

# *Green Hauntings*

New &  
Selected Poems  
Volume One  
2006-2016

Alan  
Morrison

SAMPLE



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*This book is dedicated to the memories of*

*My mother, Helen  
(29<sup>th</sup> January 1949–31<sup>st</sup> October 2013)*

*and*

*my dear friend and poetic soulmate  
David Kessel  
(10<sup>th</sup> April 1947–8<sup>th</sup> March 2022)*

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## Foreword

**H**ow to begin? With a warning to the curious? Approach with care, then, for this is indeed a book of hauntings. Morrison's work traffics in the spectral and the shadowy—there are over 120 uses of the word ‘shadow’ in *Green Hauntings*. His is a poetry concerned equally with and *for* people and histories hidden, obscured, peripheral to vision; with impoverished histories, those that persist and circulate in fragments or fleeting glimpses, carried on ‘Thicketed whispers; oral aggregates of homecoming ghosts’ (‘Broomflower’, p.226), and the dank ephemera of scent: ‘a musty fume’, ‘a stain on the air’ (‘The Mark’, p.232). Anxiety permeates these poems, an insecurity about both familial and cultural class identity. There exists a dissonance between the social and subjective dimensions of class, and Morrison is eloquent in distilling that unique sense of estrangement provoked by the downward mobility of the ‘borderline ‘shabby-genteel’ breed—/ *The shock-absorbers of the bourgeoisie*’ (‘The Mark’, p.233), who share the social condition of their class cohort, but whose intellectual and imaginative horizons exist painfully beyond their immediate and limited means.

Morrison’s poetry is very much occupied with the essential ghostliness of such impoverished lives; lives that exist in—and are—shadows: lives that inhabit the dusty gloaming of poverty, a twilight of partial personhood, that is literally dark—as from the ‘fasting electricity meter’s/ Weekly Lent’ (p.232)—and emotionally murky: ‘I’ve lingered like a shadow where my own shadow should fall./ Sometimes I wonder whether I was ever here at all’ (‘My Life in the Shade’, p.47). The poor are the pallid doppelgängers of more vivid and affluent lives, the ‘cast-offs’ of their ‘material imagoes’ (p.232). In such a guise they *haunt* middle-class imagination: an insubstantial yet persistent glitch at the edge of attention and conscience. They trouble the very idea of history as an enlightening ascent.

In ‘*Knoparmoj*’ (p.173) a ‘photograph of charred-faced Swedish chimney sweeps/ Circa 1900s, begrimed and brow-beaten by poverty’ confronts the beholder

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.

The spectre of poverty—its filth, infirmity, and want—hovers over the living poor, whose bodies bear the material traces of class inequality; as tactile reminders of this grim disparity, the poor are everywhere ejected—from history, culture, civic space—until they become mere ciphers, an amorphous suffering, criminal mass in which no one face is distinct or memorable. The poor are an urban legend, a superstition: do not speak their name after sundown lest you invoke their malevolent spirit.

While the moneyed live on through their monuments—architectural and cultural—inscribing their legacy onto public space, preserving it through artistic canons and in historical archives, poor and working-class people have few enduring possessions; theirs is the posterity of small, slant things: as intangible as breath, as fallible and perishable as a single living memory. Against their erasure from consciousness and culture, Morrison performs an uncanny anamnesis, nowhere more

so, perhaps, than in the poems from *The Tall Skies* (2013) in which ‘Knoparmoj’ first appeared. In pieces such as ‘Moa—The Lone Crow of Norrköping’ (P.177), ‘Now, Ivar Was a Traveller’ (p.185) and ‘Bastugatan 21 A Séance with the Complete Bohemians’ (p.202) Morrison celebrates some of the great autodidacts of Swedish proletarian literature, not merely in tribute, but as an activation of proletarian literature’s aims and ideals: Morrison’s own autodidacticism becomes the vehicle through which an imaginative and intellectual solidarity is embodied, across generations, cultures and countries. These poems in *memoriam* do not strictly serve the monolithic and memorialising ends of bourgeois lyric production. They are, rather, relational, a calling into being of an intellectual and creative socialist community.

There is no proletarian literature separable from the working-class readers and writers who make it: they have no stable centre from which to establish and cement their creative lineage, their antecedents are scattered, and their textual practices routinely excluded from the accepted definition of “good” writing; they are seldom the implied audience for any work of culture. The literature of the poor is always emergent, requires serial acts of excavation and summoning. Morrison’s homage to working-class writers and writing is, accordingly, part delicate archaeology and part inspired mediumship. In ‘Moa—The Lone Crow of Norrköping’ Morrison writes across the continuum of our exclusion:

Her pen scraped on, her cramping hand,  
A blazing tumbrel of thumb and fingers, she had to try  
And empty her teeming brain, but the more she wrote,  
The more the questions heaped up on the paper, as if  
To fill the space of absent answers [...]  
[...] The answers never came... So she wrote on... (p.183)

While their literature is always emergent, it is also eternally deferred, impossible under conditions of class inequality. Morrison writes into the empty silence of those ‘absent answers’, interrogating both the treatment of the poor as citizens and their status as artists, projecting themselves into a future they seem destined never to occupy.

Throughout *Green Hauntings*, Morrison repeatedly signals the embodied act of writing and the effort required to bring it forth. The effect of this is two-fold: to enshrine writing itself as an act of proletarian labour, and to constitute the proletarian body as a site of creative and intellectual endeavour; proletarian lives as subjects worthy of literature. To put it another way, writing is work, and workers are writers. Art and labour, rather than being mutually antagonistic or exclusive, provoke and facilitate each other. As Morrison writes, towards the end of ‘Moa’: ‘She poured out the shadows that she’d swept into/ Violent blooms of pounding prose’ (p.186). In ‘Bastugatan 21’ we learn that ‘Ivar Lo wrote only for posterity, so we are told,/ Not for worldly fame, wealth or popularity, but for/ A lasting place in the minds of those who followed’ so that he might

Be remembered, and, thereby, *he*, though not through  
Gauchely posed photographs with pipe and beret—  
But for what he wrote, and what he built up through  
The energy and industry of his iron-wrought words...’ (p.209).

It is that ‘energy and industry’ Morrison is so adept at channelling: a writing that proceeds not from a scene of tranquil contemplation but driven by the peculiarly pressured contexts of impoverished lives, and by an animating sense of social urgency. Lo wrote—and Morrison writes, one feels—to challenge bourgeois notions of posterity as the vainglorious aftermath of the individual, in favour of an enduring supernatural fellowship between working-class and impoverished writers across time. The posterity envisaged by Lo is not predicated upon the preservation of his work within the hallowed precincts of literature. It imagines, rather, a collective and creative praxis with the potential to transform both culture and society. Lo’s posterity is not one of static conservation, but of continuous and active struggle, something Morrison captures in these moving lines from ‘Bastugatan 21’ introducing the curator of the Ivar Lo-Museet as one ‘of Ivar Lo’s apostles: a living, breathing

Barrel-load of his autodidactic ideals: for ordinary  
Working men to graduate from hand to brain,  
Fuse the anvil with the page, hammer out a mallet-thick  
Portfolio of furious prose; this manual man with artisan  
Hands has an artist’s riveted head attached to his  
Lumberjack’s frame: a proletarian man of letters... (p.205)

A deliberate ambiguity attaches to Morrison’s description of this ‘manual man’: Morrison is writing about the curator, but because the curator embodies Lo’s notion of the working-class autodidact, he is also speaking about Lo. By merging these two figures, Morrison creates a sense of both temporal glitch—making Lo, and by extension his ideals, vividly present in the present—and historical continuity. The intricate sonic work in this passage is typical of Morrison’s use of sound to contour and extend meaning: the short, sharp vowels of ‘barrel’, ‘didactic’, ‘mallet’, ‘manual’, ‘man’, ‘artisan’, ‘hands’, ‘attached’ and ‘jack’s’ create a sense of ceaseless labour between and across lines; interspersing these sonic hammer blows Morrison weaves the long, soft vowel sounds of ‘Lo’s’, ‘apostles’, ‘auto’, ‘ordinary’, ‘portfolio’, ‘prose’ and ‘prole’, entwining notions of mental and physical labour, fusing in sound as well as image, the ‘anvil with the page’. ‘Manual’, of course, refers to any work performed by hand, but it also describes a template or book of instructions for others to follow. More particularly, in its archaic use, ‘manual’ was a book of forms to be used by priests in the administration of the sacraments. A sacrament of a kind is being enacted in Lo’s former apartment: a rite of impoverished communion.

Not all ghosts are holy. If the poor and marginalised are hauntings of social and literary thresholds, they are equally haunted, by their collective past and familial histories; what was and might have been. This other, more personal engagement with ghostliness is particularly keen throughout the poems from *The Mansion Gardens* (2006) and those from *Shadows Waltz Haltingly* (2015). In the former collection the haunted or ‘shunned’ house is a significant and staple motif, in particular the derelict rural cottage, as in ‘The House on the Rise of Reversion’ (p.34). In this remarkable poem, Morrison uses the structural decay of the physical house and garden both to conceal and to communicate the misery of those who dwell within it. Morrison writes:

Eyes entirely detached survey  
A shambling garden with scorn—  
Instead of empathising they  
Petition us to cut the lawn.

This short and tightly turned stanza pithily encapsulates an attitude—rife within English society—that treats the dereliction of poor houses as an effect without cause, as a cause in itself, figuring the poor persons who live there as equally contributing to the degradation of environment from which they suffer. The ‘offense’ given by the ramshackle homes of the poor provides an opportunity to mobilise class hatred and enact forms of social cleansing. In ‘The House on the Rise of Reversion’ this manifests in the pettiness of neighbours hand-delivering a ‘a dearth/ Of signatures’ through which they hope to coerce the occupants into tidying their property.

Morrison captures the layered complexity of this interaction through alert and original phrasemaking, evoking the ‘trampled eyes’ of the speaker’s father, and his own ‘anxious face of thwarted youth’ twitching ‘through reclusive curtains,/ Haunting a window’s hidden truth.’ The house and its squalor are supremely visible, obtruding onto the attention of the local community, yet this very visibility serves to obscure the personhood of those who live there, and to inoculate against an empathetic consideration of their lives. Morrison distils the meanness and futility of the petition; its normalising endeavour to sanitise the poverty of house and inhabitants alike. Such manoeuvres have little to do with improving the lives and conditions of poor persons, and much with evading responsibility for the systems that create and maintain those conditions. Against such willed inattention the house achieves a kind of dark victory: the flimsy instruments of collective spite are no match against the regressive anarchy of poverty, and the poem concludes with the ominous lines

Here a sham-lawn’s been flung like a sheet  
Over a bomb-shelter’s furniture by  
An idyll’s betrayal to spaded defeat  
For we who live in the house on the rise.

In the image of the ‘bomb-shelter’ Morrison merges the literal and the figurative to superb effect, conjuring at once the strange particularity of the speaker’s garden while also gesturing towards the embattled and dubiously protected condition of the house’s occupants. This blurring of physical and metaphorical elements is present throughout the poem: ‘the rise’ is both an actual location and a state of emergence or expansion; the poem taps into middle-class fears that the overrun haunts of the poor will themselves overrun their strenuously policed borders. The sprawling garden becomes a space of sinister revenant survival: like a b-movie zombie incursion, the poor aren’t alive in any meaningful sense, yet they live, horribly and numerously animate. ‘An idyll’s betrayal’ implies that such an invasion is both territorial and imaginative. Morrison’s description of the cottage garden presents a perverse inversion of the pastoral, its idealised and apolitical rural spaces.

As William Empson notes in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (Chatto & Windus, 1935) ‘good proletarian art is usually Covert Pastoral’ (p.6). Empson suggests, and Morrison’s writing would seem to illustrate this idea, that a narrowly prescriptive

definition of “pure” proletarian literature, in which the writer is ‘at one with the worker’ is impossible because ‘the artist never is at one with any public’ (p.15). Rather, the pastoral form provides a space for exploring human relations without making pre-emptive assertions about absolute reality. Morrison’s work, acutely class-conscious, but sensitised to the nuances of class and cultural identity, uses the rural space to explore a series of uneasy and class-inflected interactions. This unease is also interrogated through the Gothic trope of the haunted house. The haunted house is the traditional literary setting for an intersection of the past with the present, between the ghost and the future it cannot participate in except through its traces, through its aftermath, its effects of morbid repetition. A ghost, then, is a useful figure for trauma, for the destabilising *nachträglichkeit* of generational poverty. Morrison signals this through the conceit of ‘reversion’, which carries connotations of biological regression to an ancestral type, as well as that of legal inheritance.

The idea of the cottage recurs throughout *Green Hauntings*, but it resurfaces most explicitly in the poems from *The Mansion Gardens*, specifically ‘The Cottage’ (p.43) and ‘The House of Sadness Past’ (p.53). While both poems use the physical fabric of buildings to explore the emotional architecture of people, they figure the cottage in different ways and with varying degrees of tenderness. In ‘The Cottage’ Morrison writes of:

Father’s face hair-line cracked  
as the crumbly stone of the cottage walls;  
mother’s nerves fragile as  
the shaky glass of the greenhouse grave—

Although the poem offers a gentle conjuration of ‘misty summers’ Morrison’s use of ‘hair-line cracked’, ‘crumbly’, ‘fragile’ and ‘shaky’ suggest an underlying precarity; invisible tensions which trouble and subtly undermine the poem’s seeming peace. In ‘The House of Sadness Past’ the cottage is described as ‘the shrunken shack’ and ‘that tomb of stone’ (p.53); ‘our own little crumbled House of Usher’ and ‘a disgraced sight set back from the road’ (p.54). The Poe reference in particular feels telling, evoking the original Gothic tale with its themes of long familial decay and claustrophobic entrapment. Transposing the Gothic grandeur of Poe’s story to a small, dilapidated cottage in a Cornish hamlet is a playful subversion of genre conventions and a fine example of Morrison’s wry humour, yet it is also suggestive: throughout the story Poe uses ‘house’ to refer to both the physical structure and to its inhabitants, both of which seem locked in a mutually corrosive and ultimately doomed interaction. Does the house exert a malevolent influence over the Ushers? Or does the malign character of the Ushers bring about changes in the structural stuff of the house? Are we shaped by an inescapable genetic destiny or by our surroundings? This interplay between heredity and environment is something Morrison is engaged with throughout *Green Hauntings*.

In ‘Dole & Genealogy’ (p.40) the speaker’s father is caught

mapping out ancestral pasts;  
in fogs of nostalgia he’ll fumble  
through fictitious fasts.

