

The Shrine of Remembrance

So many dead, this monument declares,
so many slain by bomb and bayonet,
bacillus, bullet, anti-aircraft fire,
ministerial imbecility,
incompetent logistics and command—
this marble, stepped and corniced: all their wake,
with flags run up and down, “The Last Post” blown.
The rising sun it answers with a blush,
as if of shame at glossing all that waste
with such grandiloquently mitred stone.

Yet there it stands on dedicated ground,
a sentry over garden, tree and leaf.
What shades patrol its marches, fending off
the city’s rabblement of craning towers?
As if Canute declared “not one site more,”
and all that tide of concrete, glass and steel
stood straining at the margins of an earth
it could not comprehend: futility
a fit riposte to calculating grasp,
stupidity wrong-footing spread-sheet crunch,
the screed of gain, the utile heresy,
contested by this useless spectacle,
this droll memoir of cost beyond account.

Stars

In 1993 my wife would laugh
when I arose, a stepladder deity,
in one hand star-charts, the other flourishing
gummed phosphorescent paper circles and stars,
to spangle our newborn's ceiling with the skies
of cloudless northern nights. It worked so well.

Ten years on, war's shadow leans aloft;
we're selling up and moving hemispheres
to live where different stars will shape the night
above our heads. The room must have fresh paint,
so while the radio delivers word
of massing troops and fey diplomacy,
I once again ascend the ladder's stair
with scraping tool and bucket to remove
the heavens I had spread, a different god,
of aspect terribly transformed—the stars
fall at my approach like winter snow,
while our children's laughter echoes through rooms below.

*Geworfenheit*¹: the Gnostic Hotel

Magnificent failures seldom earn their due:
triumph unrelieved deceives and dulls,
pursuit of so much stuff that only pads
against the gnawing of the wants that teach.
Success embeds its darling in his place
that time will soon enough turn upside down.
At Lady Fortune's wheel all will lose—
those face it best who face it sooner than most.

But chancer's calculation is half the tale.
Few now know our alien ancestry,
our ineluctable otherness that tells
of elsewhere origins, primordial swerve
of fall, transgression, borders strayed across
that mark our exit, exile, exodus.
The castaway who makes his isle a home
may sink in comfort to forgetfulness
yet still be lost, and thus our checks and woes—
 the hurricane that shreds our woven hut,
 the rising seas that whelm our sandy dot,
 the homesick melancholy sigh at dusk—
all mind us of our lost identity.
And though its recollection score the heart
with desolation and ache of phantom limbs,
far better such remorse than ease that lulls
our swimming heads to deeper loll and nod.

¹ *geworfenheit*: German for something like “thrown-ness” (yeah, that’s clear as crystal), a term used by Heidegger (natch) for “being-in-the-world” in the sense of recognizing the essential otherness of everything that’s not you. Harold Bloom has picked up on it as a term for the essential Gnostic sensibility, in which the soul is literally dizzy with having been sucked down the vortex of matter to its confinement in both the material body and the material world. Say “Heeey, I’m not from ‘round here” in your best cracker accent and you’ll be on the scent of it.

The wake-up calls may startle and affront,
and we may curse the chirpy clerk downstairs,
but she's just carrying out last night's request—
with ruthless kindness and efficiency—
we left when we checked into this hotel,
guest of the obliging demiurge²,
glad for a roof so far away from home,
but needing no velour and potted palms
to dress the facts of circumstance collapsed
upon our pinched-off selves: check-out time
indefinitely delayed till we recall
just where we left that missing set of keys.

² Greek for something like “half-mover”, the Gnostic concept of the fallen angelic intelligence who, in a botched attempt to imitate the real Creator, has made this world, with all its shortcomings, and is spending the rest of time in denial, demanding that we pay no attention to the fallen angelic intelligence behind the curtain.

The Belated Butterfly

The book had scarcely caught my eye
among the tumbled covers and spines,
dog-eared paperbacks of love and war,
scholarly hardbacks so recondite
the author's mother alone would own a copy,
westerns, minor autobiography, car repair and food--
all assembled helter-skelter,
second-hand, remaindered in lots.

One corner of marbled cloth extruded
a note of somber beauty--there.
Hand followed eye: I drew it from under the heap.

Poetical Works. Robert Bridges.

Both poet and poems no favorites of mine,
but the book a lovely thing, in Oxford printed,
nineteen thirteen. Only one year
before the hell that seized the century whole.
The poet in a frontispiece, reclined
on a stony seat before a mullioned window.
No doubt the University. The pages white
and supple, margins ample, elegant type.

Sold for next to nothing. Then, at home,
turning pages in my chair, I found
that most were never cut. This thing had lain
for eighty-eight years unread, perhaps unopened,
while Bridges' students' mouths were stopped with mud
where shell-screams augered death to cowering ears,
while cities burned as bombers swarmed the air
and shower heads disgorged the Zyklon B,
while rockets touched the moon and menaced earth

with fire so final none would taste the ash,
while airs turned thick with mercantile effluent
and the idols of the marketplace grew great,
made chastened acolytes of all, left worth
to float on shadowed waters out of mind.

Through all of this these pages stood or lay
upon some bookshelf, lightless in a box,
clasped in silence, never given voice,
untouched and unfrequented, as attic dust
fell sifting through the air and no birds sang.

I found my knife and drew its rasping smile
across each folded join of page and page,
my present imprecisions sitting fair
among the four-score-year-old deckled edges.
I turned each leaf to face the sun
it had not seen since days when Bridges breathed;
I sniffed the musty tang of ancient rag
and marvelled at the chance that brought those lines,
that smell, this poem into my head
in this particular now and here,
belated butterfly of one man's mind.

The Lookout Man (It's All in Yer 'Ead)³

Lefty schemed the heist: he'd read the plans
of tunnels, tripwires, sensor cells and vaults.
The heavy gold shone dully in his eyes.
Righty had to watch for all his mate
could not foresee: the unexpected guard,
dozily dutiful, making another check;
the extra stair that might precipitate
a ruinous fall; the constabulary swoop;
the informer who'd commanded total trust.
For all these things sharp Lefty had no eye.
Righty did his bit by taking them in
and trying to foresee a thousand more
impediments and checks that might befall.
Righty had to use imagination,
which Lefty always had to keep at bay
if he'd have any hope of mastery.

Righty was Lefty's best friend, though he did not
reciprocate the honor, solely bent
upon articulating all his plot.
Oh, he could talk, could Lefty: words came quick,
obedient to his will. "We'll take it easy,
lolling by the pool, for all our days."
But all he saw on that lounge was himself.
Righty was taciturn—he had to *think*,
assembling all the pieces of the puzzles
set by time and chance, or, at the least,
the ones that he could grasp. Lefty, his friend,
he had no doubt, would see him right in the end.

³ A hemispherical parable inspired by Iain McGilchrist's *The Emperor and His Emissary*, an extraordinary psycho-literary account of the bicameral brain

A flawless ensemble, together they advanced
toward their gleaming goal; that stashed in bags,
they then unwove the turnings of that maze
and made for open air. “Sorry, mate,”
said Lefty over his gun, “you done your bit.”
Righty never heard the loud report.
Head down, full tilt, divested of his friend’s
capacity to see what didn’t suit,
he never heard the sirens’ keening wail
nor ever saw the strobing blues and reds,
before the handcuffs manacled his wrists
and the law struck with its truncheons at his knees.