, but blunted by an island's
Contrapuntal sea-winds. Collected like cropped mushrooms
By foraging musicologists: Sabine Baring-Gould's
Garlands of country song, meticulously excavated
As the hut-circles he and Burnard dug up in Grimspound.

And later, gathered by a gnarled eagle of Gloucestershire
Seeking folk-song carrion to underscore his symphonic
Landscapes: Ralph Vaughan Williams, vast-visaged as his
Rangy, unhyphenated double-barrelled name;
Menhiric physiognomy: a standing stone gifted voice,
A rock troll well-travelled in ravelling vocabularies
Of Nordic syncopations, dramatic terrains evoking
Tolkien Country, sculpted from damp-warped buckram sleeves.
Wizard of the quaver, his conducting-stick, a magic wand
Unfurling wings of folkloric gonfalons. The breezy spell
Of 'My Bonny Boy': a through-draft of pastoral melody
Between galvanic marches of the *English Folk Song Suite*,
Adumbrating Gunnar Hahn's own bucolic pilgrimages.

'V.W.'s Scandinavian cravings had rubbed off on him
From his diminutive kindred spirit, Radagast to his
Gandalf, invited into his prolific musical reliquary at Dorking;
The shrunken, bespectacled Nordic son of an organist and
Choirmaster: Gustav Theodore 'von' Holst; of part-Swedish
And Latvian strains — his great-grandfather, an émigré
From Riga, on the Baltic. Fellow Cotswoldian and student
Of this great oak of a friend, since they both studied composition
Under Charles Villiers Stanford. Together, through harmonic
Corresponding, they harvested a mutual kleptomania
For English choral, folk song, madrigals, church music.
Many misericords shuddered to organ chills of their

Convulsive reinventions... Holst wrought his Scandinavian Mark on the brittle British bark. Wore England as easefully On his symphonic gown as arch-magician Ralph: wound Rhapsodies and cool woodland *rallentandos* of the *Brook Green Suite*; the heartfelt *marcato* of *A Somerset Rhapsody*, And the russet *pesante* of *Egdon Heath* — summoning Clym Yeobright's dwindling-eyed returning native. Holst's glinting Optics caught starlight: astronomy launched his *Planets Suite*: The wistfulness of 'Venus', the ominous prow of 'Mars', The spur-jingling shingles of tambourines, crashes of brass And woodwind scales of fathomless seas in majestic 'Jupiter', In which he struck a strident Nordic canter through the staves Of Scandinavia's vast sound-country, its sprawling glades, High-stalking skies — Valhalla's *allargando* heights...

iii. *Thaxted Sarabande*

Yet Holst saw himself as a failure: a straw-grasper, A galloper who made chromatic distances but only hit On instances, chance tintinnabulations; sparks of Skaldic Mimicry lacking authenticity (to *his* ears only) — Adulterated brandies of the damned (to paraphrase A Shavian dram). This restless spirit flitting from theme To theme: English folk song, Hindi Sanskrit, flighty orneries Of planetary octets. His telescopic soul felt rootless, Though rooted routinely: most notably in *Thaxted*, Where his fingers plunged the parish church into swells Of organ grinds, under an incongruous Red Flag beside Sinn Fein's banner of gold harp against Cal Poly green, And a battered Union Jack. Aural valet of Conrad Noel, The "*Red Vicar*", a Catholic Trotskyite, to whom Gustav Was the perfectly pitched parishioner: a socialist composer With a flinty sky-gazing stare. But in spite of his own deeply Grown convictions, Holst bowdlerised his own *lento* From 'Jupiter's' tumult, a lachrymose *calando*, Into a hymn tune to accompany diplomat Cecil Spring-Rice's insipidly patriotic lyric, 'I Vow to Thee, My Country' — Holst insulted it as "*Thaxted*". An association Which always chafed against his transnationalist spirit.

iv. Astral Gavotte

A tragedy, that this vastly travelling, thought-provoking
Music of colouristic vigour couldn't convince its own
Composer of its power to convince. But even now his
Haunting strains and rousing orbits hypnotise human
Labyrinths: the cryptic percussions of 'Neptune' still
Mystify, the sympathetic magic of 'Uranus' charms,
'Mercury''s wings have yet to melt, and 'Saturn''s rings still spin...