Traces the line the light casts.

Dimming light. Dull evening glow  
displays his only pride:  
ancestors' names, row on row,  
dead before his time although  
he feels they're tutting by his side

In this complex poem Morrison manipulates and collides the multiple meanings of 'dole'—as unemployment benefit, as an individual's lot or destiny, as sorrow or mourning—to interrogate the notion of lineage in both its positive and negative aspects: while an imagined past provides consolation for an unliveable present, it also gives rise to an ideal to which that present is unequal. Nostalgia is a particularly dangerous and seductive form of haunting, and it is Janus-faced: composed of both voluntary memories—where the past is reshaped through an intentional and often distorting effort of recall—and involuntary memories, which superimpose themselves on present place in intense and overwhelming flashes.

The irony at the heart of 'Dole & Genealogy' is that the father's 'fogs' of ancestral nostalgia offer the only salve available to the misery provoked by these involuntary memories. Morrison's evocation of this tortuous bind is poignant and stark:

I find him foraging for childhood,  
sleep-lost in stolen pasts  
where memory graves are his mind-food  
for hope... (p.41)

For the impoverished subject memory is often the only available repository of our history, our only 'mind-food for hope'. It can beguile and consume us, yet it might also anticipate and summon an elsewhere, an imaginary otherwise; provoking dissonance between the actual and the possible, and against the reductive and brutalising logics of late-stage capitalism, nostalgia can erect an alternative dialectical tenderness, can offer the restoration of dignity and alleviation of suffering that society can—or will—not. The ghosts, then, are also those of other pasts, of impossible futures and parallel socialist realities.

In the title poem from *The Mansion Gardens* (p.36), the narrator and his addressee walk through the house and grounds of a stately home, interlopers sanctioned by their clipped coupons, but not entirely welcome or at ease. Snatches of italicised text provide an unsettling commentary on the innocuous and curated 'past' presented to the visitors:

...There's the Lords  
and Ladies, and their ancestors  
hanging, framed and ashen-faced.

*But why are they ashen-faced  
when they lives were so well-graced?*

While 'hanging' refers to the portraits on the wall, it carries—coupled with 'ashen-

faced'—an ominous undertone of (potential revolutionary) violence. When Morrison's interlocutors are tempted to see more of the rooms than is permitted:

Shall we stroll those dust-filled rooms—  
well, just alongside, take a little  
look at them, just peep inside?  
They're cordoned-off with blue rope...

*just like our lives...*

we seem to get a comment on the peripheral position of the poor and working class with respect to the representation of English history as staged through heritage productions such as the stately home. The acidic *sotto voce* of '*just like our lives*' creates a moment of arrest inside the smooth, consensus doing of this history. The narrator and addressee operate through the poem like a species of spectral and uncanny glitch, flipping the convention of the haunted manor house, tenanted by ghostly figures of its illustrious past, and themselves becoming ghosts in the machine, potential poltergeists who threaten to cross the rope, walk on the grass, and generally upset the carefully managed order at any given moment. This is the secret power of the proletariat; this is a primary source of the superstitious fear to which they are subject.

While Morrison's poetic interaction with collective history feels profound, he is also an eloquent poet of personal and generational experience. *Shadows Waltz Haltingly* brings us familial haunting in a variety of guises: in 'Guns of Anguish' (p.253), war haunts the traumatised body and mind of 'Harold', a 'grandfather of the distaff side' who erupts erratically into

[...] lunging gait, agitations, twitching thumbs,  
Sudden surges and beetroot-faced rages  
When he'd punch his own head, was barely held together  
By brown-rimmed glasses

Harold begins life haunted by 'our mother's ghost-uncle', killed in the First World War, after whom he was named, and whose doomed legacy he was able neither to live up to nor yet fully escape: suffering harrowing treatment as a prisoner during the Second World War, hit in the head with rifle butts, forced to 'to stand outside/ All night in the Bavarian snow, naked—naturally'.

While Harold's body is visited by a series of uncontrollable glitches and tics, his trauma resurfacing in often violent symptomatic episodes, he himself has been turned into a kind of supernatural transmitter, in constant 'cross-correspondence' with the spectral figure of his deceased wife. Morrison mobilises the metaphor of staticky radio communication here to superb effect—'During periods of poorer reception when lines/ Crackled and frequencies shifted' (p.254)—to convey the disorienting effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and the sense of dislocation in time suffered by those who have experienced trauma. Further, Harold seems be a figure for exploring the way in which traumatic distress is imperfectly communicated between family members and across generations. Yet a traumatic reading of Harold's symptoms is further complicated by the discovery that he suffers from Huntington's

disease, and the speaker questions the relationship between biological illness and psychological damage; these two forms of inheritance become the twin motors that drive this selection of poems: the grim hereditary of the Huntington's gene intersecting with other kinds of cultural inheritance and artistic legacy.

*Shadows Waltz Haltingly* is probably Morrison's most personal work; returning to these poems I am reminded of Melanie Klein's theory of haunting as a state of mourning, where the spectral figure is the mechanism by which loss persists and is amplified over time. A ghost, after all, is a strange kind of survival: the lost may return as the angel at our shoulder, offering comfort or protection but liable to disappear if we strain the pact of their magical existence too far, as in Harold's relationship with his beloved Beryl. The lost may return as a kind of phantom limb, irrevocably absent yet still acutely capable of perpetuating feeling; making the living world less vivid and less real, as in the 'wracked-pasts' and surges of involuntary nostalgia that visit the speaker in "Scorched Carpet": *Lepidoptera Chorea* (p.264). The lost may return in the form of a mask or second skin, something we carry within us or feel destined to become. This last is chillingly present withing 'The Rage (an extended villanelle on Huntington's disease)' (p.256), Morrison's deft riff on Dylan Thomas's 'Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night'. Here, the form's recursive qualities signal the rapidly cycling thoughts of the speaker, the jerky and repetitive progress of the disease, and the inescapable circuit of genetic destiny. The rage in this piece is manifold, belonging equally to sufferer and to speaker, who rage at the loss of their loved ones and the cruel fate visited upon them; they also rage for the hand they themselves have been dealt; their cards marked before they were born: 'Will my punished ears/ Prepare me more for when I disengage?/ Will augurs fail? Will I go out in rage?' (p.257).

The poems in *Shadows Waltz Haltingly* weave multiple levels and registers of haunting together into a layered reckoning with bodily illness, a confrontation with mortality, and a deeply moving work of mourning. Several of these poems deal with the loss by slow degrees of the speaker's mother, attentive to the exhausting practicalities of end-of-life care and to the emotional toll these exact. Morrison combines unflinching and visceral descriptions of the illness:

A twitching-tissue hair-shirt stitched not to fit,  
But encumber, de-armour the motor, trip up  
Movement; insatiably itch like a bee-sting,  
Skin-crawling urticaria, allergy of the will,  
Inflammation of the soul, the Spirit's Hives,  
A riddle Sphinxing the tongue till it swells up  
Like Oedipus' curious foot, marble-numb...

('Night of the Pegasus', p.262)

with an anguished and tender regard for the aftershocks of suffering that it causes:

Slumped by her barred bed, a peach crib,  
His fogged ghost struggles to decode her vague signals,  
Cryptic as Tongues; nonplussed, his blunt fingers  
Tapping indecipherable Morse on his scrambling brow

Later poems are marked by an elegiac tone, and it is this adroit bracketing of loving homage and uncomprehending rage that gives Morrison’s work of mourning its particular power.

In *The Mansion Gardens*, poems such as ‘The Ring’, ‘The Coin Foragers’ (p.43) and ‘Old-Fashioned Sun’ (p.44) perform similarly intricate emotional work, using the tokens and talismans of everyday life to bring moments into focus with a startling clarity. Inventively allusive and intertextual, ‘The Ring’ echoes the poem from Tolkien’s Ring-inscription to refract through the lens of boyhood’s literary preoccupations, an experience of family shame and almost bottomless defeat:

No wizard there as our guide—  
Poverty’s spell casts all else to one side.  
Father’s face grey as Gandalf’s gown.  
He always told himself he’d let us down.

Love is its own darkness, slowly binding.

In ‘The Coin Foragers’ a family’s hunt for small change from between settee cushions and the back of dusty draws is transfigured to a strange game, the ‘winner: first to disinfect their treasure.’ That these are not sentimental poems is a testament to Morrison’s great skill as a writer, always balancing adult insight (and hindsight) with a clear child’s-eye view of unfolding events. In the case of ‘The Coin Foragers’ this blurring of perspectives produces an ambiguous and troubling irony that the reader is unable to easily tease apart. It is this mixture of affection and unblinking realist witness that is at the heart of Morrison’s poetic gift. There is no—in the words of Peter Davidson—‘benign pastness’ (*The Idea of the North*, London: Reaktion Books, 2005) to the recollections of Morrison’s youth. Nostalgia does not soften the language of experience to become a tacit apology for the inequalities that produced it. Rather, Morrison’s poems are sensitised to the hedged yet intense—intense *because* hedged—life and laughter of the poor.

What is affecting about Morrison’s shorter family vignettes is their particularity: poverty is often conjured within the contemporary lyric through a series of tired tropes; it is frequently vague and nebulous. Morrison drills down into the individual moments that make up such an experience, not saturating them with straightened emotionality, but bringing a sharp attention to bear. ‘Old-Fashioned Sun’ is my favourite of these poems, in which Morrison’s eleven-year-old speaker attempts to ‘reclaim the past’ through his father’s books and records. It is a touching account of the portals art and culture can provide to another place and time; in stepping into and sharing his father’s past, Morrison makes for himself a temporary refuge in the present. Although the poem ends with the frank admission that

one can’t stay absent from their age—  
in the musty clutter of historic shrine—  
so I parted the curtains, tripped the page  
to the post-imperfect future time,  
where pop lyrics strip the Kipling rhyme.

The poem's tight metrical structure disavows an *absolute* stripping, to acknowledge instead the persistence—and the ghostings—of early artistic influence. While the speaker ultimately forges his own path, a trace will remain of these prior preoccupations, and the unspoken intellectual and familial bond they represent.

Ultimately, what makes *Green Hauntings* such a compelling sampler of Morrison's work is the links it forges between personal, literary, and political history: what haunts Morrison the poet, and what haunts the 'Haunted Ghosts' (p.314) of the poor. In 'The Haunted Ghosts', Morrison's speaker lives the suspended, secluded life of a spectre: he and his father themselves are the uncanny objects of superstition (and judgement) for the more affluent community in which they exist but from whom they are estranged, at one remove. Surprised by a 'trespasser' in their 'rustic squat/(The limbo we Shades haunted)', the speaker responds to his fumbling apology that he thought nobody lived there with a wry '& nor did we'. Poverty has rendered their existence so precarious as to be all but subliminal. Only in the act of being surprised, held by the hostile or discomfited regard of another, are they offered proof that they existed at all.

Morrison's merging of social and psychic concerns manifests in individual poems—such as the brilliantly Blakean 'The Corn Thresher' (p.37), again from *The Mansion Gardens*, where the agrarian conceit of threshing and binding corn becomes a figure for both social engineering and emotional cohesion—but also across poems and between collections, where Morrison traverses wide formal and thematic territories with approaches ranging from the epigrammatic to the polemic, and treating with equal care and attention both literary luminaries and society's most marginal members.

'Hauntings' is indeed the right word for this Selected Poems: the subtle undermining of social, familial and structural fabric: the termite teeth of poverty, burrowing into the psyche. Morrison creates a unique language to at once expose this process, but also to resist it. Resistance for the poor is itself ghostly, an ever-present prospect on the edge of emerging. That is the threat and the promise this poetry sings with.

In 'June Haunting' (p.319), the final supplemental poem that closes the collection, Morrison returns directly to the idea of ghostliness, to the speaker as a spectral presence who is somehow both pre-dead and revenant once, persisting beyond his allotted time to occupy the half-light of a grey and empty world, one which seems to offer little by way of escape or change. Perhaps, the speaker muses, his entire life has been a dream:

[...] Or maybe that was all a dream  
& my father's Allan Quatermain mourning his son...?

Isn't haunting just a sublime absentmindedness?  
A soul's shadow-throwing? Astral ruminating...?

Yet the speaker is seen by his father, as the aging father is seen—and held within the poem's space—by the speaker. They materialise each other in a touching act of filial solidarity. I wonder if a ghost—much like Adrienne Rich's definition of a poem—breaks a silence that needs to be broken? A ghost is a rupture to the homogenous

structure of experience, an urgent interruption from another place and time, an exhortation to look and be aware, a way we might be shocked into better, more loving attention.

*Green Hauntings* leaves me with the feeling that it might just be possible for however fleeting a moment to accomplish this through language: to make those other others present in the present; to bring into life and into focus the history forged by singular individuals, and that ‘lineage of suffering’ (*‘Hell’s Full of Early Risers’*, p.78) we all share in common. This is a book of hungers, spiritual and literal, and a yearning to establish the community and the canon of the outcast and the indigent, of anyone at odds or alone. *Green*, in the singing sap of its linguistic bravura and intellectual energy, Morrison’s poetry makes such a canon momentarily visible and marvellously possible.

*Fran Lock, Jul-Aug 2022*

## Preface

Putting together a Selected Poems has been as much about selecting what to leave out as what to include, and a substantial amount of my oeuvre to date is excluded because I wanted—mostly for practical reasons—to only include shorter to medium-length poems (though my idea of the latter is probably what most other poets would think of as long). This means that my pamphlet-length poems from Sixties Press (both published in 2004), my verse play *Picaresque* (2008), and the two book-length poems *Keir Hardie Street* (2010) and *Captive Dragons* (2011), are not represented here (nor is the companion sequence to the latter, *The Shadow Thorns*—although a poem which only appeared on the jacket flap of that book, ‘*Inky-Dinky-Dink, Fleur de Lis, Fleur de Lis*’, is included as a curio).

This is also intended to be the first of two Selected volumes. It charts much of my poetry from my first full volume *The Mansion Gardens* in 2006 up to 2016 which was a kind of watershed for me before I pitched into more openly polemical poetry. It has the prefix *New &* as it includes at the back some *Supplementary Poems*, most of which haven’t appeared in any of my previous collections, except for ‘Brown Studies’ and ‘The Lady in the Cabinet’ (from *Gum Arabic*, 2020, though both were actually written around 2016). The latter is included due to its imageries linking back to several poems from previous collections which reference Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a fictional leitmotif in relation to my late mother’s long battle with Huntington’s Disease: the ‘Tracing the Pattern’ section in *A Tapestry of Absent Sitters* (2009), and a large share of the poems in *Shadows Waltz Haltingly* (2015)—as well as the Gilman acrostic ‘Charlotte in a Different Light’ in *Blaze a Vanishing* (2013). Regarding, too, the latter volume, which was suffixed *and The Tall Skies*, I have decided to split what was essentially a double volume and treat each part as individual volumes from the same year, since *The Tall Skies* is distinctly focused on Swedish culture and in particular its pioneering tradition of proletarian literature (the fruits of several stays in Sweden, including an Arts Council-funded research visit in 2012).

