

Elsewhere

Poems
by
David Selzer

PETERLOO POETS SERIES

EDITED BY HARRY CHAMBERS

Elsewhere

DAVID SELZER

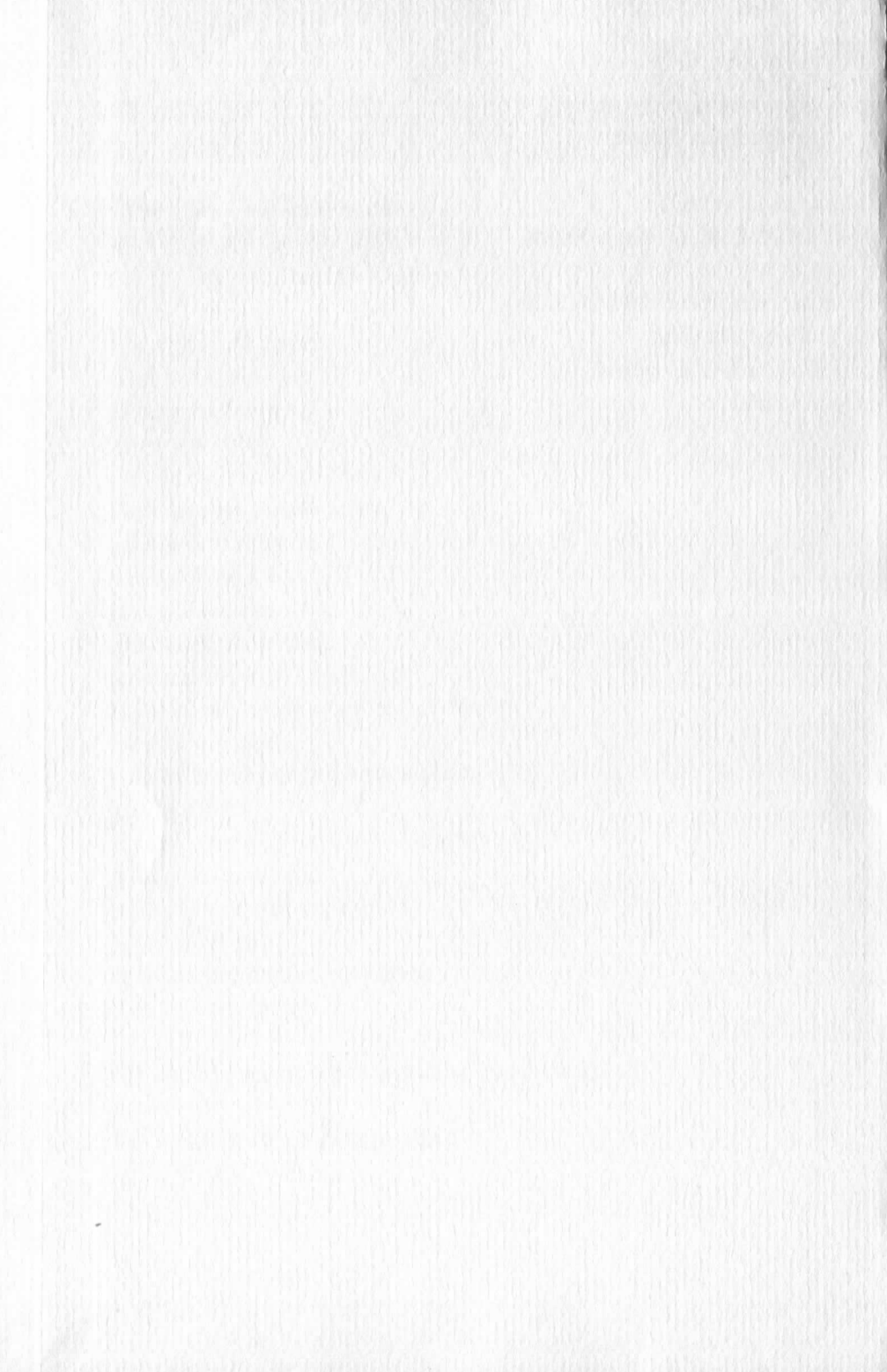
These poems, whose central themes embrace a shifting sense of belonging and alienation, of appearance and reality, are strong in historical perspective. With wit and irony, David Selzer illumines areas of responsibilities both private and public. There are poems here about 'heroes' new and old: Trotsky, Scott of the Antarctic, the Apollo astronauts. The various 'elsewheres' of the collection's title include: Ireland, Wales, Africa, a zoo, European history and a pre-1914 innocence.

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Elsewhere

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ELSEWHERE

we shall shake it out
to the end but we
are getting weaker &
colder and the end
cannot be far
It seems a pity but
I do not think I can
write more -

Robert

Last Sunday

For Gods sake look
after our people

(+)