Holst was right in the end: there are only eight planets in
Our solar system: Pluto long demoted to a gassy dwarf
Planetoid since wrongly being catalogued as a *bona fide*
Giant: now seen as a minor sphere of the Kuiper belt,
No greater than Chiron with whom it orbits the ice giant,
Neptune, accompanied by a brass section of contrapuntal
Moons —but Neptune's greatness might not have been so
Well-defined without the propinquity of Pluto.

No doubt by now the spirit-Holst has composed 'Pluto,
The Pretender', and, after correspondence with
The howling soul of Harry Martinson returning
From his epic interstellar flight on *Aniara*,
The astronomer-composer seeks to rediscover
Old folk songs from quixotic cultures of other planets'
Symphonic atmospherics; compose his Galactic
Gammaldans: an astral *Swedish Folk Song Suite*
With gavottes to rival the gravitas of Ralph's English
Triptych; storm a score for Martinson's pitching spaceship
Flung off course from Mars, catapulted out to endless
Drifts of tin-eared stars where reputations flare, eclipse.

[Page 73. Pr. Frösöblomster: *Fruh-sur-blom-stare*. Skärgårdssågen: *Huar-gorge-sare-gen*].

II.

Blaze a Vanishing

Mage of the Gammaldans
i.m. Gustav Holst (1874–1934)

Gammaldans augmented in his mind's stringendo ground
Under pounding metronomes of Baltic stone. Seven-eighths
Swedish, via Riga, Latvia. The rest, English as Cheltenham
Tearooms. Asthma and an arm's neuritis withered with vast
Ambition. A schoolboy Symphony in C Major, along with organ
Voluntaries. Unworldly choirmaster of the Cotswolds swept to

Halls of scholarship, poring over composition. Pulled into the
Orbit of an Ampney giant; a towering Wordsworth to his
Languishing Coleridge; a fellow traveller through folkloric
Scores he'd thrust to heights to trumpet Jupiter! Then thump down to
Thaxted's uprooted lento: his poison soup for the patriotic.

Broomflower

Where have I heard that voice before? Those brusque Northern
Aft-s that hatch abruptly; catch as matches in the air;
Ruffle the southerner's softer ear with the brush of rough bark.
Wood shavings from bluntly carpentered tongues. Swung
Hafts of gnarled aural cudgels. Hatchets of starker articulation:
Not more severe, simply flintier. This particular sample:
A phlegm-rumbled Northumberland thrum gathering from bracken
At the back of the throat. A guttural pipe-smoker's brogue
Underscored by tobacco-pouch rustlings of rookish wisdom.
Something almost Nordic in its steeply pitched tones:
The weathered drag of the tongue tip's drogue. And the ends
Of words chafed to sharp *f-s* and *v-s* on the windswept
Cliff-edge of the teeth; a skald's sageness scraped underneath.

Was it the reedy timbres of distant grainy poets
Bassooning croups of tropes into trumpet-eared gramophones
Which sparked comparisons in this carved voice's classless
Finish cultivated in cavalry stables, drilled with
Verbal bits to batteries of brassy artilleries...? Or was it
Tolkien's Entish inflections? Treebeard's straggled gradualist
Growl? Or how we imagined Gandalf might have spoken:
With a craggy Icelandic burr? Or was it Roald Dahl's
Gravelled Norwegian prow? Or Wystan Auden's chalk-
And-silk locution? Or Ralph Vaughan Williams' *white shoes-*
Why choose Costwolds fricatives? Or the tufted enunciation
Of Richard Murdoch's wispy narration for *The Moomins*?

No: I remembered where I'd heard it before: on the same
Hissy *Arsclit* catch as that I listened to now, transfixed
As I was that first time as a boy, when my father clicked
The time-switch of the tape-player and those carious reels
Unwound their hoary bandages of ghost recordings to
The spools' sperming looms. My grandfather, John,
Discussing Scottish folk song over tea and scones at Rock,
Somerset, late Fifties — 'Gordon' to those closest to him,
Who'd passed over some years before I'd sprung,
His stone-cut features, hook nose, stormed eyes gazing
Out under khaki cap from a photograph's gun-fog:

Such definite features that seemed so remote to our
Milkier entablature — crackled back to life as his
Crockery voice broke its silence from the other side.
Wistful yet stern, fern-edged, willowy but stoic;
A brush-scrape of heather and granite; smooth-thorny as furze;
Rough-soft as *broomflower* sounds on the through-draft
Of the mouth. And the older and smokier I grow,
The more I hear his tone in my own: a thorniness
Of intonation; a tarry, tobacco-coated brogue...