Additionally, I have not, for reasons of length, included the long eponymous poem that concludes *Blaze a Vanishing*—that will have to wait for a Selected Longer Poems, depending on whether there will be appetite for it. The *Supplemental Poems* also include some of my earlier poems written during the 1990s but not included in any of my volumes. ‘June Haunting’ was a poem composed during the lockdown of 2021 and published on *The Fortnightly Review* and is included due to its thematic and symbolic similarities to many poems in my earliest collections (it is the only poem which trips out of the temporal parameters stipulated on this book cover)—it has occurred to me that ghosts and phantoms, shadows and absences, crop up in much of my poetry but nowhere more so than in the first volume *The Mansion Gardens*. ‘The Haunted Ghosts’ dates back to around 2004 and previously appeared only in the anthology *Orphans of Albion* (2005). All these spectral poems came to inspire the concept of the title *Green Hauntings*: past poems haunting the present, and perhaps the future, like a gathering of typographical ghosts. The title also taps into Hauntology, as originally defined by Jacques Derrida (*Spectres of Marx*, 1993) and further explored in the works of the late Mark Fisher: as with most socialist

writing my poetry is permeated by a melancholy, even morbid—or ghostly—nostalgia or mournfulness in part for things or states that never were, but which could have been, and which were anticipated, and which may yet come. Another way to view it is that my poetry is largely taken up by absences—a kind of haunted poetry (and what else are poets really but life hauntings...?). This has been picked up on before: K.M. Newmann of the Irish Summer Palace Press remarked on the 'strangely haunting' quality of some of my early poems, while Geoffrey Heptonstall commented of one of my volumes under review, *Shadows Waltz Haltingly*: 'The poetry in this volume is haunted'. The *Green* of the title alludes to both the fact that much of this work comes from the pen of a younger self, while also alluding to my rural upbringing and the effect that the beautiful though often bleak, and mysterious, Cornish countryside had on my development as a poet. One working title for this book was *Haunted Pastoral*.

There are two main reasons why I decided to publish this volume under my Caparison imprint rather than approach any of my former publishers to take it on. Firstly, I wanted complete creative control, not only for the selection of poems, but editorially (so that I have been free to tighten up many of the poems, some extensively), and also in terms of overseeing the production, which seeps into the second main reason: I wanted complete autonomy on the design of the book, its 'look', which I didn't want to have to fit into the template of other imprints, plus I also felt it was a fitting time to branch into hardback. So this is a bespoke production. Being a seasoned book designer and typesetter it just seemed to make sense for this particular project to produce it myself. Much as being published by other imprints is confidence-boosting, there is nonetheless something deeply satisfying and immensely empowering about producing one's own book as a physical as well as spiritual object. (Indeed, it takes me back to the very beginning when, courtesy of some antediluvian apparatus in a local community centre, I hand-pressed my first chapbook of poetry—the sense of craftsmanlike achievement unlike anything I've experienced since). But limited funds inevitably necessitate that this is a very limited edition.

It is hoped this volume serves the purpose of showing my development from an earlier pastoral or 'Covert Pastoral' (see Empson)—even gothic—lyricism through to a more openly political, *impasto* poetry. Through the years, the lines have lengthened, the language grown more figurative—the metaphors ripened. My quondam publisher and editor, Simon Jenner, instilled in me the paramountcy of metaphor, that poetry depends on a heightened engagement with language and image, and any lapses into prose risk tipping it into verse, a very different medium where prosodic form often compromises poetic content—particular pitfall for rhyming poets (and at that time I tended to be one of those). That pitfall was at least temporarily nipped with the ruthless swipe of Simon's editing pencil as he struck out all unnecessary prepositions and conjunctions from my poems. The result of this Modernistic pruning is most evident in the more pared down poems of my first two volumes, though even those compositions stop short of the excessive sculpting which can end up reducing poetry to the Delphic—to presume the poetical must *ipso facto* be elliptical is a common pitfall of the opposite approach to 'verse'.

As to the spirit of my poetry, running through it all is a seam of something

akin to New Sincerity: a tonal counterpoint to postmodernism. Simon would call this 'Naïf', his term for a variety of self-taught styles falling somewhere on the poetry spectrum between modernist and postmodernist. An implied lack of sophistication, however, places too much emphasis on the cerebral, when the composition of poetry is as much an expression of feeling as it is of thinking. Famous Naïf poet Stevie Smith had to have a certain amount of sophistication to compose unsophisticated poetry which nonetheless expressed profound thought. And many poets would probably agree it is far easier to compose 'sophisticated' poetry of the Eliotic kind than it is to produce the sublime lullabies of Blake's *Songs of Innocence*. One might have a sophisticated mind but an unsophisticated soul. In any case, for any apparent lack of sophistication to some of my early poetry, I have perhaps ended up overcompensating to the point that some of my later work has been criticised for its density and abstruseness. Certainly it has become, for better or worse, more erudite and didactic (common peccadilloes of the autodidact), though a quixotic aspect remains steadfast throughout. Hopefully there are periods on my poetic journey when I've struck the right balance. Perhaps all poetry is a pursuit of serendipities. Emotionalism, Expressionism, New Confessionalism, Naïfety, New Sincerity—any of these terms might describe aspects to the type of poetry I have attempted for the past three decades. What all my work certainly has done is go against the grain of what is fashionable and 'mainstream'—though this has mainly been down to creative instinct rather than conscious agenda.

Influences can no doubt be detected in the poems of each period—they include, in rough chronology of encounter: Blake (*Songs of Innocence and Experience*), Keats ('Ode to Melancholy' was the first poem to really give me the poetry bug), Shelley ('To A Skylark'), Coleridge, Wordsworth, Milton, Andrew Marvell, Byron, Emily Brontë, Tennyson ('The Lotos-eaters', 'The Kraken'), Thomas Hardy, W.B. Yeats ('The Song of Wandering Aengus'), D.H. Lawrence, Wilfred Owen ('Anthem for Doomed Youth'), Siegfried Sassoon, Gerard Manley Hopkins, John Clare, Horace, Pope, Walt Whitman, Robert Frost ('The Road Less Travelled'), W.H. Davies ('Leisure'), T.S. Eliot ('Pruferock'; *The Waste Land; Four Quartets*), Dylan Thomas (*Under Milk Wood*), Emily Dickinson, Stevie Smith ('Not Waving But Drowning', 'Do Take Muriel Out'), John Betjeman (almost entirely for his untypical poem 'N.W.5 & N.6'), W.H. Auden ('In Memory of W.B. Yeats'), Philip Larkin ('Aubade'), Sylvia Plath, Donald Ward, Arthur Rimbaud, Thomas Gray ('Elegy in a Country Churchyard'), Christina Rossetti ('Remember'), Isaac Rosenberg, George Barker, Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender, John Davidson ('Thirty Bob A Week'—my favourite poem, a benchmark for me), Harold Monro (*The Silent Pool*), Walter de la Mare, Keith Douglas, Alun Lewis (*Raiders' Dawn; Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets*), Sidney Keyes, Drummond Allison, Clifford Dyment, Bernard Spencer, Robert Lowell (*Life Studies*), John Berryman (*The Dream Songs*), Roy Campbell, Tony Harrison, Martin Bell, Peter Redgrove, Thomas Blackburn, Kathleen Raine, David Gascoyne, John Cornford, Christopher Caudwell, Ted Hughes, H.D., Wallace Stevens ('The Emperor of Ice-Cream'), Ezra Pound (*Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*), David Jones, Ivor Gurney, Harry Martinson (*Aniara*), ee cummings, Hart Crane (*The Bridge*), Anne Sexton (*The Awful Rowing Toward God*)... I'd whittle this list down to a handful whose work has had the most conscious influence on my own: Blake, Keats, Shelley,

Davidson, Monro, Eliot, Gurney, Auden, D. Thomas, A. Lewis, Larkin, Plath.

In terms of music: classical and orchestral is to my mind most closely related to poetry, though not a medium in which I pretend to be any sort of expert, nor even habitual listener. However, I would have to cite the soundscapes and sonic atmospherics of the following composers as having had significant influence on my poetry: Gustav Holst ('Jupiter' from *The Planets* in particular, *Somerset Rhapsody*), Ralph Vaughan Williams (*English Folk Song Suite*), Malcolm Arnold (*Symphony 1 & 5*, film music), Jerome Moross (*The Last Judgement*, *The Big Country*, *The Valley of Gwangi*), George Gershwin (*Rhapsody In Blue*), Claude Debussy (*Arabesques*), Erik Satie (*Gymnopédies*), William Walton, Manuel de Falla ('El Amor Brujo'), Stravinsky (*The Rite of Spring*), Rodney Bennett, Frederick Delius, Percy Grainger, Vladimir Cosma, Wilfred Josephs, John Barry, Béla Bartók.

In my teenage years, before I'd discovered poetry of the strictly literary kind, I'd been inspired by the lyrics of some popular songwriters, particularly Paul Weller (whose Jam B-side 'Tales from the Riverbank' struck a particular chord growing up in the countryside), John Lennon and Paul McCartney (The Beatles), Andy Partridge and Colin Moulding (XTC), Sting (The Police), Matt Johnson (The The), Kate Bush, Rick Wright and Roger Waters (Pink Floyd), Mark Hollis (Talk Talk), Roland Orzabal (Tears For Fears), P.D. Heaton (The Housemartins), Ian Dury. Regarding Weller again, it had been, ironically, on the back of The Jam's 1980 *Sound Affects* LP that I'd been first introduced to the immortal lines from Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Mask of Anarchy* ('Rise like lions after slumber/ In unvanquishable number' etc.), a poem which would have considerable influence on my political poetry.

But it has been as much the writings of novelists, scholars, playwrights and philosophers that's influenced much of my poetry as it has the work of other poets —again, in rough chronology of encounter: H. Rider Haggard (*Allan Quatermain*), Rudyard Kipling, J.R.R. Tolkien (mostly for the mystique of his striking Germanic name and the strange worlds it signified), Emily Brontë (*Wuthering Heights* first inspired me to write), Robert Louis Stevenson, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy (*Jude the Obscure*), Karl Marx (*The Communist Manifesto*), Max Weber (*The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*), Émile Durkheim (*Suicide*), George Orwell (*Keep the Aspidistra Flying; Homage to Catalonia*), David Nobbs (*Reginald Perrin*), Lewis Carroll, James Joyce (*Ulysses*), Eugene O'Neill (*Long Day's Journey Into Night; The Iceman Cometh*), D.H. Lawrence (*Sons and Lovers*), John Osborne (*Look Back In Anger*), Edgar Allan Poe, H.G. Wells, Arthur Conan Doyle, Joseph Conrad (*Lord Jim; Nostromo*), Graham Greene (*The Heart of the Matter*), Samuel Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*), Shakespeare (*The Tempest; Richard II*), Charlotte Perkins Gilman (*The Yellow Wallpaper*), Henry James (*The Turn of the Screw; Wings of the Dove*), Angela Carter, Colin Wilson (*The Outsider; Ritual in the Dark; Brandy of the Damned*), Robert Tressell (*The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*), Aldous Huxley (*Antic Hay; After Many A Summer; Brave New World*), Jean Rhys (*Wide Sargasso Sea; Good Morning Midnight*), John Wyndham, Susan Hill (*The Woman In Black*), George Gissing (*New Grub Street*), Daphne Du Maurier (*My Cousin Rachel; The Infernal World of Branwell Brontë*), Christopher Hill (*The World Turned Upside Down*), J.B. Priestley (*An Inspector Calls; The Edwardians; Angel Pavement*), R.D. Laing (*The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise; Knots*), Al Alvarez

(*The Savage God*), Christopher Caudwell (*Illusion and Reality; Studies in a Dying Culture*), Michael Young (*The Rise of the Meritocracy*), Alasdair MacIntyre (*Marxism and Christianity*), Wal Hannington (*The Problem of the Distressed Areas*), David W. Petegorsky (*Left-Wing Democracy in the English Civil War*), Charles Rycfort (*Anxiety and Neurosis*), George Thomson (*Marxism and Poetry*), J.H. Plumb (*The Death of the Past*), Roland Camberton, Christopher Fry, Søren Kierkegaard (*The Concept of Anxiety*), Swedenborg, Annie Besant & C.W. Leadbetter (*Thought-Forms*), Bertrand Russell (*A History of Western Philosophy*), William Empson (*Some Versions of Pastoral; Seven Types of Ambiguity*), Edmund Wilson (*To the Finland Station*), Peter Shaffer (*The Royal Hunt of the Sun; Equus*), Caryl Churchill (*Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*), Erich Fromm (*The Sane Society*), Christopher Isherwood (*Prater Violet*), Robert Burton (*The Anatomy of Melancholy*), Cyril Connolly (*Enemies of Promise*), Rene & Jean Dubos (*The White Plague*), Albert Camus (*The Myth of Sisyphus*), Henry Mayhew (*Mayhew's Characters*), David Lockwood (*The Blackcoated Worker*), Richard Hoggart (*The Uses of Literacy*), Paul Roazen (*Brother Animal*), Harold Bloom (*The Anxiety of Influence*), Jack London (*Martin Eden*).

Some figures from fiction have become personified leitmotifs in my poetry, in some cases unconscious shadow archetypes of aspects to my personality—in particular, Emily Brontë’s Heathcliff and his doomed son Linton, Hardy’s Jude and his disturbed son ‘Little Father Time’, Dostoyevsky’s Raskólnikov, Orwell’s Gordon Comstock, Graham Greene’s Henry Scobie, Conrad’s Martin Decoud and ‘Lord’ Jim, Tressell’s Frank Owen, Gissing’s Edwin Reardon, London’s Martin Eden. And real life figures who have held a fascination and affinity: John Keats, Vincent van Gogh, John Davidson, Vaslav Nijinsky, Kierkegaard, Gerrard Winstanley, John Lilburne, Robert Burton, Richard Burton (actor), Viktor Tausk, Oskar Werner, Tony Hancock.