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Edited by

Harry Chambers

E. J. MORTEN (Publishers)
Didsbury, Manchester, England

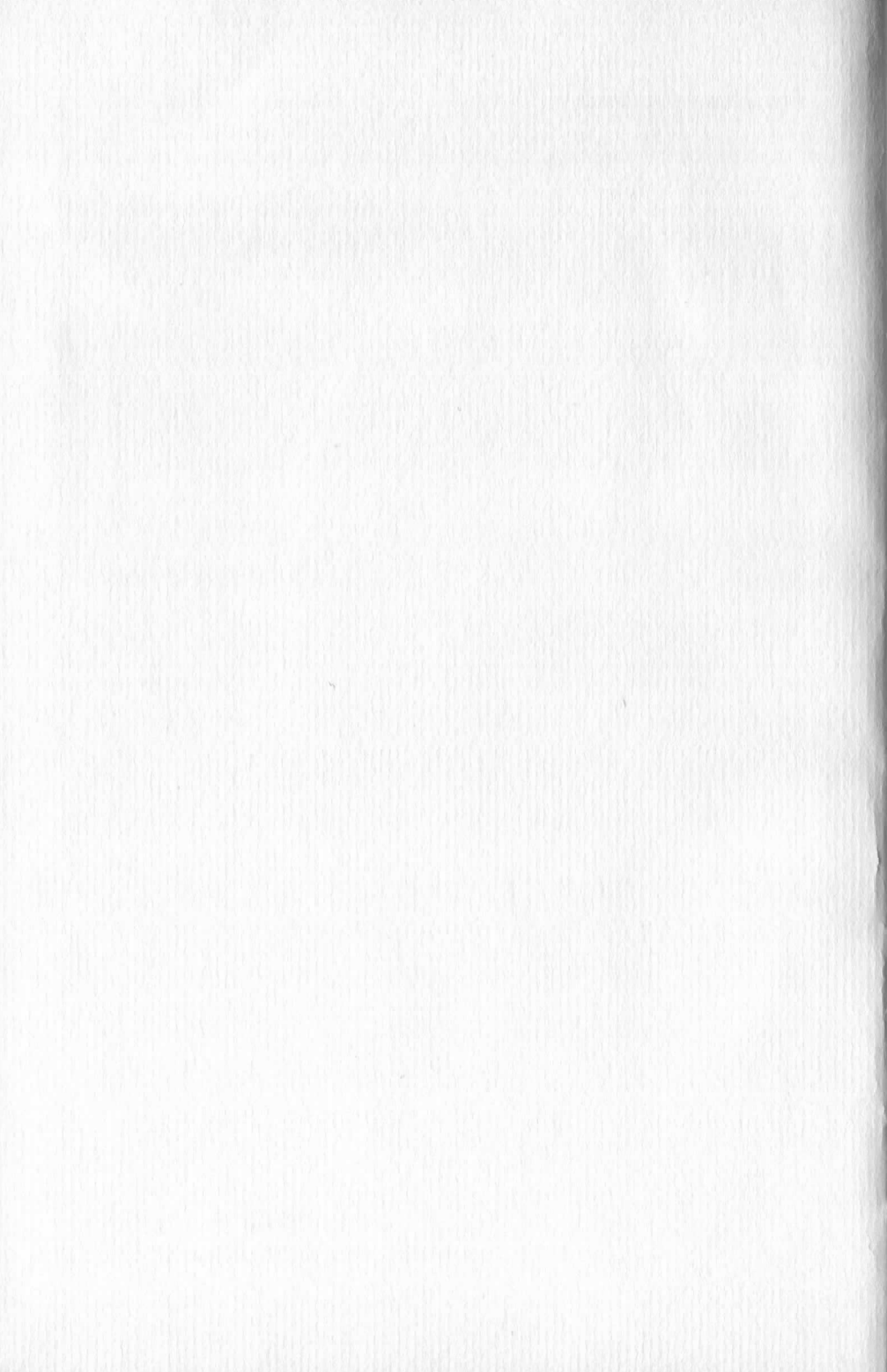
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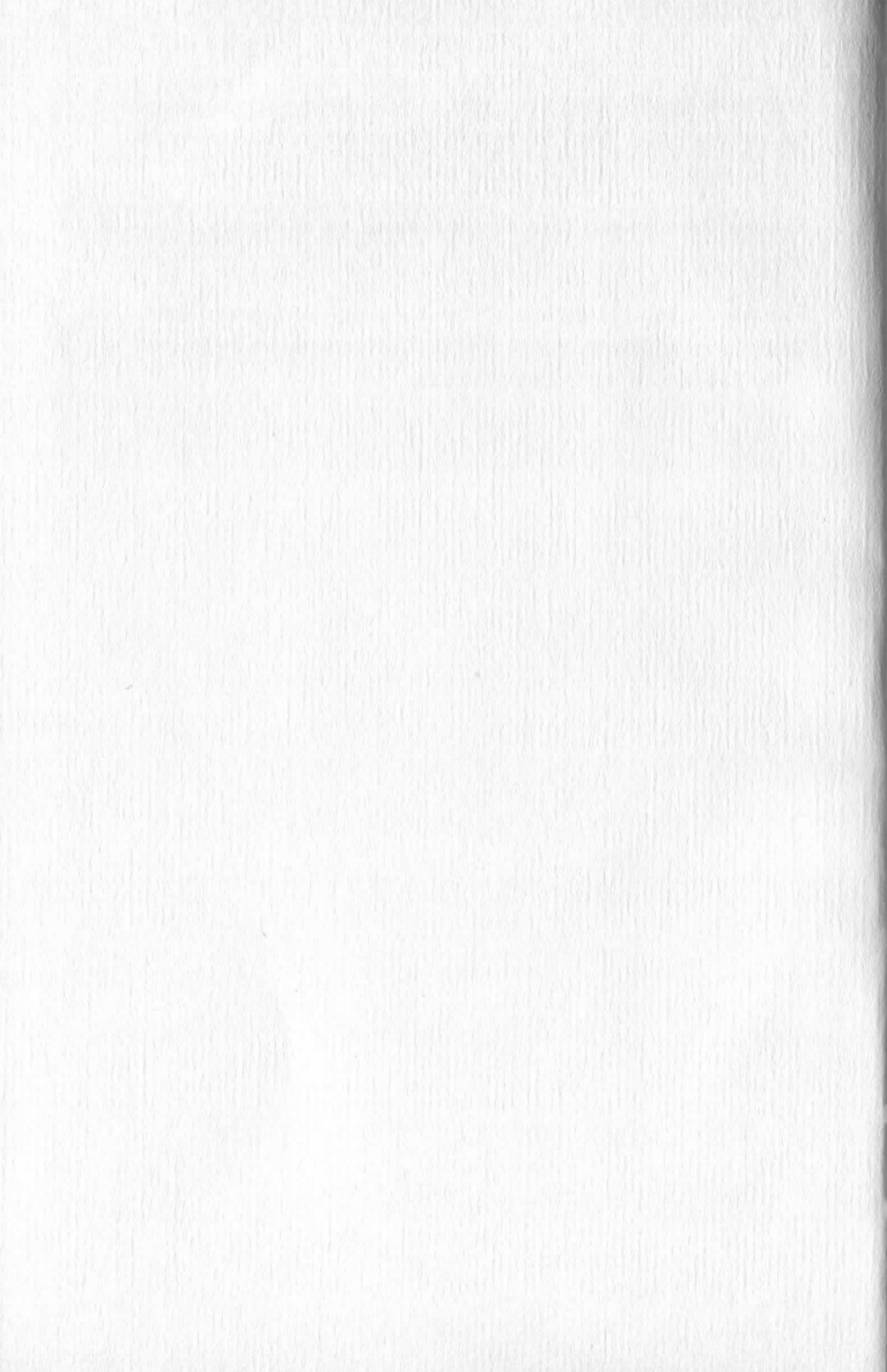
For Topsy and Sarah



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS are due to the editors of *The Honest Ulsterman*, *P.E.N. New Poems 1971-72*, *Jabberwocky*, *Phoenix*, in whose pages some of these poems have previously appeared.