Our voices are transmitted salvages of ancestors'
Thicketed whispers; oral aggregates of homecoming ghosts.
And though our thoughts and choices of words might be our own,
Our elocutions are honeycombed in echoes thrown
Through revenant ventriloquists: our mouths blossom
With broomflowers, our throats boom with tombstones...

Wilfred's Rifle

i.m. Wilfred Salter Owen (18 March 1893–4 November 1918)

Who killed Cock Robin? —“*Not I*”, wept the kettledrum sky,
“*I only rattled him with my artilleries of rat-a-tat rain*
Lashing down on mud dugouts of conscripts caped in raglan wings,
Flightless as rats...” Wilfred's rifle jolts to pity's whistling
Ricochet, packs up to scrap. At Craiglockhart, he enlists to
Edit *The Hydra*. Fumes of its polycephalous paper crop
Drowsing odourless corridors; souls re-grown from wounds of song.

Siegfried swore he'd stab him in his leg if he returned to those
Amphibious fields; dark Shropshires of cloth-clad Pickelhaube spires.
Lucifer flares hissing fuses of soggy dog-ends, spluttering
To acid-sips of oil-black tar; khaki killer-milk weaned from
Empress sows of tobacco'd nostalgias — 1st Btn. Artists Rifles—
Rigged on cigarette cards, Cartophily's tarot. Sambre-Oise,

One week to armistice: a ducking mudlark picked off in aspic,
Wings of barbwire, stiff serge tunic, pall for quail-egg grey
Eurydice. His singing head bobs downstream to Oswestry...
No crosshairs sought Cock Robin, just the stray bullet of poetry.

[*Polycephalous*: 'many-headed'. *Pickelhaube* ('Pickle-helm'): Germanic spiked helmet. *Cartophily*: the collecting of cigarette cards].

Aspiring Giant

O to shrink back to a violet from the vertigo
Of an aspiring giant, and abdicate to shadow.

Silver & Gold

Five days a week to earn silver and sweat;
Two days a week to drink gold and forget.

Heart Spectacular

The heart can erupt into volcanic upsets —
But from it we get some spectacular sunsets.

T.E.'s Match Trick

He'd strike a match and watch it light,
Mesmerise with the flame,
Then pinch it out between his fingers,
Not flinching from the pain.

Fellow officers would scoff at him:
"Lawrence, old man, what's the trick?"
But he'd just smile madly back at them
And lick the burnt-out matchstick.

Charlotte in a Different Light

i.m. Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935)

for Jan Bradley

Crie de Coeur? The choice was chloroform or cancer: an easy or
Horrid death. Put so elementarily, there was little room for
Argument against suicidal dialectics. In any case,
Reason was a meme for androcentric academics taking
Liberties with gender accident. *'The brain is not an organ
Of sex'*. Much more to her neurosis than an Elektra Complex.
'Ties by this dread disease' that made her thorny literature seem
To *'contain deadly peril'* for those whose living narratives had
Entered *'mental derangement'* — were these crinkled men projecting

Penis envy into scalloped groins of aggressive suffragettes,
Emigrés of gerrymandered oestrogen skirting virile
Rotten boroughs with grooved incursions of pelvic valleys?
Katherine's birth had stirred that which tobacco-whiskered doctors
Invested in her as *"postpartum psychosis"*. Proscriptive rest cure:
'Never touch pen, brush or pencil as long you live', instructed Dr
S. Weir Mitchell. But words were her escape: *they* left her husband,

Stetson. Made her Gilman again. *They* sent her daughter west
To live with him and his new wife, her closest friend, Grace
Ellery Channing — happy for the more compatible pair,
Thinking Grace would be a better mother, for her's had only
Shown her affection when she thought she was asleep; iced
Out her access to close friendships, and fiction. So Charlotte ate
Natural philosophy; a tomboy student neutered by correspondence.