Art has played its part too—no artist moreso than van Gogh for his sheer emotional intensity. Also: Manet, Millais, Holman Hunt, Henry Wallis, Walter Sickert, Matisse, Picasso, Munch, L.S. Lowry, Goya, Rembrandt, John Tenniel. The thick textural application of paint, *impasto*, as practised by van Gogh, and Sickert, is a term I’ve sometimes applied to my poetic technique of layered language.

It just remains for me to thank all those poets, writers, editors, publishers, critics, and other artists, including actors, who have helped me significantly in my poetic development, supported or encouraged my work, constructively criticised or critically praised it, or played parts in its public presentation: John Agard, Karunesh Kumar Agarwal, Jim Aitken, Robert Allwood, Sebastian Barker, Sarah Baxter, Brian Beamish, Larry Beckett, David Betteridge, Linda Black, Martin Blyth, Laura Boni, Denis Boyles, Jan Bradley, Leon Brown, Paula Brown, Alan Britt, J. Brookes, Norman Buller, Nick Burbridge, Jeanetta Calhoun Mish, Riccardo Capoferro, Pedro Carvalal, Debjani Chatterjee, Gillian Clarke, Cliff Cocker, Bernadette Cremin, Andy Croft, Alessandro Cusimano, Will Daunt, Dominique De-Light, Alan Dent, Matt Duggan, Alan Dunnett, R.G. Foster, James Fountain, Naomi Foyle, Greg Freeman, Jan Goodey, Wolfgang Görtzschacher, Dennis Greig, Eileen Gunn, Peter Guttridge, Martyn Halsall, Colin Hambrook, Mary Hampton, Sophie Hannah, Graham Hardie, Bruce Harris, Geoffrey Heptonstall, Graham High, Martin Holroyd, Peter Holt, John Horder, Michael Horovitz, David Hunter, Michael Jayston, Mike Jenkins, Simon Jenner, Norman Jope, Tom Kelly, David Kessel, Prakash Kona, Katy Lassetter,

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Finally, I would like to thank my late mother, Helen, who I think more than anyone else in my earlier life encouraged me to never give up on my poetry in spite of all the obstacles—she, above all, believed in me, even before I believed in myself.

*A.M., 2022*

# *Green Hauntings*

New &  
Selected Poems  
Volume One  
2006-2016

Alan  
Morrison

from

*THE MANSION GARDENS*

(2006)

## THE WATER SHALLOWS

As I was paddling in the water shallows,  
the ripples turned to waves,  
the paddling to a wade.

While I tried to shallow my tumbling mind,  
the thoughts that swam in the water shallows  
were chased as fish by the shadows of sparrows

## DANCE OF THE DRAGONFLIES

Around the still lake the dragonflies danced  
In a flurry of cobalt and green—  
They buzzed their glass wings and blindly chanced  
Skimming the water-sheen.

One hit the water then hurtled and skidded,  
Seemingly out of control—  
A pilot was drowned where the lily pads lidded  
The mantle which merged with the shoal.

The pilot's son cried as he tried to forget  
But leapt up with a new sense of hope  
As he spotted a dragonfly, wings stuck with wet,  
Drag itself up the bank's sandy slope.

## IN SEARCH OF THE HAGGARD GHOST

It flitted down the lane  
past children's voices raised in play,  
tracing its steps long ago  
pressed into the mud,  
trodden on a thousand times since.

The brief trek ended.

Returning up the lane, rain  
in drips, hastened to penitent patters,  
pelted on the muddy puddles  
then intensified, sleet—  
bounced off clenched fists of grass,  
pummelled flowers at the sides.

Standing silently, sullenly,  
as the children ran out laughing  
through a pasture gate, it stood there,  
still and quiet, and they didn't see it.

A shabby, bedraggled, sopping ghost  
orbited by a bulging black cloud  
sagging in readiness to burst.

## NOSTALGIA

Even in those golden days  
Life always left us wanting more—  
Why we loathe ourselves today  
Is why we loved ourselves before.

## THE MANSION GARDENS

Shall we stroll those mansion gardens,  
baize on baize of velvet grass  
so well-kept and un-walked-upon?  
Come on, love, we've cut the coupons,  
let's see those shouting flowers  
round grounds of ivy towers.

Shall we walk those mansion cloisters  
verged with portraits? There's the Lords  
and Ladies, and their ancestors  
hanging, framed and ashen-faced.

*But why are they ashen-faced,  
when their lives were so well graced?*

Shall we stroll those dust-still rooms—  
well, just alongside, take a little  
look at them, just peep inside?  
They're cordoned-off with blue rope...

*just like our lives...*

oh, we'll cope.

Shall we pace those mansion chambers  
ringed by pasty-platted rope...

*easily unhooked and disobeyed...*

No—that would be to abandon  
our law-abiding principles...

*what's wrong is always irresistible...*

Shall we recall those mansion gardens,  
baize on baize of velvet grass  
so well-kept and un-walked-upon?

*I'm not envious: simply a dreamer:  
those lawns seemed so much greener...*

**MAKE WAY!**

*Make Way!* their banners gallop  
In the choppy Cornish wind;  
'*He Lives! He Lives!*' crashes on cramped  
Coverack, Lilliput-twinned.

On the craggy harbour-side  
They rejoice their Saviour's Risen!  
And yet He's still invisible,  
While their clammed evangelism

Is vivid and immovable  
As Coverack shacks' limpet-cling  
To granite rocks; or barnacles  
On the moored hull of *Tamarind*.

Rustling tambourines displace  
The shingle's cymbal hissing—  
No footprints to be made out on  
The sand because the tide is in.

In Chapel they all clap their hands,  
Sing with palms splayed up in prayer  
Spun by a cardigan-man on guitar  
Strumming in a thumping chair.

In among the rocking pews  
The Not-Yet-Born-Again's found out;  
Someone nudges me: '*Come on,*  
*Clap!*'—the spell to cast off doubt?

Into the street they pour their peal  
Pounding on my doubting brow—  
Bashing tambourines they dash  
My faith like fish-brains on a bow.

## A HAMPER FROM LANDRAKE

In the creel of a slate-skied Cornish winter  
we caught a scraping sound outside;  
a huge mass landing, heavy as the weight  
my father prayed would be lifted from  
his jobless shoulders scraped and bowed—

cold wind shot through the hallway, lo!  
we beheld a hamper packed with tins  
& vegetables—no Christians,  
just a scribbled note blown on the lino  
saying *from the Parish*—my father scowled:  
now he was obliged to let them Save him.

## DOLE & GENEALOGY

1

The fireplace littered with Carlsberg cans  
he sits, disconsolate.  
Concentration fills his hands:  
his hobby gropes to compensate  
for his neglected state.

From chair to chair he'll stumble  
mapping out ancestral pasts;  
in fogs of nostalgia he'll fumble  
through fictitious fasts.  
Traces the line the light casts.

Dimming light. Dull evening glow  
displays his only pride:  
ancestors' names, row on row,  
dead before his time although  
he feels they're tutting by his side

judging him. Tries to appease  
their disappointment in him  
by tracing ad infinitum  
far into his fantasies,  
fizzing cans, full ashtrays.

2

I find him foraging for childhood,  
sleep-lost in stolen pasts  
where memory graves are his mind-food  
for hope; stale bread that lasts  
till shattered like plaster-casts.

What use is love? Over us looms  
a quiet Catholic God, aloof  
from our penniless misfortunes,  
old invisible heirlooms  
flogged long ago to keep this roof  
of poverty's brooding proof.

Can I convince my maltreated father  
God is on our side  
when our cramped prayers have scrimped an after  
of comfortless dark? Time and tide  
long passed on the other side.

In creeps a torrid afternoon  
of brief self-pitying;  
more motherless sobs fill the room,  
nothing can lift the casting of gloom  
over the sound of a grown man crying.

3

I pity the prowess with which he heaps  
more shame upon himself  
as he lumbers his dad's damp-blotched books  
onto the listing shelf—  
sad tributes to a faded wealth.

More than any other member  
of his leafless family tree  
he personifies the motto  
*Forgetful Of One's Own Interests*  
warped through verdigris.

‘I’ve done my duty, I’d done my best’  
he mutters to a mirror  
repeating this and all the rest  
that still he is no winner  
but definitely a sinner—  
always self-accuser, never self-forgiver.

4

He slips to sleep and dreams of more  
sleep; cuts adrift from the shore  
of consciousness.        The more he copes  
the more he reeks of cigarette smoke  
that fog the fact his nerves are broke—

and what chance did his nerves have  
when at the age of three his skin  
was blistered to the third degree?  
Sixty years on his hands aren’t ready  
to keep their cigarette fingers steady.

I see his eyes are blurring again  
back to blood-shot clearness,  
tired whites slowly yellowing—  
I see him trace the family name  
back to the safety of the past—  
but how long can nostalgia last?

...long as lamplight puddles pages  
of photocopied parish records—  
he trains his straining sights towards—  
as the light begins to fail  
his mind will slowly gather sail  
and trace the print like mental Braille.

In the dark, he’ll bite his nails.

## THE RING

No wizard there as our guide—  
Poverty's spell casts all else to one side.  
Father's face grey as Gandalf's gown.  
He always told himself he'd let us down.

Love is its own darkness, slowly binding.

One day my mother had to pawn her ring,  
But kept it secret till we'd finished eating;  
Her finger as it was before their wedding.

## THE COIN FORAGERS

In darkling days of testing means  
we found distraction in playing games;  
one comprised four players,  
rules always the same:  
each foraged for mouldy copper token  
hidden in the scrimping room,  
collecting as many as they could find.

Some stuffed in the glooms & crumbs  
of the settee's cushions; some  
stashed in the clutter of the kitchen dresser.  
The winner: first to disinfect their treasure.

## OLD-FASHIONED SUN

Eleven years old, I tried to reclaim  
the past, inspired by cottage-gloom—  
the countryside is always the same  
no matter what time: I furnished my room  
with my dad's dog-eared books caked in damp-stain  
from *The Black Arrow* to *Allan Quatermain*.

On brumal mornings as a pale sun  
lit thin curtains that filtered its rays,  
I'd stick Holst's scratchy *Jupiter* on  
summoning my father's schoolboy days—  
Somerset, Nineteen Fifty-One,  
in the ghostly warmth of an old-fashioned sun.

But there's a book-end to the shelf of time:  
one can't stay absent from their age  
in the fusty clutter of historic shrine—  
so I parted the curtains, tripped the page  
to the post-imperfect future time,  
where pop lyrics strip the Kipling rhyme.

## FORGIVE-ME-NOT

Let go. Forgive. Forget the bitterness  
That buttresses when love is dead:  
Most of what's said isn't meant;  
Most of what's meant isn't said.

## THE COTTAGE

For all the breath-smoked winter nights  
we shared some misty summers  
drifting off to light tunes' fall  
like balsam on the garden  
from my brother's bedroom window  
jammed with grandma's *Iliad*;  
sunbathed with mongrels at our feet;  
plucked blushed apples from the tree beside  
the cement-filled well, where we planted  
hope for rescue from this rustic lull  
false as our restless wishes were,  
still yet to be weeded.

Father's face hair-line cracked  
as the crumbly stone of the cottage walls;  
mother's nerves fragile as  
the shaky glass of the greenhouse grave—  
I'm sure she's shrunken in this shade  
all these faded years;  
given the choice she wouldn't leave  
this place for ties still tested like  
the trembling washing-line.

This is where we first dug-up doubt  
fossilized in the outhouse stone  
like stories of our mythical home;  
where we first came to believe  
in not believing, with the countryside,  
that simply is. How could we leave...

## INFATUATION: THE FIRST

Infatuation? It didn't last  
Beyond rosy, rough-and-tumble days,  
Gooseberry sweet, no sour aftertaste.  
Time didn't intimidate the infant; time was sky.  
The love, the bond that tore our hearts  
Strained too far, sighed out to die.

*Time's the face you love  
but are tired of looking at.*

Bitterness of callow apples, raw,  
Windfall-bitten, sour out the tongue  
With immature spices to subtle in  
Its un-acquired taste—sap squandered on  
Those who sample before ripe; spat out;  
Wiped clean by sleeves it bruises on.

*Time's a face you love  
but tire of looking at.*

Time takes long to trickle on; to traipse.  
Rich spit of first kisses infiltrates the rest.  
He: *life's not long enough for love.*  
She: *love purses lips for death;*  
Familiarity and death: the same.  
We tied knots in our stubborn bond; our breath.

*Time's a face you love  
but are tired of looking at.*

Feelings home in unhealed sores;  
In lichenized ruins bonds re-build  
On slippery foundations—love clings on;  
No shutting off till we're told—mistakes,  
Only palpable once trampled past,  
Form the pattern of the human face.

*Time's the face you love  
but tire of looking at.*

## MY LIFE IN THE SHADE

Since I was sunburnt as a boy I learnt to love the shade,  
Spared me from the heat where the other children played—  
But I was tugged out in the sun and punished by its light  
Turning from a shadow to someone in my own right,  
Found that I'd preferred it when I'd felt invisible.  
*Sometimes I wonder whether I was ever here at all.*

I've always loved so easily and pitied anyone  
Who showed signs of remorse for the wrongs that they had done.  
I've struggled and I've buckled under every thought I've had  
As if the mere imagining of bad events was bad;  
Pursued by Furies of my own phantasmagorical school.  
*Sometimes I wonder whether I was ever here at all.*

The more I've lived I've lost myself and drifted far away  
From the busy worlds of others and the places where they play.  
As if I died some time ago and turned into a ghost  
Haunting all the places that I used to love the most,  
I've lingered like a shadow where my own shadow should fall.  
*Sometimes I wonder whether I was ever here at all.*

I came to fear feelings of love for how they made me see  
The image of myself through the eyes of those who loved me,  
Until I was obsessed with being gone in all but mind  
Sharing in the mourning with my loved ones left behind.  
But I'm still here; still in the shade; trembling in its thrall.  
*Sometimes I wonder whether I was ever here at all.*

## TALES FROM THE EMPTY LARDER

I can't stand scant catechisms  
of tremors in an empty stomach;  
the stench of hunger-scented breath  
where a full belly's the only tonic;  
the famished itch in-between the teeth  
where only food can feed relief.

The stain won't shift: mean-spirited strife  
spoilt my appetite for living well;  
splintered my spittle with bitterness;  
chipped my shoulder with its scrimping chisel—  
I taste it still in weak stewed blends;  
in sickly stings of singed dog-ends.