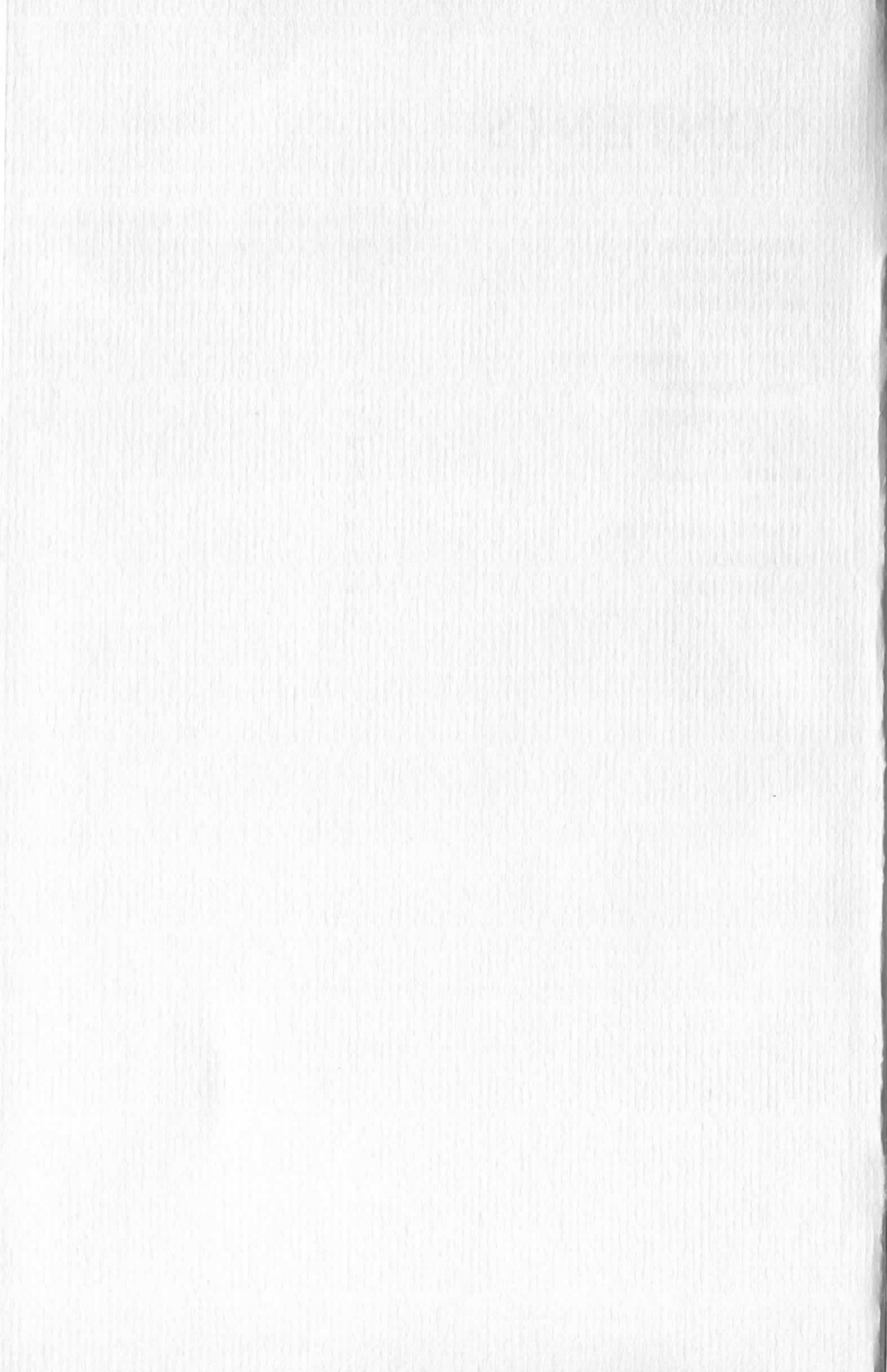
Several of these poems have also been broadcast on Radio Merseyside.

The frontispiece photograph of the last entry in Captain Scott's Diary (British Museum Postcard MSS 21) is reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.



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Connections 1

1

Between wind and water,
the sea's vanishing line
rusts through the steel hull of the ship.

2

Between Ovid and the Barbarians,
only the Danube—but in winter it freezes
and fish, alive, are held in the ice.
Ovid exiled to the Black Sea.

3

'Between land, sea, heaven where air, water, earth
coalesce, in the middle of the world,
Rumour lives.
In a house of distorting mirrors and echoing brass
gathering all experience,
credulous, hopeful,
fearful, seditious,
whispering,
Rumour ransacks the world.'

The artist as rumour? Between Ovid
and me, two thousand years
and a wishful, summary mistranslation—
or meanings, hidden, sly?
In time, no one may know.

4

Between Nicholas, whose corpse
will be flung with those of his family
into a pit at Ekaterinberg,
and Edward, whose horses
will win the Derby three times,
sits Wilhelm, whose clockwork army
will upset timetables all over Europe.
They are ogling 'La Belle Poitrine'.
Wilhelm, with the crippled arm,
dislikes the virginal Nicholas
to whom the French dancer, he thinks,
is attracted. Edward,
as yet unknown to Wilhelm, has already visited
the famous cleavage in her dressing room.
Perhaps.

5

Between the President of the People's Republic,
seated at his rococo desk,
and the First Secretary of the Party,
standing beneath a rococo chandelier,
five men have been effaced from the censored photograph,
and the rococo chair and mirror
they partially obscured
have been returned to their pre-revolutionary prettiness.
'Reality
is a bourgeois illusion,'
wrote somebody on a wall
of Balliol College, Oxford.

6

Between one slice of the sandwich
and the other, a constant, a relation—
metaphysical paste or linguistic spread.

I bite into accident.

Are these sandwiches filled with truth,
extract of truth, delicious falsehood?

In time, even I will not know.

7

'Entre deux guerres'—

Mr. Eliot at Lloyds then Russell Square,

taking Vivienne dancing

at the Hammersmith Palais

and 'Trying to use words'—

the burning of books—

the silencing of Isaac Babel

(in the twentieth century, even babel is silenced)—

Turkish poets exiled

to the inevitable quarter of Paris,

learning to paint

(they had only each other to read their poems)

and failing,

weeping each evening

in the inevitable cafés,

drowning their linguistic sorrows,

like fish, in 'Entre Deux Mers'.

8

A tame jackdaw perches on the Fuehrer's shoulder,
between his right ear

and the blurred grin of an aide

at the edge of the photograph.

'By maggot-pies and coughs and rooks brought forth'.

Corvus monedula—
'noted for its loquacity
and thievish propensities'—
a harsh frequenter of ruins.

9

On the long wall of a convent,
between waste ground at the top of a street
and waste ground at the bottom,
it is neatly whitewashed,

GOD

BLESS

SIR

OS

WALD

MOS

LEY

Walpamur's contribution to theology.

10

Between 'Prepare to meet thy God'
and 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord',
stencilled luminously on a pvc vest
that appears at unlikely public events,
an old woman's heart beats optimistically.
Her shortsightedness has never seen
better days.