Not cut out for scholarship, she cut her own cloth from mental
Embroideries. Illustrated trade cards. Took to design, painting.
Evolved from a *'nervous'* being into a creative vessel — ideas

Germinating to vines crawling on yellow wallpaper trapped
In sealed hymens of her mind. She had to strip it; follow those
'Lame uncertain curves' to where they *'plunge off at outrageous angles'*;
Mutations that emasculate themselves. That musty *'yellow smell'*,
Acrid as azane-stained linen, that clung to everything she'd write.
Nettled patterns of neuter letters cast Charlotte in a different light.

His Bitten Smile

i.m. Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888–1965)

‘to have bitten off the matter with a smile’

‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, T.S. Eliot

Thomas the doubter —but in doubting, so convincing:
Hoarse oracle scrubbed through Doric columns of bombed crockery.
Orator of wasps in beehive archives. —Heart, a derelict
Monastery. Emotional teetotal of the nervous remote.
Augustine startled among the preening nightingales.
Sipper of ambrosial poisons through a gramophone’s throat

Sweeping out prosodic cobwebs with his scribbling besom.
Tsar of modern macro-conscience; ventriloquists’ thrown
Echoes: Davidson, Bysshe Vanolis, Calvin. Self-described
Anglican and Royalist, antimacassar Carlist —deemed
Richard, his cat-sitter, fur-balled by Fabian aboulia.
No sops from this purring expatriate. Dark honeyed pupils’
Slick-blacks: a pair of melting weepers on pallbearers’ heads.

Ear-twitched March Hare; a tiffin-griffin smitten with
La Falange. Poor Prufrock, a worry-bead gingerly rubbed
Into baldness and rolled trouser-ends, pinned to celluloid
On blue amberol to the quale of his quavering shellac voice:
To have mattered, but so bitterly, in spite of his bitten smile.

Lapsed Anglican

Racketing in quixotic Volkswagen past
Vast avenues of interminably detached
Mock Tudor follies and pillared McMansions
With imposing porches, groaning bay-windows,
Immaculately gravelled private drives —
We anchorites gazed disapprovingly
From our monastic car, and all its trappings:
Poverty-beige with ripped roof linings.
Our driver, a lapsed Anglican, observing
These palatial retreats from under the brim
Of his waxy tweed cap, intoning through
Tarred ochre teeth his hard-gravelled song:
"Makes you wonder what they've all done wrong...".

After Harvest

Before I puff to bed, I roll some fags,
As night imbibes its last dark drags.

Tipping with light into ashtray-dawn:
Ochre stubs to shocks of razed corn.

Snags & Rapids

i.m. Alun Lewis (1915–1944)

'He saith among the trumpets, Ha, ha; and he smelleth the battle afar off the
thunder of the captains, and the shouting'

Job 39:25

Among the trumpets, ha, ha, you smelt battles before the brass
crashed

Like thrashing branches, strapless faradised arms ungrasped.
Under bleak Welsh skies you grew out from the shadow of Aberdare.
Nonconformist. Socialist. Your soul was public but your heart was

Let to private nettles. War wrenched you from snags and rapids of
thorny

Entanglements. You enlisted into tropics '*seeking less and less of the
World*', but found *more*. Slippery acceptances in clammy fingers
Insinuating triggers. Smudged pages' greased onion-skins. Time,
Sun and inky jungle insisting on '*a thing so long delayed...*'.

The Auden Saga

i.m. Wystan Hugh (W.H.) Auden (1907–1973)

for Norman Buller

What a saga! From fourteen anxious windows at 54 Bootham,
York, to scrolls of Miltonic sonnets and walnut-puckered skin —
via

Solihull; Oxford's hoary dorms; a night train through the
neurasthenic

Thirties: taking in Iceland's black Gabbro dales and basalt crags —
Ancestral landscape of Skaldic fancies — to dusty Spanish pastures
that

Nuanced your political tempo. Ambulance driver/ contra-Franco

Haw-Haw for a wired Republic stormed by rumours in uniforms;
Under Sino-Japanese seas; then, periscope up at Manhattan's
Giant's causeway, moored for your remainder, spouting out of
blowholes,

Harpoon-proof in a chunky ashtray *Nautilus*... Wystan! Where
was your

"Auden Country"? Was it Rookhope, your *"sacred landscape"*,
somewhere

Under a Pennine rainbow? Or underwater? Can we raise its Atlantis;
Drain its anthems into silos for emergencies? Your ectopic *Edda*
Ebbs in the pulse of Northern heirlooms, but its malpositioned
mouth

Needs urgent restoration: it has a way of detouring, a south...