I suppose the harsh lessons I scribed  
inspired in me a need to dream,  
to believe in insubstantial truths,  
for you need a God when you can't keep clean  
and hope, when your faith overspills,  
socialism will cure most ills.

But it's often the morbid human way  
to come to love what you should despise  
just as, in depression, sadness comforts  
with blessings of tears in tea-strained eyes;  
so I feel perverse nostalgia  
for those hours of hunger-fed neuralgia.

I've said to my brother, it's strange to think  
amidst the dirt we found ideals,  
a sense of justice in second-hand clothes  
and transubstantiated packet meals—  
the dark of a larder's empty shelves:  
where we first found ourselves.

## THE GOSPELS OF GORDON ROAD

In parroting streets the Parkers lived  
in an outburst of spilt belongings  
by a pet shop perched on Gordon Road,  
No. 31—one score left to them;  
muffled fluster of cockatoos  
scratched the front-hall walls;  
terrapins, tropical fish  
splashed in a backyard aquarium  
for a ghostly public, unforthcoming.

### I. THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO BERYL

Obese-limbed Beryl, name the colour  
of her bilious coat, avocados  
she'd bleach with vinegar  
supping on stories of Roaring Uganda,  
kept a trove chockfull with spoils  
of childhood paraphernalia:  
a damp-spotted pith helmet,  
one of her cast-off canvases  
titled *Elephants in Jinja*,  
ebony carvings, tusks, and tales  
of a slate-eyed Scottish father  
telegraphing the Savanna  
and ivory white goddess mother  
biting poison from Boy on the veranda.

Penner of eccentric green-ink letters  
to all and sundry: from the star  
of *The Flame Trees of Thika*  
to Margaret Thatcher—Iron Beryl,  
fulsome as lukewarm Stout.

Her mantelpiece of miniatures:  
a small glass Buddha with an ochre flower  
in its bloated belly, ‘*If you rub his tummy  
it'll bring good luck*’ she'd mutter through  
cryptic lips, with other superstitious snippets:  
‘*Pray to St. Anthony if you lose anything*’,  
but he never recovered lost marbles.  
Beryl believed in blonde baby Jesus,

cribs, clans, papacy, tooth fairies,  
Clarabelle, Tinkerbelle, plaster saints  
and table-salt superstitions—held  
chair-ridden court cushioned in  
upholstered throne, all swollen shins,  
tortoise-shell glasses and netted hair.

## II. THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO HAROLD

Her trilby-humbled husband Harold  
limped in slump of self-belief,  
stick to buttress his step,  
stocky North Londoner, Gunners supporter—  
shuddered at jellied eels, bow bells,  
'*I'm not a Cockney*', he'd maintain  
but perhaps he was unconsciously:  
fond of the phrase '*me old China*'.

A rifle-butt buffeted his spirit  
in a German camp, buffered him  
with fits of temper, trembling limbs—  
from Corporal Parker of the Buffs  
to Private Struggle pensioned off  
to the tyranny of landlords  
and the mush of meals-on-wheels.

A legacy of long-term concussion:  
de-mobbed prompt in '45;  
assembling dolls' limbs in factories;  
spell as shopkeeper bankrupted off  
to last stop by Balfour Road.

In mouldering, damp-walled winters,  
bereaved by his worshipped wife,  
coped through a series of botched episodes:  
Catholic conversion, gulps of pills,  
macabre bed-time reunions  
with his spectral Beryl.

Harold went out like a flare in a trench,  
refusing Last Rights in rabid-eyed rage,  
leaving the Priest and the Pastor speechless  
as the plastic Christ on his bedside table  
he mistook for Mary as the beard had faded.

Four campaign medals, absent fifth  
for a brave act screened off in gun-fog;  
captured; tortured; frozen to snow  
for escape attempts—never escaped  
the stalking of the swastika's brand.

His prime predisposed to put him out in time:  
namesake of his mythic brother,  
killed 'spiking the guns' in the First,  
smudged out with led like his last  
pencilled scribbles blunt as his fate.

Harold rationed out his days,  
guilt-inheritor, warped by self-blame  
for the world's unanswerable blunders;  
his prize: some debts and a pauper's grave.

### III. THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO GORDON

The Brighton Parkers played host to  
a cadaverous bachelor, physisog threadbare  
as his wicker sweater, also Gordon,  
who lodged one ruptured flight beyond  
obscure parameters of absent banisters  
up a scupper of cuttlefish stairs.

A bachelor but for the merchant sea  
he married, Gordon cut a skeletal shipmate  
in his fisherman's cap and tweeds,  
spruced on canine piss and bird seed.

Shut off in the trill and chirp of his  
lemon-curd/sky-blue budgerigars  
caging his company as a cancer-  
growth his old dog Tony,  
the gruff old lodger shrugged off thoughts  
on gossip of souls and salvation:

*'I don't believe in Heaven; nothing  
after this 'far as I'm concerned;  
best make the most of your pension'*  
he'd glibly comment if invited in  
to give his shilling's worth of philosophical rent.

God scarpered from his dingy digs  
in Gordon's head long ago to find  
new lodgings in more malleable minds.

*How odd him not believing in God,*  
I thought as a boy—my oblivion,  
being alone—couldn't comprehend  
his atheism, not knowing then  
the dormant terms of my own.

#### IV. THE GOSPEL OF GORDON ROAD

We believe what we want to believe;  
time buttresses us with splints of insight,  
feeds us lies to starve doubts, to cope;  
Gordon's tools, the mental present-ness of pets;  
Beryl's, rent-book resurrection;  
Harold's, ball-points on football pools.

*Some make themselves their own God;*  
*some spend their lives fishing for stars;*  
*some endure all with a humble hat's doff;*  
*some keep budgerigars.*

#### BEATITUDES

Today, everything's resolved: the man  
with the rainy Sunday face has found  
a smile's an inspiring beam of light  
in his outlook; the senile lager-breathing  
dragon of withered scales, forced to forgo  
his habit for the day, is the better for it:  
sober and brave; the two middle-aged  
friends have let bygones be for a change;  
the doubting housewife's found her faith  
while vacuuming behind the chairs.

from

*A TAPESTRY OF ABSENT SITTERS*

(2009)

## PRAISE WITH FAINT DAMNATION

*for Kevin Saving*

Don't damn with faint praise or admiration—  
Drub our green words till they bruise at the smart.  
Raze us to grain, praise with faint damnation.

Feel free to deflate with defamation—  
Pick at the scraps of the amateur heart,  
Don't damn with faint praise or admiration.

Anything but vague, blanched affirmation—  
Rattle our talents with your crafty art,  
Raze us to grain, praise with faint damnation.

We're not after plaudits or salvation,  
Blast against the grain that splits us apart—  
Don't damn with faint praise or admiration.

Trample us to our naïf foundation,  
We'll grasp the straws at the pitch of your dart;  
Raze us to grain, praise with faint damnation.

No time for hyperbole's temptation:  
We'd sooner upset Fashion's applecart—  
Don't damn with faint praise or admiration;  
Raze us to grain, praise with faint damnation.

## THE CLATTERING CLASSES

Discarded on the curling pavement slabs  
crouched the beetly dark grey UNDERWOOD,  
shining levers stirruped in,  
compacted as a swatted fly;  
long-hammered keys, fingertip-blunted,  
an eroded causeway of QWERTYU.

I claimed the decrepit old typewriter,  
cradled it in my arms, careful  
not to let it fall and shatter  
as if it were my own dust-cocooned soul,  
a little broken but still dormant;  
reflexive; reactive against the bland  
craven anvil of a hammering scene  
crimped in brinkmanship, besotted by  
sameness, an understated take  
on what has to be said, by not saying it.

Suggestion needs a kick-start now and then  
or it whimpers out to nothing. Roaring voices,  
hardly audible for stacking attacks  
on life-quarried lines; belletrist backlash  
against fired minds' spined generations;  
an anti-crusade for the sake of staking  
vain claims on the creaming page,  
buttered self-tributes, owing nothing  
to a Blasting past. The Thatcherwrite hack.

They have it all wrapped up now;  
creativity need no more question.  
*We know this, we know this—but never show  
we know, too obvious. Show don't tell.*  
Deconstructing the poets, stripping their spell.

## ELOCUTION LESSONS

They sussed I scrubbed up from humble origins  
by how my second-hand clothes wore me out  
of pocket, kept up Sta Press pretensions  
of 'well-heeled'; my clipped articulation—  
practically accentless—betraying embarrassment  
at state-school culling: too conscious of aitches  
to pass for one above my fricative station.

Those old-tie school boys deloused my foibles  
as psychiatrists their patients' phobias,  
with lackadaisical lazy-lashed flicks—  
*You lack that certain air...* didn't rattle me,  
salted as I was with socialist distaste  
for privilege-peppered classes. Though I  
resented those tongues ironing out my creases.

Naturally snatches of taut consonants  
and cavalier vowels rubbed off on my palette  
but not that lofty atmosphere  
orbiting moon-cool composure;  
gravity-defying, gravitas-supplying,  
tripping high to satellites of expectation.

## FANTASIA ON A THEME BY THOMAS HARDY

Never have ideas above your station,  
It'll only end poorly;  
Remember that cloister-struck stonemason,  
Darkling Jude Fawley.

A greengage when he spied those skerries  
Of sandstone, and they spires  
Sparkling his eyes as blackest blackberries  
Unreachable on the greenbriers.

Those spires he saw were Devil's horns  
Leading him astray  
From knowing's roses to knowledge's thorns  
That strip the heart away.

Time fleeced Jude's future—his wool eyes  
Unravelled from their books:  
Lambs snagged on barbs by hushaby  
Box-cords tied to hooks.

He died in thrall of his tall vamps  
To peals of Trinity—  
But tolling cow-bells, tumbril champs  
Chimed his varsity.

In their flowing gowns those dons n' deans  
They rascal jackdaws be:  
Cawing in ruins cut out of dreams  
Of low-born boys as 'e.

The ink that stains their lily white  
Dainties b'ain't the dirt  
That fills your fingernails a'night  
N' soils your patched-up shirt.

The only verse you'll plough verbatim  
Is the stump-jumped furrow there—  
That plank for kneading bitumen:  
The only mortar-board you'll wear.

Those tasselled hats graduates throw  
To their Christminster sky:  
Good as a cloud of cackling crows  
To the scarecrow's half-cocked eye.

## STONES & MORTAR-BOARDS

Intellect is catechised  
Through tradition's tutelage;  
Disciplined by licking cords,  
Choristered on pristine sheets.

Blazered ranks are classicised  
And classed in private cribbage—  
Straw-boatered, tread springboards  
Tripping footlight to staged feats.

*No surprise those scrolls are prized,  
Prestige-steeped in steepled Oxbridge—  
Streams of downcast mortar-boards  
Millipede the chiselled streets.*

Those differently exercised  
Towards the greater suffrage  
Take the bench, or misericords  
Of Parliament's selective seats.

Obscure scholars have disguised  
As steeplejacks, scaffold-cortege  
Of stonemasons' processions scored  
By chisels' contrapuntal beats.

*No surprise those scrolls are prised,  
Prestige-steeped in steepled Oxbridge—  
Millipedes of mortar-boards  
Stream the chiselled streets.*

Ambitions cracked as Latinised  
Spines in peeling lineage  
Of Herodotus, over-pored—  
Doomed as fox-prowled bleats.

The un-shepherded and ill-advised  
In under-funded umbrage,  
Cast sights and floater votes towards  
Democracies' disguised elites.

*No surprise those scrolls are prized  
In dream-spiring Oxbridge—  
Gowned jackdaws in mortar-boards  
Stalk the chiselled streets.*

## THE RECUSANTS (1586–1986)

Our natures, frayed with sun-warped books  
blanched khaki in the window beam;  
cobwebbed in spider-hatching nooks  
behind the hulking curtain screen  
thick as the gown on plaster Mary  
enshrined in the spare unpainted room.

Hood-souls, crouched in contrary  
cottage-dark where doubts mushroom,  
plunge the nicotined reredos  
into outer blackness. —Biding  
by altar-jambs, we ghost a cross  
in the rigged ballot—then into hiding  
opinions in empty larder priest-holes,  
cowed by the blue torch Goosy-Gander.

Too strapped for brass, too bookish for proles,  
our emblem, a grounded germander;  
recusants of class—rubbed rosaries  
for worry beads; drubbed socialism  
waxing in candle-lit crannies.

Scrapers of coupon catechism  
trampled by the Thatcher anathema—  
snagged grants bar university  
for familial fiscal asthma:  
lapsed capitalists in bankruptcy.

Our stomachs howl hosts of weak refills  
from stewed tea-bags: we fast past Lent.  
Episcopacies of toast-racked bills  
numb us to TV's otiose vent,  
while our own obscure, un-broadcast soap  
is watched by the set-top's porcelain Pope.

## THE PLASTER TRAMP

*for Sebastian Barker*

Gloomy morning, stewed from dreams  
to an unclouded voice downstairs  
drifting up through the ceiling beams  
with a hint of incense, half-answered prayers.

I find my parents beatified on  
respite from debt through alms; the fume  
beading their heaped faces, briefly gone.  
An aura of calm haloing the room.

Fear temporarily slopes into hope  
as the plaster tramp seems to wink and grin  
magically from its mantelpiece cope,  
immortalised in glossed chagrin.

Through smudging years, that plaster tramp  
caricatured our stony lot;  
crinkled into bilious life like the damp  
trumpeting the walls with rot.

The carrageen of repossession  
stalked a clan of craned Canutes—  
bracing wills at seas of recession—  
neck-bent and pear-shaped as lutes.

Transplanted from that plaster tramp,  
my adumbrated vagrant future:  
captured bench-napping in the cramp  
of a sculptor's time-trapped suture.

Indebted to days of alms and no phone,  
insights of stripped-down poverty:  
the tattered chair, no quixotic throne  
had our house mushroomed commodity.

All material things appeared transparent  
as the luminous fuse in me that frayed  
my stripling grasp of tangible apparent;  
toys turned to tomb relics, painted to fade

after my time. —Not the inanimate  
tramp that matters in that plaster-past,  
just the aura that haloed its insensate  
sentiment; what the eye can't cast.