11

Overlooking the railway at Walsall
or West Bromwich or Wolverhampton,
on the side wall of an end terrace,
between an advertisement for Bass
and another for Beecham's Pills,

it is written,
'Eternity.
Where will you spend
Eternity?' 'Religion,'
saith the copywriter,
'is the laxative
of the soul,'
under his breath.

12

If places
recorded occurrences,
then between
the Gulf of Guinea and the Caribbean,
on the base line
of the Triangle,
what insupportable
cries!

Connections 2

TROTSKY AND THE FALL OF MEXICO

1

Between Bronstein alias Trotsky
and Djugashvili alias Stalin,
deceptions;
between idealist and gangster,
dead ground;
between the prophet of the new religion
and the faithful retainer of the old regime,
much history;
between l'homme de raison
and action man,
confusion.

Stalin dies in his bed, officially,
from a tumour of his greedy brain;
Trotsky, undoubtedly, at his desk,
a visitor's ice pick splitting his subtle mind.

2

In Coyocan, Montezuma's emissaries
brought golden gifts to Cortes.
'We did not know what to say
or if this was real that we saw.'

The adventurers marched on the causeway
to Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco,
to the shining cities
of Mexico.

On the forest-fringed lakes
were floating islands of flowers.
Populations pressed into the streets

to see the white strangers and their tall beasts.
'We did not know what to say
or if this was real that we saw.'

The Emperor kept menageries
of human freaks.
When the soldiers saw the shrines to the gods
drenched in blood,
even the most profane of the men
declared the superiority of the true religion.
The bearded, exiled gods had returned,
bringing gospels and gunpowder.
Refusing the sacraments,
Montezuma died of his wounds,
professing the old suicidal beliefs—
the conquering Aztecs conquered
by the new religion of the murdered god,
the absolute slaughter.
Here is the business of souls and gold.
Here are the PR men
for Coca Cola and the United Fruit Company.

3

Joe Djughashvili had Lev Bronstein
murdered in Coyocan
a crumbling suburb of Mexico City.
The autopsy noted his brain
'of exceptional dimensions'
and that 'his heart, too,
was large'. In the shrines,
human hearts were offered on golden plate,
three at a time.

Monuments

Each evening of our honeymoon, a sea-bird
whistled in the estuary, called from the pebbles
to the dark where river and Atlantic whirled.
Strangers on Ireland's furthest coast,
we faced the southern miles of ocean and sky.
Strange to be there, beginning something new.

All week, we drove past donkey carts,
tinkers, potato fields, men scything wheat.
Time stationary like dust in jars,
like lilies on a pool. Endlessly poor,
the land's extravagant with souvenirs.
The rebel soldier on his plinth defends
racked towers, strategic ruins in wasted fields.
Each flaking village has the Queen of Heaven
in white and blue and gold. The Son of God
is as high up hills as men could carry him,
immaculate by weather or by hand.
Relatives have placed by roads In Memoriams
of wood or iron. Churches, laid waste,
cluster fresh tombstones with ancient names.
As gaunt as skulls, cottages, empty
a decade, a century, only the seasons rob.
Grass smooths cart-tracks, trees burst
the sheltering stones. Gaps
where gates swung are blocked
by slate and brush. Always near,
there is a lived-in cottage.
Someone had walls built down the narrow lanes
for boundaries or a grand design.
Hawthorn, fuchsia, honeysuckle hide

all but the softened shape of what was done.
Disaster, like disease, wastes all,
ambition, hope, greed. To survive
seems everything, be anonymous and whole,
keep time forever like a statue or a stone.

Strange to go there, hoping for what might come.
When we returned the air was full of seeds.
High in our Victorian house a broker built,
above the smoke but close enough to hear
his cast-iron fortunes hooting at the wharves,
we keep the past, our looks, our property,
and share and cosset them like flowers.
All day we hear the horns blast. Owls,
at night, screech over ragged lawns.
The hump-backed rats have heard them too.
The past is tangible; its monuments,
to loss of dignity, and pain, and death.

New Year 1970

Winter deepens as calendars turn.
Ships' midnight horns bass and treble
another decade
along oily streets smelling
of river fog
to wakers in a whisky haze.
Season of schmaltz
and dyspepsia twitches
on the silver pandora
in the corner—
box of trivia,
strangers' nightmares,
evening concerns;
'The Lone Ranger' precedes
the politician bleeding in the greasy
kitchen; a child, too starved
to cry, follows
'Opportunity Knocks'—variety
flickers like the windmill with pomegranate
sails I planted for my daughter
in the summer. Wind
unravelling it.

This is
my twenty-eighth year to heart's
haven and remembrances
flicker,
turning me
sleepless;
shames sharp as yesterday,
losses heaping like ashes.

I sleepwalk streets that flap
with litter. A hundred sheep
wake me with human faces—friends,
advancement. I am pacing vanity's
iron zoo, lion
grinning on nursery curtains,
menageries of broken sleep. Soundless,
my wife turns in the shared warmth.

Runners, in a brittle, thickening
wood, sky patches wheeling
above like shocked,
dead faces, sapless twigs
snatching, long
for a crystal, cloudless Spring,
but woods whirl,
crashing horizons.

Old West African Man

Old West Africa man in Leamington, watching
brittle children
die on his television screen,
dreams of the Emir's horsemen
whirling dust, of pidgin bargaining in the humid South;
when blacks
were privates, and tailors at Onitsha
would run you up a suit
while you waited;
whisky and soda in the sudden
sunsets of the bush.
He had a pet baboon that handed round the drinks.
He can't remember the names of some of his 'boys'.
Black, serious eyes
outface
the lens.
Today,
a West Indian called him 'dad',
taking his arm when he staggered.

New Heroes

Cottonwool moon in a flimsy sky
and Armstrong, Aldrin, Collins
impelled
by Wall Street and the Pentagon,
impelled
beyond experience
where it is brightest, darkest
and nothing seems to happen.

On Monday, July 21st.,
my wife, our child and I
climbed up, out of town,
through trees' green shadows
to rain-pocked, frost-cracked, wind-worn rock;
and the Observatory
where my great-grandfather,
who sailed a 'coffin' ship to Boston,
watched the stars in his middle age.

'Old Glory' stiffens above us all. When Nixon spoke,
we T.V. millions saw
Aldrin at attention in his lumpy suit
a quarter million miles away. New argosies,
new heroes, church-going, athletic,
dull as machines that level
error and style,
leave only the passive
as humanly possible—
being poor, persecuted, dead—
but still no one is equal not even in suffering.
Above the scrofulous cities of the earth,

the brilliant contraptions spin like discarded coins.
We are dirtying the universe like flies.

Our condition is trite, appalling.
Dancing on warm and antique rock,
our little girl sang,
'Moon has the face
like a clock on the wall',
and the town—sooty,
commercial, Victorian—
lay sharply in sunlight. Change
is silting of incident, present
eroding into future which is always here
and unimaginable. Past is sure, tantalising,
a grievous taste.