The Neighbouring Void

i.m. Sylvia Plath (1932–1963)

‘...the utter exposure and defencelessness of the frontiers of human existence against the neighbouring void’

Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind*

How everything conspired that cryptic winter —
The pipes that froze, the telephone that wasn't there —
To snow-in her susceptible thoughts in a sparse, icy flat,
Gloomy and cold as an igloo. That shadeless light-bulb:
A throbbing white goddess above her in the lunging hallway.
How the scene was starkly set, too temptingly prepared
To pass up as if a blip in atmospherics. For one brief
Moment she fancied it might all be ameliorated by a fillip,
A pill, a sensory clipping. But, still, the woozy hypnotism
Persisted. Felt more permanent this time. Even if
Al Alvarez had perceived, in retrospect, more of a dress-
Rehearsal compared to her ultimate attempt as a child.
His Savage Goddess in dressing-gown. Mothing Snow White
Of silent carpets. The shadows wore her solitudes while
She slipped into their robes, tripped in slippers into
The pale paint of impassable walls. A mere shade.
Domestic Dido, mourning her phantom lover
Of the overworld: the torrid Trojan from Mytholmroyd,
Eloper with her future gas apostle, Assia Wevill.
Efforts towards oblivion were purely incidental tropes
In a long and somnolent monologue winding to its close;
A narrative in which she was the absent party,
Going through the motions, disembodied, alienated
From her own movements as if a ghost already,
Pure spirit lifted weightlessly from her milky body.
The scene was set, implicitly: the patient furniture,
The once-happy sofa, the resentful rugs — how hollow-souled
Her human bowl, a liberal lobby of bones. Yet she
Felt boneless. Luminous. Unassailable as an x-ray.
Emptied of immanence. How *being*, to her, had always been
A nervous dizziness, a terror of freedom, some kind
Of chilly consciousness ever combing the skirting-boards

To a neighbouring void. And how could anyone simply
Carry on, knowing oblivion was only next door?
That centrifugal negative energy that always beat back her
Frail attempts at becoming something other than a thought-filled
Superfluity of refrigerated flesh, and corpuscles only
Responsive to panic. A turretless fortress prowled by
Pawed exposures. And now she couldn't tell if she'd already
Slipped next door. Her body so cold. The house dipped
In unworldly whiteness. Now she groped from room to room,
Shapelessly, a spectral understudy on the stage after
The audience has left, their empty chairs, sealed lips
Between two jaw-clamped armrests. Then the view
Of the empty stage, where she was meant to be,
Now stood in the wine-dark aisle, a solitary usherette
With plastic-coated confectionaries, bitter sherbet lemons.
This was no intermission, this was the empty premiere:
Absence anticipated her. A chill of fingers tied her hair.
Wet towels and cloths were her willing accomplices;
Conspirators against the air. They'd insulate her
From the through-draught that brushed itself like a guilty cat
Retracing the wall under the stair...

Oblivion on Devonshire Street

i.m. Harold Monro, poet and publisher (1879–1916)

Harold of rag Argonauts, hinged orange in amaranth gatefold
trimmed

Against grains of anthologised Georgians, clothbound Colchians
Raised with Aeëtes' sewn teeth. But no embalmer could burnish
Oblivion's bruise, clotting to black catafalques cradling glue-
Ligatured signatures. Flyleaves like pinto tomb-lids brushing
Deckle-edged nerves at Devonshire Street's nicotined frontispiece

Marbled with Bloomsbury-mould. Foxed flophouse and posthumous
shop

Of mummified spines like dust-bloomed pupae, or hatched buckram
moths.

Nipping stems poems' decomposition in card sarcophagi: scrolled
Relics of consciousness: curse of aphasic pharaoh-souls. We outgrow
Our nerve-verged shelves: our bandages unpeel; our words throw
shadow.

[*Colchians*: of Colchis, home to the Golden Fleece possessed by King Aeëtes — 'Colchians' are today called 'Georgians': Colchis is a province in Western Georgia. *burnish*. to smooth and seal by rubbing. *signatures*: sheets of printed pages. *deckle-edged*: feathered edge on specially-made paper. *buckram*: stiff cloth of cotton. *nipping*. pressing sheets to expel air at the sewing stage].