## THE CRACK ON THE VASE

*To be is to be perceived* —George Berkeley

‘It’s symbolic’ murmured James,  
my unknowingly Thomistic brother,  
at the hairline crack crawled suddenly  
on the dusty vase of poverty’s salvage.  
A sudden charge shone out from it  
(not solely of it, projected *into* it  
by our aesthetic artifice—  
a reciprocal echo). It had  
become something other  
than a vase, now brimming  
with sentiments in our animating  
gaze. In a moment’s enchantment we’d  
cast an animistic spell, oblivious ourselves  
to power ebbing from us—an outer *ents vital* (or  
humming electricity)—now beaming something into  
us we weren’t aware of; a new-perceived significance;  
*haecceity*. No more observers, now observed, as when hid in  
the shadier pews to avoid serving on the altar, but still visible  
to the priest’s hunched helper, her vision all-observing as God’s  
(two genuflected trees pretending absence in empty quads);  
haloed by holiness in objects obscured by style’s crudity;  
obfuscated by the surface (the material always nauseated  
us, in spite of our catholic taste); the sudden emitting  
shine on the vase ovaling our reflective faces. Was  
that the collective soul we glimpsed in the  
vase’s vague glimmer? Connaturality  
of all things we sensed, called it  
compassion, socialism, this  
airy quiddity, soul politic,  
spiritual polish—but  
it had no name, no  
verbal tarnish, that  
was its natural  
poetry. All we knew  
was the vase, ourselves, our  
souls—none of them belonged to us.

## WHERE BANSHEES BROUGHT ME

Gusts hurled blustery fists outside  
& threw, with sweeps, the rain  
That lashed against the draughty glass  
Of the sunken window-pane;

I caught the squalling croon  
Of a thousand drowning choirs;  
The bawling caterwauled across  
Plunging downs and dipping mires—

I heard them beckon me outside;  
Their morbid song, lifting in pitch,  
Led me from a restive mood  
To the turbid depths of a ditch;

The wails turned to watery gasps—  
Into the ditch I tripped and fell;  
The rain filled in the dug-up grave  
& there's little else to tell...

Except that here I drowned with ease—  
My thoughts, the bricks around this well.

## MISTER ASPIDISTRÀ

*i.m. Harold Monro (1879-1932)*

Hobo of broadsides, goblin contradiction  
Among sunning Georgians. Absence-in-  
Residence: poet and shopkeeper. An  
Obiter dictum in the blasting storm; gloom-  
Lyrics aslant the lightning rain. Foxed and  
Dog-eared, my copy of his orange volume.

Moon-eyed, mustachioed, souped in lapels; an  
Oaky vintage with hint of manila and  
Nicotine on his tongue's bitter sanctuary.  
Reclusive chaperone of shop-curtains, smiling  
Out with stiff soldierly bows, a slight wave.

## HAY BAILS & SHORT STRAWS

*i.m. Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)*

Time's amanuensis, savant of the Fates,  
Hay-bailed to Nature's Tantalus ways;  
Oracular badger brindled by bait's  
Moon-beamed betrayal in the henge's rigged rays;  
Architect of rustic myth, arbitrary traits  
Scattered like dandelion-clocks on rocked days.

Hubris-blunter for hatched pariahs  
Aspirant in class-traps; scribe of short straws  
Ravelling Shalt Knots round Christminster spires;  
Digger of tragedies. Heart nabbed by paws—  
Yoked to frumenty in a cat's snatching jaws.

[*frumenty*: a dish of hulled wheat boiled in milk and seasoned with sugar, cinnamon, and raisins. Michael Henchard in Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* laced his frumenty with scrumpy, with tragic results].

## WHISPERS FROM THE PALIMPSEST

### I. INTRODUCTIONS

Holistic sanctuary: a plush pause of room  
daubed hint-of-lilac—inspiriting change  
from the brush-off grey of the counsellor's broom  
which can only tidy, drug or rearrange  
my thoughts' spilt toy-box. A coin-palmed guide  
gifts me gossip from the other side...

### II. LILY & JOHN

First Lily shines through to smile at my urge  
to dig up her ceded ideas, ripe  
fibres she pitted in napkin serge  
for marital trappings' colic tripe;  
fears of sheer impulses leaping the edge  
to a green repeating end...

(The ledge

between tangible and invisible  
precarious as our scalloping lobes:  
spectres receptive—even visible  
in Victorian mediums' mucousy  
ectoplasmic robes—to ghost-  
Morse tapped by needling clairvoyants  
unstitching the distich of existence,  
tracing the Braille of the ravelled thread  
on table-cloths laced with after-trace;  
translating spirits, eavesdropping the dead)...

Present, correct, in khaki carapace,  
grandfather John, chuffed at my interest  
in those I only knew through a palimpsest  
of rsclist hiss. No scrape of his smoked tone  
this time, just the tight-breathed intermission  
of a metacarpal gramophone  
cranking sound-waves to crackly transmission  
(tracings of passed characters, so they say,  
can be taped at a certain time of day)...

### III. BERYL & HAROLD

Next Beryl, my Uganda-raised grandma—  
truncated as her elephant-foot gamp-  
stand, yeasty and round, armchair rum baba,  
shins like blotched sausages, blimpish with cramp—  
vents through to précis on my present spell  
of trumped luck: I must toughen up my shell,  
pincer on through life's snagging rock-pool  
braced in crustacean—apple of her eye  
as a halo-haired boy; gold in the buhl  
of her tortoiseshell specs... True as a die,  
her under-the-thumb husband Harold,  
now demobbed in the other world:  
in their lino and woodchip hereafter  
I'm told they communicate far better  
than in stilted life: brake mustard laughter,  
since Beryl still seems the tempo-setter,  
at least, according to a strained reprise  
from the medium's ear-trumpet expertise—  
(Psychic? Or bogus reader of vibes?  
Pickpocket telepath palming my thoughts?  
Or truly inspired in what he transcribes?  
He could tap in any time without rapport;  
throw me to his circle of thimbled knitters  
for their tapestry of absent sitters)...

### IV. TIME'S UP

The hour out, his palm clams up... The clock  
ticks back: Time's teacherly realigning...  
The palimpsest's wiped over on the crock  
of coppery chrome—life's tactful self-erasing...  
But traces, spectral patinas, remain;  
Repeated listens raise them from the grain...

### V. TRACES

Cassette in hand I drift home with the boon  
of ghost companions, an amplified sense  
of those passed on but who listen in; spoon  
my replication brushed by their absence—  
I'm not as out of synch as I often feel  
but a variation scratching reel-to-reel...

from  
*THE TALL SKIES*  
(2013)

## 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 aged glue...

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*].

*from THE QUIET IMMENSITIES*

After Harry Martinson's *Aniara* (1956)

*'I could go on describing this story about Aniara  
But to wander the same road that you once poeticised  
Is too perilous. For that, others see better than  
The poet who has only acted as the medium and reporter  
For his or her own time...' Thus translated Matilda,  
As I found I was too slow to save a wasp from drowning  
In her coffee... The wasp curled lifeless on the serviette,  
Its wings glued together in one gelatinous teardrop;  
Its body ambered in a lethal sweetness—strange feckless  
Insects dissembled in the manna of deadly addictions;  
Globules formed from their own greed... But we pitied  
This particular wasp, this little black-striped yellowjacket,  
Caparisoned in colours of typical Swedish townhouses...*

*Aniara, Aniara, a name without a past, or future,  
Its floating, drifting cadence, a phantom invocation  
That haunts the fevered breath of an amorous youth  
Pining after an indifferent beauty who perpetually  
Turns away on her untouchable pedestal; a name, fluid  
With longing; more lyrical than Dante's Beatrice,  
Keats's *La Belle Dame*..., or Poe's Annabelle Lee—  
And like that doomed object of a boy's desire, *Aniara*  
Plays eternity; airy, incantatory, a verbal spell,  
An aural charm; a terrible lullaby sung by The Mima:  
A gestalt of semi-mystical machinery on board  
The eponymous spaceship adrift in the pitch-black  
Wastes of uncharted space; driven off course and flung  
Off orbit, destined to travel forever among the stars,  
Cut off from the port of its departure, the city  
Of Dorisburg, long ago atomised along with Earth;  
The stranded crew condemned to endless odyssey  
Perpetually voyaging an eternal intergalactic saga,  
A Flying Dutchman destinationless... On board, a culture  
With no history, no hope, only sordidness of boredom,  
Despair, decadence and desperate distractions;  
Empty entertainments; a Saturnalia of ennui  
And acedia adrift in Andromeda's uncharted galaxy...  
The Mima, faintly naïve, hard-wired with Nordic angst—  
A Romantic dream-machine, or nightmare agleam—  
Ultimately destroys itself, having lost its faith in  
Circuitry, after witnessing the terrible melting*

Of Dorisburg by its psychopathic cousin, the phototurb,  
In a spectacular eruption of ‘*white granite tears*’—  
A sight too much for The Mima to bear in Her memory banks;  
Then, only emptiness, without end or return,  
Both outside in the oceanic blackness and inside  
The soulless bodies of the stranded eight thousand human  
Passengers (would-be Martian colonists)—emptiness  
Is their only remaining reality; the psychical salvages  
Of the ‘*quiet immensities*’\*; the ‘*immeasurable sadness*’\*  
Of objectless sentimentalities; hence the name,  
*Aniara* (an almost-anagram of C.S. Lewis’s  
Contemporaneous Narnia): the meaning under its  
Aural aria of mystification: *avuapóç (aniaros)*,  
Ancient Greek for *sad, despairing, tiresome, boring*,  
*Cloying*, as well as harnessing the sound of *a*,  
Which had a mystical resonance for its wanderlust author,  
Autodidact proletarian poet, Harry Martinson...

Of what was Martinson’s eerie futuristic lamentation  
In one hundred and three cantos warning..? Cults  
Of critics have dissected it canto by canto since  
Its first appearance on the Thirteenth of October  
Nineteen Fifty-Six; the year of the violent Soviet  
Oppression of the student-led Hungarian Revolution,  
Stamped out with boots and bullets by the troops  
Of the Politburo—that bloodbath in Budapest  
Had stamped itself on Martinson’s macro-conscience;  
They say he dictated *Aniara* after a disturbing dream  
(As Samuel Taylor Coleridge had similarly drawn his  
*Rime of the Ancient Mariner* from a phantasmagoria  
Relayed by a friend), at a time when Swedes were  
Troubled by Russo-rumours and Midgardðsormr  
Sightings of periscopes surfacing from Russian  
Submarines in the Baltic; and despatches of Soviet  
Incursions into Finland; *Aniara* was, apparently,  
Martinson’s warning against the rise of technocratic  
Tentacles; of totalitarianisms of all kinds,  
But, by the mood of the time, mostly those from behind  
The Iron Curtain—this was the Cold War, a period  
Of red deliriums; of starfall fantasias, blinding  
Lights of green meteors, Triffids and body snatchers  
Marshalling strange invasions after lulling humanity  
Into routine cohabitations; bathyspheres  
And submersibles plumbing popular paranoias...

Martinson, self-educated poet from Blekinge County—  
Near the Baltic tip of Sweden's flaccid phallus—was always  
Sensitive to atmospherics; statics; so his fictive  
Feelers prickled with trepidations sufficient to build  
A poetic tension bristling beneath the surface of his  
Stark imagination; which, by the lancing of his pen,  
Launched into the epic flight of *Aniara*—*a review of man*  
*In space and time*; gilded with semantic mystifications,  
Glossaries of neologisms, phantom nouns, portmanteaus,  
Strange projected jargons of future days—possibly,  
In part, shadow-plays on perceived Swedish Newspeak  
Germinating in the long golden teething stage  
Of the first decade of *folkhemmet*, the Swedish  
Welfare state: emancipator of a generation's  
Agricultural *statare*, the hitherto inescapable  
Caste from which Martinson himself had been rescued,  
Along with the rest of the legislatively salvaged...  
For it was the fashion of those early days of socialist-  
Administered altruism, for the inheritors  
Of the bourgeois literati to poeticise their scepticism,  
Enshrine the term *welfare* as a motif of cultural  
Defloweration (though it was the belated social  
Fructification of Swedish Grace—simple yet elegant  
Egalitarian design in furniture and architecture);  
Some cryptic threat to their unaltered individuation;  
A bureaucratic crèche; a nursery of memes to net  
Personal responsibility to make moral decisions,  
To *choose*—that is, for their own propertied class  
And, as always, at the expense of others' freedoms,  
From *statarna* to the factory drudges and urban  
Colonies of slum-dwellers... But Martinson's polemical  
Space poem chills in this new century: reads more as  
A proleptic metaphor for capitalist atomisation  
Of moral standards: an aimless tailspin of nations  
Into the hurtling nullities of hedonism, division,  
Material greed; valueless, morally anarchic, but  
Always pretending to please—a pilotless culture  
Of astral tsars; existential *statarna* of the stars...

As I sit gazing at the wasp in its amorphous capsule  
Of aspic, its bubble of absolute self-absorption, I  
Think of Martinson's microscopic analogy—ventriloquised  
Through *Aniara*'s fatalistic astronomer—in conjuring  
The imperceptible movement of an air-bubble trapped  
In an untouched glass, which '*moves interminably*

*Slowly to a new position in the body*' of the sand-Melted vessel: a journey it completes 'after gradual Millennia'... Then Martinson pulls the rug from under us: 'The same way in interminable space/ abyss within Abyss ... around the bubble *Aniara* is...' (—*Nautilus* To Martinson's neurotic Nemo)... So merciless, so final, So immaculately sealed within this claustrophobic Aphorism, inimitably his—the spaceship a moving Tomb, a cruising sarcophagus; the thirteenth Canto Magnifies this image, keeping it lingeringly in mind, An intrusive leitmotiv that can't be banished through Any effort of will: if seen '*against the depths of space*' *Aniara*'s pace parallels the air-bubble moving Invisibly in the glass...

We leave our café seats,  
Matilda gently embalming the drowned wasp in  
The sodden napkin, and placing it under some shrubbery,  
Where it might eventually disintegrate with dignity...  
Or resurrect? If only my hand had been quicker, lighter,  
In fishing out the immersing wasp before it drowned—  
But then, no matter how stealthily I performed this,  
The coffeespoon scooped up a pool with the wasp;  
And during those brief seconds I conveyed it to  
The serviette, futilely, and carefully tipped out  
The saturated wasp onto the fluid-absorbing fabric,  
Was, from the wasp's concept of time, far longer  
Than it seemed to mine (a saga—millennia in transit!)  
And more than enough for it to fully drown to the dying  
Insect-scream of *Aniara*: inaudible to us,  
Iced in its glassy cubicle, its quiet immensities...