Marks of monstrous crêpe soles left
on a cindery world
for a million years
should no more wrench
our numbed, excitable selves
than Zyclon B
or Newcomen's Engine,
and time is no shorter than it ever was
for us of the broken countries
which sour, like mouths of rotten teeth,
all they encroach.

The Chimney

'Inter urinas et faeces nascimur'

Black smoke streamers
flutter like a black wind-sock,
a dark standard. The chimney
is cunningly tall—evaporates
waste over Cheshire or Wales,
is dark bunting still
over rich houses banking
the river, terraces
stacked by the canal, us—
cunningly taller than steeples
or cathedral towers, of enormous girth,
a colossal brick penis
ejecting dainty black sperm,
lead seeds, the latest, last
alchemy. In fog, at night,
its red warning throbs
like a waiting craft, drills
like a god's eye.

Because of the chimney, we are safe.
It is burning Europe's flesh but we are safe.

Illusions fall like lead balloons,
faster than Galileo.

Is waste scattered
or dropped here
where we live?
The Inspector tests
our air, our earth,
ourselves.

This
is
mine!

We do not mind if England is poisoned
up to the official level,
if hill sheep have leaden guts,
if cattle ruminant in livid meadows,
but we shall not be polluted
beyond a citizen's duty.
A man's home is his dustbin!
Pollution makes all men brothers!
Prejudice is a luxury!
Despoilers of the world unite,
you have nothing to lose but your comfort!

Too many impeachments!
The world minds my business, the silent
photogenic victims of the earth
demand so much.

I call the Inspector.
'This is an answering service,'
says the oracle. 'Please,
state your message clearly.'
O God, make speed to save us!
As I watch my daughter
learning to read, lead accumulates
faster than words. O Lord,
make speed to save us!
We shall go for our Sunday drive
and poison the earth. Cassandra,
thrill us with doom!
In the twenty-first century,

my relatives jostle
limb to livid limb
and eat shit noisily
with toothless gums.

If it be possible, let this cup pass from me.
I hold all the responsible views,
yet there is no help in me.

When they cut down the trees we can see
from the kitchen,
oaks taller than houses,
by God
I shall protest!
Some weekends, we empty the waste bin
three times a day.

Through night, through fog
the red-eyed god
drills

Do I sacrifice my daughter
for a harvest of convenience?

taller
than towers or steeples, beyond siege
or storm.

The Zoo

Bordered north by the Motorway,
east by The Field and The Tree
with Occasional Kine,
west by The Works
where waste gas burns
like an orange angel,
and south by the polythene fishponds
and sensible birdbaths
of The Suburb,
is The Zoo.

Visiting a neighbouring semi,
the new vicar, while praising the lawn,
hears unfamiliar sounds beyond the hedge.
'My God!' he exclaims.
'Is that a seal at the bottom of the garden?'

From Mytholmroyd, Ruabon, Bakewell,
everywhere, along The Motorway
which simplifies
death, having no right turns,
we progress to the park of marvels
no one lifetime's travel
could encompass.
American Buffalo roam
with a lack of concern
unbecoming a dying race.
Over a wall, a path, a hedge,
The Motorway lies.

First visitor: 'On my way to the Zoo today,
I ran over two hedgehogs and a rabbit'.
Second visitor: 'And they say there's no wild life!'

In a world no larger
than a t.v. set, a lizard
winks like a slow shutter
at his twitching locust lunch.
Headkeeper Providence
has dropped it from heaven—
deus ex machina
in the flies of a plywood
lost world.
Human faces beyond light
wince and wonder
at quiet spectacles—
the nonchalant violence
of the whipped tongue and the crunchy death.

In the Cafe, stuffed animal heads
jut from the walls. Eaters
look up into flaring nostrils
and surprised glass eyes.
When an elephant died,
from anthrax it was learnt later,
the carcass was fed
to the other animals.
They were burning gazelles for weeks.

Weekend zoologists, bestial voyeurs;
Sunday visitors to a bedlam for rarities,
a prison of muscle and impulse;
we are amazed the squat gorillas
are only two strides off—
power neither reason
nor courtesy restrains.
When the monkey throws shit
at us, we carry on laughing,

allowing, insisting
animals be our worst selves.
A polar bear, fur
edged yellow like a smoker's
moustache, hobbles
on hind legs to snap
en bouche the tossed crust.
He rhumbas drunkenly
to a soundless, atavistic tune.

A bored sales rep., filling the hiatus
between one joke and the next,
by chance, sees
adult chimpanzees
about to copulate.
He looks away—they look embarrassed.
He mentions the incident
to no one.

A dishwasher in the Cafe,
an easy, lonely lay
with a low I.Q., from the Staff toilet,
watches the old lion
hump one of his harem
at 8.35 each morning,
and brings herself off
to the beast's ecstatic roars.

Like dust and time, litter—
and 'You don't half shovel
some shit!' says Headkeeper
Providence, pushing a barrow—everywhere;
under the Antelope's haute-couture hoof,
in the Beaver's boys-own mansions,

on the grubby English grass
where the Bengal Tiger prowls,
behind chicken-wire diamonds
in his circus stripes.
Only his rage is clean,
or real,
like a hot needle.

Seeing a sudden wind dishevel a line of poplars
and rain, advancing, veiling the trees, I sheltered
under laburnums by the lake. Through railings and rain,
I watched three wildebeest still as idols under an oak
and thought, sharing it, of the wonder travellers felt
seeing the Serengeti Plain teem like Paradise;
Thompson's Gazelle, Eland, Marabou—those names! A party
of mental defectives in plastic macs
shuffled by, ageless heads nodding,
faces open to all weathers. One,
a girl or woman, began to shout or
scream, throaty, chesty cries. The two
attendants slapped her, slapped her again,
again. The others began to watch, think,
waving like flowers. Then it was
over. They shuffled. The girl sobbed. I
stood under the dripping laburnums.
The image returns and returns.

On the island in the lake,
the gibbon lurks,
whooping plaintively like a lost train.
Rarely seen, known
only by the whoop and the swinging crash
of foliage, she had disposed
of two mates.

Keepers throw food from a boat.
When the lake begins to grow
its skin of ice, the keepers
tear it with oars.
If it thickened,
the gibbon might slide to freedom
and death.

