

Ordinary Soles

Durham Cathedral, January 2003

For Anne Stevenson

I.

At first it was a view, sombre theatre
Staged for the tourists it had half-foreseen,
Soon cancelled by the hills, their tinselly scatter
Of New Year's city. When it showed again,
Above the Bailey, looming on the crests
Of snow-lined slates, it seemed domestic, plain,
Despite its mass, some Palæolithic hearth
For tiger-scaring fires and warriors' feasts.
But human pleasure wasn't in its myth;
Only some madness which had forced those vast
Spiralling trunks to the canopy, stained them with
Faintly Islamic chequerings, combed the light
To seven shades of glowing dusk, and crossed
Blood-sacrifice with something called salvation,
Wanted me there, made almost moral right
Out of the comfort-zone of awed sensation.

2.

It was no shell. Hoards of the unadoring
Had trudged the aisles, acquisitive and blind,
And not destroyed the marrow: you could sniff
Its life-force, superstition, sure that if
Today, some loaded plane made light of it
—Light, and immense and simple dust, slow-pouring
Into the bedrock, next week's hands would find
The prototype, or young architects compete
With wilder plans for fusing sky and steel
And low-lit shadow-nests in which to kneel.

3.

I wish some hand could stop this iron ball rolling,
Check the tumultuous spin, and wrap the year
And all its rage into some child-proof sphere,
With cotton snow the only debris falling.
Out of such simple-minded depths might not
An Angel of Self-Doubt unveil her face
At last, smoke-shadowy in the conjured heat
Of oil-fires where she floats, and bodies, rippling,
Half-melted, claw and pull at her in seizures
Of frantic hope? But when it comes, her shout
Is tiny, falters in the competition
Of man-power's engine-roar. Go back, she pleads;
Forget your tyrant-making, tyrant-toppling
Enterprise. Look close. Your war is terror
Itself: how can it cancel terror out?
This angel, talking to herself in error,
Is human, not an emissary from the skies,
But from the future. She is Evolution
And fades as I invoke her with these lies.

4.

I laughed at history, once. A gimcrack vein
Of martyrdom pulsated, neon-red,
When plugged into my secular disdain,
The comic strips of family anecdotes
Reluctant to evolve into an adult's
Tentative research and imaging:
But how can it be kitsch to lose your head?
Later I found the words, The Pilgrimage
Of Grace, and I could hear those rude heads singing.
What chutzpah, when you marched against the king,
Were cautioned, and set off again! Oh, great
Great grand-dads, tearing at your feathery souls
To part them from the spiked mess on the Bridge,
You're bullying me again to demonstrate
That I'm a genuine relative of yours.

5.

Perhaps you'd be appalled that there's no Cross
To head our march, shocked by the futile ease
With which we'll breast the democratic breeze,
Attracting cameras like a motorcade;
Perhaps you'd choose the Coalition's crusade.
But you would go with us as far as this:
That kings be questioned, un-just kings opposed.
And so halfway we touch, venerable ghosts
And common heretic who calls on God
Only when tube-trains stall, or gangs are loud
In midnight streets. The window's prayer-wheel rises,
Nevertheless, lights webbed in fragile lead,
Like a mandala, beautiful but not
So beautiful it daunts and blinds, but rouses
In dust or memory-gene some still-embodied
Arrythmia: the pilgrims' voices, flat
And hoarse with cold, their slow encumbered tread
Drumming the heartless miles and extra miles,
Until they sing no more.

And here's today,
The light like dirty ice, the still-white lawn
And melting roads suddenly footprint-strewn,
As if the first marchers were on their way,
And tired, contemporary, un-miraculous soles,
Metabolising grace from power restrained,
Were grinding out a different passage through
The fossil-heavy self and all its walls,
Sparking off synchronicities of new
Aerial pathways, choirs and towers of cells
—Not monkish ones, but growing-points of mind
Whose miracle would be this: a seventh sense
That leaps between history and consequence.

Note: The Pilgrimage of Grace, a Northern movement opposing Henry VIII's Reformation, was brutally suppressed by the King in 1537. George and Richard Lumley, who were among those executed, are the figures referred to in Section 4.