[\*phrases from Theodore Sturgeon's review of the 1964 American edition of *Aniara* (originally published in Swedish in 1956). *Midgarðsormr*: the Midgard serpent of Norse mythology.]

from  
*BLAZE A VANISHING*  
(2013)

## 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.

## 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.

## 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, palls 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].

## TERPSICHOREAN RHAPSODY

*i.m. Vaslav (Vatslav) Nijinsky (1899–1950)*

*for Jeremy Reed*

They say—and we only have what they say—Vaslav Nijinsky defied gravity in his self-propelling leaps; Avian of the balisage; flaming cockerel of tulpa-plumage; Indisputably, in death, and after, defier of posterity: Nothing would frame his mythical artistry: no recordings Exist of his balletic sorcery, only old eerie Photographs of his uplifted beatific face made up Into terpsichorean prosopons: the melancholy clown; The supple Scaramouch; the diamond-sleeved Harlequin; The sensual faun—Nijinsky! Therianthrope Of tulip-opening pineal eye; springing spectre Of the yet-living—immortal through others' memories, Recollections, and his own scribbled records that mapped Out his mind's metamorphosis into something Sprite-like; unclutchable tropic—an exotic bird In shouts of violent colours... His adoring Romola, Who ever found him, never left him, a soul-mate in thrall To his ribboning shadow—she claimed an x-ray Of Vaslav's feet revealed chimerical structure, Somewhere skeletally between man and avian— “*No wonder he can fly; he is a human bird*”, piped Dr Abbé, pinching the wing of the illuminated plate Against the light... His feet, that tripped the air so Effortlessly, spring-light, prehensile; tapering down To elongated toes that could grasp rope or bar Like a bird on a perch... Athlete, acrobat, artiste, Aesthete, mystic, stringless marionette; bounding Leveret; tightrope walker of elevated spirit; Zarathustra of the trapeze... Sometimes a tumbler To the spin of Diaghilev's voodoo; the unscrupulous Conjuring of those white magician's gloves: Abracadabra and his terpsichorean protégé's Halo rattled to the stage; his fragile ego congealed To darkness; his unearthly gift melt away at an instant— His identity spilt like salt... The patron and manipulator Knew Nijinsky's Achilles' heel; had only to snip those Sampsonic puppet-strings with a spell from his cruel lips For Vaslav to collapse in a heap of parts—such was Diaghilev's legerdemain, but the bow-tied pederast Had grown to fear the powers of this rangy Ganymede

Whom the impresario could not possess: once the music  
Irrupted in Vaslav no earthly force could arrest it...  
Pipes, strings, reeds, flutes, brass—all collided  
Within him in contrapuntal trance... Those feet  
Would swell, split the seams of the kid glove leather  
Ballet shoes: pair by pair replaced mid-scenes,  
Sole after sole scuffed in powdered rosin... Each  
Movement: osmotic, lithe, lyrical, muscularly cryptic,  
Breathless, elliptic—no conjuring tricks: just tendons  
And hamstrings hereditarily dipped in Stygian  
Gene pools of obscure lineage; his pulse pumped  
With pirouetting troupes of peasant hummingbirds  
Of the Caucasus and Crimean mountains:  
Generations of gymnastic Gopak jumps to cimbaloms  
Charged his song-sprung haemoglobin; his conspicuous  
Cheekbones and vast brown Zaporozhian eyes,  
Spoke of Ukrainian steppes; Tartar ancestries  
And Slavic Kiev; his thick neck propped the vital  
Purpose of his sculpted head: a nimble bust; clipped  
Torso poised on muscle-bowing thighs, balanced by  
Long arms' trunk-like wings... Each performance  
An epiphany, a revelation, miraculous, magical,  
Almost supernatural, no need for highfaluting  
Diaghilev's hyperbole for here *was* Pan, Apollo,  
Bacchus—Rasputin of the greasepaint; scintillating  
Tsar of the dance; high-priest of poise and posture  
To roses and sores, bouquets of jonquils, cut tulips,  
All flowers of rioting blooms and rapturous applause....  
But, surely, not applause for *him*? This medium  
Of the Steppes? This wide-faced Ukrainian with  
A labourer's biceps? Not applause for poor Nijinsky:  
For poor Nijinsky didn't actually exist! He was a figment!  
Simply a funnel through which all this refulgence crept;  
A flesh-and-bone conductor for celestial effect—  
But nothing, *a nothing*, as all human ciphers;  
An empty vessel sometimes filled with ambrosial blood  
Pumped by the Bacchanalian wine-skin of the heart—  
That globed bulb buried in clay, nothing but a beetroot  
Dug up from peasant earth to nourish rushing blood;  
Succoured on unconsciousness, he'd no identity,  
No grounding ego, no sense of self, only a sense  
Of oblivion in movement; to spin fast as planets,  
The spiralling rings of Saturn—the scale, the vast  
Dark of racing galaxies; stage-lights, waxing stars  
Obscuring gasping galleries... The stars are us,

We are stars, atoms, splinters of God—he knew this,  
Felt this, grasped this as he spun, and it was the only  
Thing he grasped—the whirling Dervish of Kiev  
Knew he was nothing and everything in one, as every  
Man, woman, child, bird, fish, fowl and familiar:  
All as one, under one spell, one fragmentary trance  
Of light, colour, colour-echo, colour-sound, colour-smell;  
A propulsion of the soul propelled him from the ground—  
But his were the witnesses' wings: his leaps, sprung  
Anticipations of the body politic... All was change  
To Vaslav: motion, flux, limbo, fandango; all was  
Without him, whirled around him; surface things,  
Materialisms: temporal seams and sequins of hubris's ball—  
And he was the thing which channelled them,  
Symbiotically... He was not Vaslav, or Vatslav,  
He was the dance, he was its vassal, he was its  
Whip-lashed slave, he was anything but Vatslav;  
His essence was not invented as his name; he was  
Nijinsky, never Vatslav—a visitor at his own vaunted grave;  
Invalidate by valve or vein; invalidated by living;  
Reinvented by velocity: now convivial Faun;  
Now frowning clown with tear-drop-painted cheek;  
Now sailing swan; now strutting Harlequin;  
Vaunted by the venerable, bourgeois and powdered-  
Nosed patricians—but no one's property (not even  
His own): no Armide's slave of Diaghilev's or  
Stravinsky's—though he served his *Rite of Spring*  
Devoutly: recoiled his toes like a brass monkey  
At the chill of its rambunctious reception; stamped his  
Stick to keep the dancers up to tempo through  
The howls of outraged laughter; mockery; abusive  
Chants pelted like rotten cabbages at the stage  
Till a riot erupted in the thumping boards... But still  
The music crashed and dashed its brash cacophony,  
Desperately, euphorically; all the while Nijinsky  
Clapped his dancers beat by beat, stood on a stool  
In the wings, heart-flayed with splintered feet;  
He clapped them on in their jolting choreography  
Of chorea—ugly angular spasms of frantic radical dance!

Nijinsky resisted temptations of Chaplin's to brine  
His sublime alchemy of motion in cinematic can—  
Perhaps he sensed a hyperkulturemia in himself  
Could erupt if exposed to his own performances;  
No footage exists of his swift footing, only the ghosts

Of those who shadowed his dances with gushing lines  
In besotted biographies can give glimpses of his  
Energetic genius—he alone knew the magic was  
In the mystery, and the mystery was in the fling  
Of the moment's *gigue*, confined only to the mystique  
Of memory, its filtered mystification... He knew we  
Were all only atoms, star-splinters sparking apart  
For seconds in time, then shooting up to the vast,  
Everlasting commonality of dark—but O that hypnotic  
Self-propulsion, sprung muscular limbs, sinuous  
Giraffe-neck, feet of avian skeleton (so some  
Mythologised); and those leaps and bounds; the jump  
Which catapulted him impossibly high from the ground,  
And the sorcery of his slower gliding down—enchanted  
Peter Pan, Magus of the stage, Cagliostro  
Of choreography, Houdini of terpsichorean escape,  
Almost seeming to levitate, elasticate: an elongating  
Dunglas Home of the *Ballet Russe*... How tragic, then,  
That the meteoric flight that propelled him so high  
Spun into schizophrenia's triple *tours en l'air*;  
Launched him into its maelstrom—no slower landing  
As he once could perform at will with invisiblign  
Hummingbird wings: its dissipation brought him down  
Into the sulphur pit... So Nijinsky denied himself  
The immortalisation of film, the capturing  
Of his flights of wingless tapering arms; somehow  
He seemed to know the *mythos* was the show,  
The moment everything, and nothing, its banishing  
To rapt spotlights of memory: means to mystifying  
His miracle of movement; for that brief tripping  
Time he spread his tulpa-plumage, a puppet without  
Strings; he *was* the Harlequin—the chameleon  
Who danced himself out of his own identity;  
A force of nature; a sped-up projection of the living;  
Who could only find his sense of stillness in  
The vertigo of spinning spinning spinning...

[*hyperkulturemia* (or Stendhal's Syndrome): a severe form of vertigo (panic, (dizziness, fainting etc.) when exposed to a plethora of exotic art. *gigue*: jig].

from

*SHADOWS WALTZ HALTINGLY*

(2015)

## CHATTERTON'S SCRAPS

*i.m. Thomas Chatterton (1752-1770)*

Twentieth of my Composition was Pride—the rest, Imagination & Humour—a practical joker; I learnt my alphabet from capitals On old music folios & elephantine Bible-print. Rowley, My made-up monk, dusted himself from musty parchments At Canynges Redcliffe, in the muniment room upon the porch; School at Bluecoat Colston was a bore, so I spiced things up a bit:

Canynges taught me how to counterfeit illuminated manuscripts— Heaven to a scrivener's apprentice! Kersley's *Dictionarium Anglo-Britannicum* versed me in mediaeval diction; port-spoilt Tories gormandised on my finds for their thirsty periodicals— Those milking editors drank my talents & tipped me into penury; Expurgated my forgeries to sculpt out profits! But scrolling Rowley poured a poison posset to glaciate the garret glooms: Tipple enough to leave me heaped like a crumpled string-puppet On an attic bed, one knuckle rooted to the floorboards—a wax Nocturnal Icarus, wing-singed, pinched out by an arsenic nightcap.

## MARIGOLDS TO DISTRACTION

*i.m. Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)*

*Eyes like Sherry in the Glass the Guest leaves —*  
My mind is too near itself — cannot see Unclouded —  
Indian Knots Stitch my Heart — *Hair like Chestnut Bur —*  
Leave me to see into myself — transparently —  
Youth Clouds my Mousy Brow — Yellow Butterly.

Death, my Shadow Correspondent — can't Un-think me —  
I'll not invite Him in again — He shan't irrupt in my  
Churchyard sleep — with his Wainscotting Knock — Bone-  
Knuckles — grind to Cheese-Rind on my grating Door —  
*I'm not in!* I squeak — this dispels His purpose — for now —  
*Not in — Out today* — out in crowded Garden's worsted  
Shawl — a Blaze of Blooms — and *Marigolds to Distraction* —  
O — They call me Recluse — but I'm in Bliss of it —  
Nerve-ends nestle into me — Stings back into Bee.

## TWO GLOUCESTERSHIRE MAUVES

### 1. TWIGWORTH YEWS

*i.m. Ivor Bertie Gurney (b. Gloucestershire, 1890–d. London, 1937)*

Impact of mustard gas, “*no worse than catarrh*”—from a gurney’s Vantage, Nurse Drummond drew his heart’s triage—invalided love, Over in advance—then over the nervous verge; wires strung too Rigid—*Boing! ‘Bloomingest’ urge’s* suicidal leitmotiv...

Brancepeth Castle *‘basket case’*: tinkling wonky ivories Echoing on an old piano’s *‘boiler factory in full swing’*; Rev. Cheeseman, sisters Hunt and Marion Scott nurtured his Tuneful gifts, grown to songs of sprung green ranges rising In glissandos—from rag traders’ son to composer of the five *Elizas*; wounded-shouldered, shell-shocked Housman settings—this

Gloucester lad flung *Severn and Somme* by howitzer mood-swings; ‘Unteachable’ to Stanford—might have bloomed brighter than Ireland, R.V.W., Bridge, but for his *‘bolshiness’*... Poems’ embers Numbed asylum years—a bloodied cough unhinged the creaking Escritoire of his chest... Buried humbly by Twigworth’s puttied Yews: no stripes for Privates of verse, no chevrons for severed nerves.

### 2. LITTLE GIANT

*i.m. Isaac Rosenberg (b. Gloucestershire, 1890–d. Arras, 1918)*

Immigrant to imagination’s melting regions—parentage Salvaged from pogroms of Dvinsk, saved by the *“Mauve Decade”*; Anglicised identities: Hacha and Dovber changed to Anna And Barnett; but Isaac’s remained—a sickly boy, brought up on Cable Street, in a poor district, schooled at St. Paul’s Whitechapel

Round the corner from Wellclose Square; then Baker Street, Stepney—Out at fourteen, apprenticed to an engraver; then Slade’s Studios: dovetailed talents, like David Jones, mortised between Easel—alongside Marsh, Bomberg, Carrington, Binyon, Nash—& Nib; but it was verse which carved his visage—along with chronic Bronchitis—to a whittled gnome; though his shadow, once thrown, Eclipsed the other Jewish *‘Whitechapel Boys’*—Gertler, Leftwich, Rodker... Attached to a *‘bantam’* battalion, giants at five foot two, Goat of a Suffolk Folk Ranker, dropped by a sniper at Fampoux.

## RAGGED ANGEL (IN RED CABBAGE)

*i.m. Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (5 May 1813–11 November 1855)*

Argonaut of Angst—Søren Aabye Kierkegaard;  
Forty-two years in the blink of an eye, *øjeblikket* of Being...  
Under rustic cloak of outward sternness his haggard  
Father contained earthquakes of Yahweh's wrath,  
Tectonic plates of a neurotic God scraping against  
His biblical conscience: he believed an Abrahamic  
Curse predestined his children to predecease him as  
Punishment for blaspheming in a moment of green rage,  
And a prenuptial spilling of his seed; but his hen-wife,  
Ane, clasped her chicks close, especially Søren  
And his brother Peter, the only two of seven  
To outlive the parents... Young Søren, a proto-Törless,  
Determined his own Bildungsroman by exploring  
The crooked streets of Copenhagen's cramped-in  
Poor districts, Knight of Faith against conventions  
Of his well-heeled class, he'd not shun society's  
Outcasts, but would roam among them, greeting  
Each as his equal... As a boy he'd been nicknamed  
'Fork' for his excoriating tongue and proneness  
To quips—yet he looked so fragile, a ragged angel  
Always wearing the same red cabbage-coloured coat...