Babel's Villa

Showers wake me, surprise
of rain on glass, gutters rushing. Drip.
Drop. Home-owner's water-torture. My roof
and my rest are leaky. Wind blusters
at the slates, slaps
the aerial. I switch on cataclysms
where chimneys loosen, lurch
through roof and joists, lath and plaster
onto our bed. We lie
already like figures on a tomb.
We have known each other ten years
and still there are secrets,
silences. Often
the house jangles
with fifty years living. Our childhood fields
are sown with paper houses
and instant community. In summer,
when sun shafts through the stain-glass
bijou of our Edwardian windows, we move
in cathedral lights. Gusts ease
under eaves. I dream the roof rises
on creaky wings and we are mortgaged
to a flying house. I worry too much.
The place grows faults
like a child, a flawed inheritance.
Bomb damage was repaired with sea-sand. Salts
glisten through paper in damp air. A shifty place.
My daughter's favourite story is the 'Three Little Pigs'.
In the chimney,
of her pink room, wind moves
like a cry in the throat. Too narrow

for witches, you tell her,
or wolves. Three years old and already
she enjoys bad dreams. My nightmares
are wakeful—humiliations, unkindnesses,
secrets, silences. Memory
is full of razors. In the attic,
mice scratch—like my discomfort,
unreachable. We have laid poison
in shadows. I found a corpse,
its delicate guts nibbled at.
They are cannibals, mastering
our poisons, our sly
refinements. No walls
exclude all shocks of weathers,
seasons. Love keeps nothing
from the commonwealth of dust.
We, who lie like effigies,
have known each other ten years and can afford
such images. Many tonight
are sleepless, dying, dead
in the choking rooms of the sick,
the poor. Over Asia
the sun has risen. Nothing would convince me
this is not everywhere
a night of squalls. To ask
if you, at this hour, are awake
would open too many possibilities.
After ten years, secrets,
silences, and no new way to speak
of love. I kiss your ear.
Often the house is quiet with happiness.

Jacob

Like a white crow,
my wife limp on the languorous chaise-longue.
'Daddy', she croaks,
'where are you
such a time? So wet?'
Old crow, I think, kissing her beak.
At the cemetery, it rained;
I hunched under leafless trees;
blurred shapes eased
distantly, decently Speigl to his grave.
My brother, my ghost, you really dead?
Forget!
For my stealing, I suffer.
Your piety, your house
cramped, crowded, your unanswered
forgivenesses
ghost me, poor Speigl.
Forget. Forget.
What sons you have to grieve
for you! When we were brothers
in the Pale, we hid together
from Cossacks trampling the village.
Crows were first to fly.
Do they know me? Only
an old Jew come to the graves
for shelter.
Your loss made me
rich. Once taken, no giving, going back.
I invested in ruination and remorse.
Six sons to fill your shabby house.
My daughter died in her cot, too long

to remember. My wife pecks
at my dignity in air-conditioned rooms.

'Daddy', she crows,
'why suffer?'

For my soul, old scavenger,
for my soul.

After the mourners had gone,
birds, gleaming in rain,
perched on the turned soil.

Time's Countries

Out in the misted estuary of the Tweed,
the cloth-capped fishermen have cast their net.
Near the breakwater's end, at the tide's ebb,
the salmon shoals are fattening to seed
up river's reaches, dark, pebbled inlets.
Roped to the harbour breakwater, their web

is taut against the stream, fast to a boat
skulled endlessly to sea. The lone oarsman
strokes the pinkish distance. Hidden weights
tether the flimsy skeins bouyed up by floats—
their tiny liquid shudderings omens
to weathered spiders at their morning wait.

Or so it seemed the late Spring I was there,
when I was twelve, on holiday with Aunt.
We visited their honeymooning lairs,
hers and her dead husband's, decades distant.
She focused from their bookish disarray
time's countries, wars and parliaments away.

Edwardian Shropshire in bland air.
Her brother's games. A tree-lined drive.
A ride in Uncle's coach and pair.
Her dog, in snow, buried alive.
Father. A kindly peasantry.
War scares and statesmen's pleasantries.

Flags waved and feathers fetched. The Somme.
The uncle gassed at Passchendaele,
the groom legless, the bayhorse gone.
Two cousins at the Dardenelles,
one mad, the other believed dead.
Father endowed a 'Hero's Bed'

She saw the victory flares die down,
and Father's steel investments boomed.
Roedean, Hunt Balls and lovely gowns,
and love for which she'd been well groomed,
with little French, crochet, the Dance.
Then courtship, marriage and romance!

On honeymoon, she saw the salmon caught.
Her husband knew the place, explained the skill
in waiting for the tide to fetch the shoals.
How picturesque, how suitable she thought.
Watching the floats to guess the net was filled,
the fishermen, like Aunt, played proper roles.

We stayed at their hotel beside the Tweed,
some miles inland. At sunset, I would stare
towards the salmon pass. They leapt sea-black
against the waning lights, the water's seeds.
Or, leaning from the hotel wall, I'd scare
the sallows and the trout would dart and tack.

The other guests were there for sport. The rich,
the owner's solemn gillies at their call,
in sun or rain, angled each costly pitch.
The Colonel showed my aunt his glass-eyed haul.
She frowned at tinned-food, dead marigolds
and the Cockney parvenu in his Rolls.

Her husband was Chargé d'Affaires
in Bombay, Shanghai and Rangoon.
They gleaned the proper Eastern fare—
loyal 'boys', jade Buddhas and typhoons.
At home, the General Strike, the Crash.
Her father's paper fortune smashed.

He shot himself, twice, near the heart.
Her mother went to live in Slough
where my father, her son, taught art.
He sculpted at weekends. They rowed.
On leave, Aunt's small son drowned at Staines.
And China was at war, and Spain.

Austria fell, Poland, the Jews.
Each suffered someone's finest hour.
Father was blown up entering Bruges.
World peace manoeuvred into power.
The Labour Government and slacks.
Her husband had his heart attack.

We visited a hillside where they'd walked,
a Tudor battleground marked by a plate,
and saw, below, a town with woollen mills
of crowding granite where the river forked.
Their waste, snow-white froth, slowed down the spate
to sluggish eddies, and she said, 'It kills'.

Now she is dead, and I see little more
across the tract of years and circumstance,
than when she treated her 'poor brother's child'
to know how she found nothing wrong, how flaws
ideas exposed—ideas and death and chance—
time's vast estates absorb, however wild.

I eye the quivering floats until mists rise,
reveal a smaller boat, the mirrored clouds,
the town's sharp contours, and the spiders rise
and haul the trammel in like empty shrouds.
I watch to see them curse, their faces strained,
but neither the old men nor Aunt complain.

Suicides

After the first and only
abortive time,
when they trawled me from the sea,
my nakedness
was festooned with weed,
smooth, oil-brown,
dripping in egg-cases.
My husband, the respected
gerontologist, gave his childless
wife a box of assorted
seeds.

Garden beds
shimmer with feminine blooms
perfuming
paths, stairs, bed.
When he returns from the wards,
his hands exude the geographies
of age. He holds
my arid countries
as if they would crumble
to dust. My breasts are wrinkling,
my womb
is shrunken as a dried
fig. I do not need
help, only time.
I shed my clothes like petals,
among sea-thistles,
buffed-pebbles
and vacant, waiting shells.

Elsewhere

I

Before the valley steepens
into wilderness,
above woods and the swift river,
they terraced purple slate
into vastnesses.

A mauve haze fills the quarries
strikes and Sundays emptied.

Lord Penrhyn, slate millionaire,
whose marriage bed was carved
from a single slab, attended Matins,
with his family and retainers,
in the private chapel
of his neo-Norman castle.
In Bethesda, the quarrymen
sang, with their families, 'Moody
and Sankey'—their chapel
back from the road
and tiny houses, its name in gold,
its portico white, its roof slates.

Lord Penrhyn's constituents
(some of them) signed a petition
supporting his stand on the strikes.
Others (the same perhaps) presented
a bound copy of *The Messiah*,
inscribed with their thanks
for my Lord's encouragement
of singing among the quarrymen.

A jagged pyramid of discarded slate rises
over Bethesda, perching for gulls
and rooks—their cries
and the shut-in
hymns, Sunday's only sounds.

Slates rebuff the weathers
effortlessly.

I think of Lord Penrhyn, dead,
dead, anonymous strikers,
and the silent, purple airs
of the quarries.

2

Stillness and dust in sunlight.
'World's End'—over the sign
Welsh is scrawled. Dogs bark
out of nowhere. A kestrel circles
over a field where a plough rusts.
A tanker clatters through the village.
Walking in fern on the hill,
a couple bobs, like rabbits,
suddenly from view. Tourists.

I am Dai the Knowledge
or God, and this is my hill.
I see, hear, speak
all—the divine gossip.

Gwatkin the Fish, drunk, sits on the chapel wall,
singing a bawdy song. Tegid Pugh the Flour
whips him for blasphemy. Gwatkin, drunk, rolls
in the cut

and drowns. Fishes to fishes.
Ersatz Wales!

Dams block the valley east
and west, obscuring sunset,
sunrise. When the last snows melt,
community dissolves.
Tourist trout will waft
unmannerly through front doors
hopelessly ajar.
Forgettable Atlantis, leaving
only the braggadacio of art!

3

The Druids' Last Stand—
somewhere near the two bridges
and the yacht club. Judges,
priests, teachers, poets,
speechless at the Empire's mercenaries
swimming the straits;
out-run and skewered,
like boar, in thickets;
covert for centuries;
poets lost
in their own lands.

4

Once on the ridge—
after a last look
desperately, ruefully
down the giddiness
of what, from the road,
was grassed slope
with stream and stones

but now, finding clumsy,
slithery feetfall
on the strewn rock
of a water-falling torrent,
is sheer
madness—
here is plateau, lake,
mountain walls, wilderness.
Bird crawks echo,
echo into distance, deceiving,
reachable crags are footslog furlongs off.
You can hide from the builders of roads
and underfloor heating. Armies
of urbanity lose themselves.
I am the first and the last
and I want to shout, Adam
and Revelation!,
but don't. The place does not give an inch
or a damn. It is adamant.
I carry my pride
carefully, like a hurt companion,
down to the road.
Vanity speaks of objectives reached.
Heart cringes at wilderness
known.

5

We crane to see the mountaineers,
yellow, red, fawn, on granite,
easing their spidery paraphernalia
through the vertical. They yell
instructions, jokes. Mundane,
insouciant, seemingly,
they are easy in death's plane.

Back at the camp, nearer
sea-level, in thick woods
where the river, stepped.
precipitating, buffs
glacial boulders sea-ward
roaringly, incessantly,
companions dive, mundane,
insouciant, seemingly,
into an olive pool of chance
calm. Their yells
pierce the green woods. Man as spider
or otter. I lie in the sun,
like a lizard, and flick at mosquitoes
tasting me. Light stings my shut lids.
I see the boot entrusted to loose rock,
the pool's shadow harden to a cracked skull,
the immovable faith
in seeming.

On the top ridge of the violet mountains
that billow briefly above the sky-line,
an orange flare
bursts. I see it—
the others clamour in wooded air.
Like a settling fly, a helicopter orbits.
Catastrophe or manoeuvre? Distance
secretes decision. Elsewhere
is metaphor.

6

Small-talk on the lawn—poems,
property, marriage. The first fine Sunday
in May, and my beer glass worries a bee.
Visiting in Wales,

a friend's cottage—semi-detached comfort
compressed into a labourer's hovel.
I imagine it smoky, full of children
and hens. He reads to my daughter
from her 'Jesus' book, the parable
of building on rock and sand.
'Like the three little pigs', she says.

Before he tamed it, the garden
was waste, a tip—under the rubbish,
stones, roughly squared for building,
remains of a village street.
Stones are arbours, paths, rockery.
He excavated horseshoes,
a cobbler's awl, bottles,
a crucifix. The last, polished,
hangs by a print of Gauguin's
'The Yellow Christ'
over a greystone fire-surround
he saw in 'Practical Householder'.
Most of his books are in town.
The cottage, empty so often,
swelled the pages with damp.

A spare toothbrush is kept
for the occasional weekend girl.
A lecherous solitary, he is devoutly
tidy in his life. He brings me an ashtray
to use in the garden.

Dozing. Warm beer. Small-talk.
He says, 'My ambition
was to be a professional co-respondent—
until the new Divorce laws'.

My wife impersonates her headmaster,
'The seventh commandment meaneth
thou shalt not water the milk'.

I balance on the rockery
to see the land, spinning, spinning—
the bell tower above the village
to knell through the country's folds,
fields, tamed by hedges, rising
to moor over the brow.

I taste the desolation out of sight,
indifference, spinning, spinning.
At its centre, spectral over every rise,
round each bend, the windowless house,
gaunt hunting lodge.

Its original owner shipped it
from Norway stone from stone
for summer holidays, and the autumn culling
of whatever bleakness breeds.

He could see, on fine days,
the country house of his business partner
on the Mountains of Mourne.

To amuse the children, he sent a telegram,
'We can see you. Can you see us?'

Travellers, taking a traffic-free route
to resorts, puzzle at daunting grandeur
in a welter of gorse, such inconvenient
extravagance.

The bell tower's shadow lengthens.

We walk—lanes of wild flowers
not seen since childhood,
and wild strawberry trailings.

We promise to pick the fruit in summer

for our daughter—queen bee.
The evensong bell clangs. Returning,
we pass the straggling church-goers.

In the crisp night, we leave for town.
He will lock up and follow.
We join the returning procession of cars.
Lights swerve on kerb and cats-eye,
shutting us in. ‘Where does Jesus live?’
my daughter, still awake. ‘Everywhere’,
her mother. We talk of the empty cottage
and the moonlight in the garden
that was a street.