Grown up, he wore a mask of haunted beauty, gloomy  
Handsomeness, a dourer Adonis with a shock  
Of blond hair and almond-shaped eyes beset  
With cloudy pools—grey-paned soul-windows;  
But he spurned temptations heaped upon him by  
Amorous admirers of the pulchritudinous sculpture  
His spirit occupied, and sipped the sour potion  
Of Keats's gallipot—the tonic of bachelorhood:  
Broke off his engagement to the girl he loved, Regine,  
A stranger he'd recognised at first sight, felt he'd  
Always known—'*like all knowledge love is recollection*';  
But he felt bound, as Abraham with Isaac (and Keats  
With Brawne), to sacrifice his fiancé of finitude  
And their future for the infinite resignation  
That would bring him closer to his cold-shouldered God—  
Or Goddess, demiurge, Gaia, anima, Muse:  
The shadow-woman dormant in Man, shrub of His  
Inner-rib, incubus of His aborted womb,  
Overwhelming for sensitive men, demanding of them

Heart-sacrifices; so it was for Kierkegaard, as for Keats before him, mythical archetypes, Aeneas And Orpheus—Regine and Francis, their Dido And Eurydice... Søren was only able to '*swim in life*', And, if needs must, upstream, splashing against The rapids (for all humans are salmon, always leaping Forward back to brackish origins), but he felt '*Too heavy*' to levitate for long in love's '*mystical Hovering*'—its luxurious prison brought out A chthonic Houdini in him, keen to break the chains, Untie the knotted sleeves, swim back up to the surface— Gasping escapology; so he released Regine from her Obligation (she'd become, in time, Schlegel née Olsen), and by so doing released his spirit From its submergence—and with this purgation Gushed aphorisms, speculations, philosophical Discourses, much gnashing of teeth, *Fear and Trembling*; he felt too angst-ridden for marriage, Too melancholic for children; his celibate pledge: '*To find the idea for which I can live and die*'...

Adam's Sin adumbrated him, and all humankind, Infinite guilt rooted in the shadow of Eden— Pumpkin of compunction; and Guilt, the wrinkled gourd Of that apple, a grating rind, the grind of Angst, For which the only analgesic he could alchemise Was Hidden Inwardness, his own Negative Capability Of reflective grief and resignation, since God dwelt Within us, so we must nurture the inner-life; '*To be or not to be*', as Hamlet, that other angsting Dane, had put it—to act or not to act, according To Kierkegaard; the *Either/Or* of existence, The choice between the World or God; and it was In this hinterland most of us dwelt, in realms Of resignation, free-floating grief, and anxiety That springs vertiginously from freedom's '*dizziness*'— Such chronic indecision made up the path of broken glass Trod by Adam's scions—though in most it slept, blunted, But still splintering, festering in necessary recesses; In more ruminating minds it swung as giant pendulums, And, had Kierkegaard realised, pounded as loud in Another Copenhagener of the pen, Hans Christian Andersen, who trod his intrusive thoughts through Marshy fairy tales, galoshes anguishing...

Critics soaked in the backwash of Kierkegaard's fractious  
Heteronyms, a species of punning nom de plumes—  
Victor Eremita, Johannes de Silentio, Nicolaus  
Notabene, Constantin Constantius, Vigilius  
Haufniensis, Hilarius Bookbinder, Anti-Climacus,  
Inter et Inter, et al—who answered back in variant tones,  
Although their reclusive creator resorted to  
His own name during the protracted '*Corsair Affair*',  
A periodical spat of splitting hairs with Meir Aron  
Goldschmidt; then, later, in the posthumous *Judge for  
Yourselves!*, Kierkegaard targeted the Danish Church,  
Declaring the pyrrhic triumph of Christianity  
For having '*completely conquered*' the world and thereby  
'*Abolished*' itself! (How ironic his name, Kierkegaard,  
Was Danish for Churchyard)—on completing this last  
Parting-shot manuscript, exhausted, Kierkegaard  
Collapsed on a Copenhagen street, unable to be  
Resuscitated due to some '*complication*' incubated  
Since a childhood accident, some inner-bruising  
On the brain harboured there ever since his little  
'*Fork*' fell out of a tree... Had he been attempting  
To reach an apple atop another imbroglio  
Of knowledge-boughs before he toppled? If so,  
Presumably the apple had been left unbitten,  
Albeit slightly bruised... and a bit less forbidden...?

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*Øjeblikket*: the moment/instant from *øjeblik* 'blink of an eye, moment' (Danish),  
also the title of a treatise against the Danish Church by Kierkegaard.

*Törless*: *The Confusions of Young Törless* by Robert Musil (1906).

*Bildungsroman*: novel of formation/education/culture (Germanic).

*SUPPLEMENTAL POEMS*  
**(1991-2021)**

## THOUGHTS OF TREES

### *MINE*

As my thoughts cloud over  
I long for the sun to return,  
And as soon as wished for out it comes  
To light my cloudy brow's slow burn.

I look out from the sunken window  
And the solitary tree  
Swaying in the subtle breeze  
Waves green gloves at me.

### *ITS*

Who is that who's staring out?  
Is it me his eyes traverse?  
I might scratch words on his cold look  
Composed in rhyming verse.

Shall I flower with cherry blossom  
Whose petals' pinkish glow  
Echo the tone of his complexion?  
Why does he stare from his window?

## MISPLACED

Sat, lacklustre, 'mid the din  
Of the ortho-orators—  
Am I me, or was I him,  
Stooped by the radiators?

Deep, deep down, I always did  
Knot my sickly stomach—  
Others dared defy and carp,  
Others slouched like hammocks.

I silent, timid, lachrymose  
Allowed my mind to stray—  
I faked alertness, mimicked zeal,  
While my thoughts were far away.

I'd frown, I'd sigh, inside I'd die,  
I'd plan a strategy  
To cough my way through sleepless nights  
So I'd stay off next day.

While some would be ashamed of this  
I'll simply end to say  
That duty was for me a drain,  
Numbing, day to day.

## FEARS OF VANISHING

### I

I walked the leafy, dim-lit pathways  
Where moon-cold colours cast by night  
Bleached pavements mauve, grass-blades grey:  
Columns of molluscs like concrete blight  
Glistened the ground I traipsed in haste  
Skirting gastropods' trails of white.

I fell into a furlough from the light—  
Allowed the dark to furl me in  
Its arms of ink, blot me out from sight,  
Trees clawed the air like cats' paws, dripping  
Paint-brush branches on the canvass of night  
To reveal red verges of russet leafing.

I traced my footsteps back into the dark,  
The duty-dousing dark from where I come;  
A rip of pitch-black peeling back like bark  
To the stripping of an axe; revealing the stark  
Flood of the moon like a nocturnal sun.

### II

I wonder reader whether you've dwelt  
In such a twilight, having sipped  
Dark nectar, swaying about in the veldt  
Of midnight countryside of lush loam lipped  
By bolder buds, where ink-thick night's trees  
Spread like hands slid in gloves of black felt.

Each branch sharp as a feather-quill's nib  
Dipped in black ink, thick in pitch as treacle,  
The pen which scratches out these lines—rosehip's  
Healing tang hallows grim steeples  
Of tall, crooked witch-hat trees that tip  
To and fro: halyards to Hecate's squall.

I, a wastrel wayfarer, waded, sopping wet,  
As if through dream-dosed slumber, or waist-deep  
In rushing waters, roaring rivulets,  
Through the wind-raged rain lashes' sweep,  
Till in a grove sheltered from the elements  
I found a stout fork-tine tree, rooted deep.

In this grove, a scythed-out shrine, I caught  
The raucous, squawking howl of a ghostly crow  
Whose rancorous wail in the static air wrought  
Chilling airs with shudders—scurrying low  
Rodents, roused by noctambular rapture, sought  
Hollows of husk-trees scored by beaked foes.

### III

Sleet speared down in sharp shooting splinters  
As I hobbled up the hill, invisible  
But for dashes falling where the road ghost winters—  
Sudden winds mustered to tumble  
While, on the wintry ridge, I, bedraggled, lingered  
On the road which, then empty, there sprawls.

Fleets of traffic flitted past my presence,  
Dancing dodgem-lights like spitting pyres,  
Or cats' dilating irises, iridescent,  
Which, while awaying, shed flecks of red that mires  
The dark like hellish eyes, then lambent  
Beacons die fast like storm-tossed fires.

Like these lights, I fear sometimes  
I may be swallowed up by night  
To find myself fastened in an air-tight brine,  
To disappear from all-else's sight,  
Preserved in my fermenting youthful prime,  
Restrained in the sour milk of worldly spite,  
Suspended like olives in a jar to fork tine—  
I've felt a spectral wayfarer where hedgerows wind—  
Fears of vanishing I've had every time.

IV

To this bleak night I return:  
Along winding lanes I, gibbous, traipsed,  
Burdened by a dorsal feather-fern  
Which weighed heavy on me, chaste  
By restricting binds like knots in churn  
In a stomach starved by bitter taste.

A harrowed face of twisted penitence  
Crafted by the cutting cold a goblin  
Made faces at the wind for admittance  
Into a twilight realm where lamp-lights burn  
In the fog with unremitting resentment—wished  
To spill from the swinging of my fastened urn.

V

Longing to spill into could-have-beens  
He treads, still sopping wet, back home  
To the empty house encasing stale dreams,  
Of sunken stance set back from the road  
In a hamlet of glum roofs propped on rotting beams  
That bid for betterment with winks of light  
And nods of chimney smoke...

## THE HAUNTED GHOSTS

A face peered through the two-way window  
Of our shadow-cottage, squinting in  
With sun-shade hand, it shook back as  
The dogs claw-scraped up to the ledge  
Barking ferociously as Cerberus  
At the gates of Hades —I, Orpheus  
With my shrinking father (Oeagrus)  
Quickly stirred, blinking & startled at  
Being discovered in our rustic squat  
(The limbo we Shades haunted)—  
*'I'M SORRY'* called the trespasser  
Through the starved glass, gingerly  
Retreating, *'I DIDN'T THINK ANYONE  
LIVED HERE'* —& nor did we...

## OLIVE STONES

How will you haunt me? Will I meet your  
ghostly face through the window or  
will you tap your nails on my bedroom door?

Will I hear the shuffle of your slippers feet  
on the carpeted living room floor  
entering to find it empty but for

a different feel, a chill, a fleet  
shadow as moonlight pours in—swear I saw  
something, but what, I can't be sure?

Will I detect the subtle creak  
of a recently-left seat,  
or catch an ungraspable glimpse of you  
counting days in olive stones as you used to?

**INKY-DINKY-DINK, FLEUR-DE-LIS, FLEUR-DE-LIS**

Sat by a lip-singed fag-bandaged lady  
On the bench by the entrance to the hospital  
That glues and re-glazes cracked terracotta dolls,  
Dragging at the sun, tapping ash in the bin,  
Licking thought-sores' salty nicotine  
She rasps, *I used to recite poetry*, then sings:  
**INKY-DINKY-DOO-DA, INKY-DINKY-DEE,**  
**INKY-DINKY-DOO, FLEUR-DE-LIS, FLEUR-DE-LIS...**

*I'm Scatty Hattie, everyone knows me*  
**INKY-DINKY-DOO-DA, INKY-DINKY-DEE**  
*I knew you was a poet soon as I clapped eyes*  
*On you DINKY-DOO I used to like poetry,*  
*I used to WRITE poetry INKY-DINKY-DEE,*  
**FLEUR-DE-LIS, FLEUR-DE-LIS—**  
*I'm not for the sunshine normally*  
*Just gettin' a taaaan you see INKY-DINK*  
*They're always cadging cigs off me*  
*Even though I don't smoke*  
**FLEUR-DE-LIS, FLEUR-DE-LIS**  
*I know I've got my back to you,*  
*Just braanin' it you see—DINKY-DOO*  
*I'm not ignoring you... DINKY-DEE*  
*Am I? I'm just 'avin' a smoke FLEUR-DE-LIS,*  
*I 'ope it ain't boverin' you—*  
*Is my smoke boverin' you? DINKY-DOO*  
*'cos it's boverin' me—me' lungs that is,*  
*Welllll, by now they'll be all charred*  
*INKY-DEE Black as two malt loaf I 'ave*  
*Na daabt FLEUR-DE-LIS, FLEUR-DE-LIS...*

I thought to her: one day in the future  
When I'm wrung of the last vestiges of *me*  
Scrunched beside you on this bench again,  
A shadow misshapenly cast, will you  
Recall our first sojourn *DINKY-DEE*  
And how much more *DINKY-DOO*  
Intact that light was back then  
**FLEUR-DE-LIS, FLEUR-DE-LIS...?**

## JUNE HAUNTING

In lockdown I visit my father the anchorite  
Crouched like a gnome in the smoky glooms  
Of his dingy singed living room-cum-grotto  
In front of his half-open window,  
A birdwatcher shielding inside a hide;  
Or it's as if he bides behind an unreflecting two-way mirror  
Since the sun behind me blinds me to him  
Though he sees me clearly, perhaps clearer than before,  
&, as always, I'm pale as milk, especially after  
An epic interior spell, which, even with my  
Reclusiveness has been a revelation of nerve...

Am I a revenant paying him a visit,  
A revenant who thinks I'm still living, a ghost  
His woozy thoughts have unwittingly brought out  
From the cobwebbed boughs of his mind's shadow wood...?  
His youngest son grown from shadow who somehow  
Survived well into adulthood, now middle-aged,  
Against all augurs, gray in daylight, a wraith, a waif,  
Frail Linton, fraught Hartley, brow-knitted Little Time  
Who ripened in spite of expectations, a deep  
Sense of emptiness, unspotted on the spectrum,  
Problems put down to nerves, a strange vagueness,  
Something missing... Or maybe that was all a dream  
& my father's Allan Quatermain mourning his son...?

Isn't haunting just a sublime absentmindedness?  
A soul's shadow-throwing? Astral ruminating...?

Back at the flat I sit in my green leather chair  
In the backroom overlooking the long-neglected garden,  
And think on my father, how much he has shrunk,  
Seemingly in the drag of a cigarette, ash-tapped,  
Crookbacked, brittle, but the warmer image  
Of him long-summered in my mind is still rooted,  
Gentle-strong, a gnarled trunk, browned by the world,  
An anchored Capricorn, his large tanned hands,  
& I sit back and listen to the wind in the garden  
Moaning then roaring, & the warped old wooden  
Shed creaking & groaning as gusts disfigure it,  
So long neglected as the garden, the overgrown,  
Overwrought garden, its agonised grass  
Going over & over the same ground again...