7

“They’ve closed down Happy Valley—
and I am very sorry because it was wonderful.
There was a hypnotist, a mountain railway,
a flying boat in the bay and we saw it
when we were in the hotel dining room,
climbing, a tattoo, and I took a dead crab home
in a box, and it was tiny, and all see-through
and two days later a bad smell though small,
but stinking of seaside.”

8

At the sea’s edge, she turns to grimace
and gesture into the holiday
camera and already
her inflatable ring of Woolworth
plastic blue with Commodore Donald Duck
endlessly resplendent round its circumference
scuds, on an off-shore breeze, too far
into the bay. That a poor

child on a southern beach, Fishguard
or Africa, that a ringless child
may have it for playing almost consoles
but thinking of others'
joy sharpens loss and she howls.
And only a new, blue one with the splendid
Commodore will soothe. Should we have taught
of the casting of bread and a lesson
in losing—'That's life!'? (We lied, knowing
the seas run north). My darling,
we cannot always underwrite your losses.

9

Even in sun, a howling
and white seas gouging
deeply, between cliff
and island, division;
a narrow, open
bridge over the pounding
swirl; your mother,
anxious,
on the turning steps
up the face;
behind, rock strata
bend like folds in cloth.
Wind could snatch you
like paper,
plummet you
shrieking.
I hold, hurt your wrist
lovingly.
We clasp you in a vice.
Will you hate us
when you know?

Seas fume, gouging
bedrock deeply,
deeply.

10

Like sand through fingers tight
as pincers, self seeps sometimes,
grains from bristling dunes into sea's sleep.
The buoy's bell booms in the warning
channel and the ship sirens. Round
the limed and sanctuary
rocks, gulls whoop, echoing
over tawny, evening water
and deep creatures, kindred, bloodless.
Self pulls. At my feet, sprats
wiggle and tempt. The mackerel men
zip hooks into shelving gloom.
Tonight, if you land and gut me,
superstitious love,
you will find my heart. Reach,
for me, reach.

11

Under the jetty, only appearances.
Ripples slap like flesh
on the piles. Whose shadows
waver on the slatted water?
A point becomes a rod, a prow;
at low tide, a black wreck
raddled with sea-rot, beached
long-ship like. The keeled darkness creaks
into mud. Sleeping, your breath comes
so quietly I panic
to keep you. Doomed submariners

gasp in their fouled air like landed fish.
I grasp you like a respirator.
In the undertow,
golden weeds flame, rocks shake
like rusty, barnacled jellies.
Do we dissolve into each other
as the shadowy mirror says?
You are so easily lost.
Across the beach, riders
and mounts trot into mist.
Birds' cries or girls'? After tide's
suck, swirl, mist's dispersal,
nothing. I drown so easily with them,
towed under inscrutable surfaces.
Like broken combs, breakwaters
strand sea-weed and carapace,
carding the tides, the drowned.
You peer into gaudy pools.
I fish for metaphors—reflections breaking, breaking.

12

On the main street, 'Jerusalem',
in cement and slate, rises
over the 'Owen Glendower'
beneath a criss-cross of telephone wires.
Walkers to the old church
topping the hill—before normans,
before saxons something—the name
of the village translates
'old church'—walkers must look
to the knobbly path or up
to the cross on the lych-gate
and the figure

hung like a hawk,
a harrier.

Graves askew in the steep yard
sprout like ponderous thorns.
With the gradient, they ascend
in size and status. Slowly
as continents, they are slipping downhill
to chapel and pub,
revolution, legend.

Ivy fingers the masons'
English chisellings. A fly,
skating on summer wind, buzzes alarm
in my ear, reveille of self.
Hic iacet
ego et al—
type and particular.
A July afternoon is moving through leaves
somewhere familiar I have never been.

In spiky grasses, a cat
tempts my daughter who skips
off a tomb
that is toppling,
stones' pace,
into earth.
'Are they sleeping?'
she calls, peeping
through a cracked slab.
'Don't walk on the dead!'
They are brittle
company, slow
agitation of bones.

From a headstone, a cross
juts stiff as a mast, and Christ
limp like a dead bird.

The weathered sarcophagus of a Welsh Queen
lies now in the porch, used
for centuries as a horse trough,
say English and Latin inscriptions,
until a Georgian squire
found and brought it here
to speak of 'the transitory nature
of sublunary distinctions'.

His mediaeval ancestors sleep
in alabaster in the chancel—
knight and lady whom sunshafts,
traditionally, illuminate.

Though her lap dog is awake,
alert at their feet, they have lost
noses and some fingers—for five centuries
their soft medium cut all over
with initials. In a niche,
a saint stands headless.

Walls retain vestiges
of reformers' whitewash.

Not a word
of the people's language in a conqueror's church.

Over the nave near the tower's
high dark,
Christ
hovers—
Iesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum—
harrier;
handiwork or heaven.

Scott's Last Expedition

In a tent provided by an English public school,
three men, in a blizzard, died,
two, one smiling, in sleep,
their leader, an arm
flung over a comrade, his face
distorted, in pain
or in horror facing
death under cold and booming canvas.
Outside, whiteness
whirled, ice
dervishes. The tent
was filling with snow. They stayed thus,
on the glacier, eight months
until found.

'We shall die like gentlemen'. Representing
the mess-deck, the 'invaluable' Evans, the unplanned-for,
extra mouth, died first—disappointment,
frostbite, falls, self-pity,
class. Did he say 'sir' to the end? Barriers,
thicker than ice walls, enforced loneliness, pride, despair.
Who could be steadfast without comrades?

The dastardly Amundsen,
who was after fame
not fossils, actually had dogs
pull him south and anyway
started sixty miles nearer
than Our Heroes—
who walk most of the way,
who haul their gear

over the ribbed
desert of ice
like drays.
A day's march from the pole,
Amundsen leaves a black flag.
'Great God! this is an awful place.'

In a white and crystal
wilderness, they are
singing in their tent,
upper lips stiff
with honour and frostbite.
They take my breath away,
talking of the future
even until they fall
asleep. Five men, four, three,
in harness, marching
to where the world ends.
No remorse, recriminations, retribution.
'For God's sake,
look after our people', writes Scott
finally. Oates
thinks of his mother and his regiment.
'I may be some time,'
he says, before he leaves
to lose himself
in space, but does not tell them
that he loves them.

Furlongs beneath, coal-seams and fossils stretch.
War grows
like an ulcer while they are dying
in the South. Walking

right up to death, brave-faced,
near the One Ton Depot,
at the Somme,
in any 'awful place',
should melt cold, strategic hearts.

O brave, recumbent boys in sliding
ice, inching, like slow
torpedoes, into the oceans'
massive dark!

