

Grandfathers

Dragged offstage before my birth,
The bodies had been disposed of,
A modus vivendi reached,
A pact initialled sight unseen.
Little was said in my presence;
When alluded to, the dead
Were named in a loving tone,
But many unuttered thoughts
Floated like overfed putti
Around the coves of the ceiling,
Speaking to me by telepathy.

The bottle had dragged them down
After years of rage and misery.
Passing the propped-open doors
Of Whelan's pub and the sickening
Smell of last night's beer and whiskey,
I see the off-duty curate
With his grease-grey mop asperging
The floorboards, messed by togetherness,
Mucus and other unspeakables.
The smell would be of carbolic
And insufferable sanctity.

The wine merchant, too, had sent
His Christmas-box case of claret—
Bottles of blood for the sufferer
When his head-bands grew unbearable.
The other side of the fire
Disapproval sat in black
With common sense on her side
And a drought between her legs,

While the men of God declined
To give evidence for life,
Invoking the fifth amendment.

So where did the pink house go to—
Pink-washed roughcast with a fanlight—
And the sober-looking pony,
The whippet and the canary
And the apple trees that featured
In all the family photographs?
Down the shore in the floodwater's
Spate, carrying away feculence,
Matchsticks and the head of Orpheus
That cried out so inconsolably
At the family's dismemberment.

And much the same for the Cornishman,
Who exiled himself from Camborne
And foundered off the ice-shelf
Of South London in the gales
That blew behind frosted glass.
But their childrens' childish memories
Were of affectionate fathers.
The terrible nights came later,
Statues reeling off their plinths,
The mantles of the gaslights
Broken and collecting dust.

The relicts had to limp onwards
With their unknowing offspring
Through gardens of convalescence—
One child, me, without old men
To tell him that nothing mattered.
Aged orphan, I wonder who
Were these not so wise old owls
Addicted to self-destruction,
Men who gave me half my genes,
My eyebrows, perhaps my fingernails,
My neural pathways, my thinking.

Amateur snaps show geniality
And bushy moustaches, heads
Tilted slightly to the left,
Tolerant of unsure eyes
Hovering above the viewfinder
And forefingers feeling blindly
For the nib that clicked the shutter.
But nothing more. Sepia prints
Of summer afternoon faces
From which the essence of soul
Has volatilised like ether.

They're still there, part of me thinks,
Detained under house arrest
In their own segment of space-time,
Cloistered, incommunicado,
But unquiet in their quarantine
And quite without curiosity
About the never heard of me.
Anyway what would we talk about?
Our mutually strange diction
And bearing would come between us,
With translators' comic errors.

My one grandson has one grandfather,
Who still hovers on the fringes,
On the lookout for a role.
But despite what count as quirks
In the eyes of friends and villagers,
I can manage a chalk line
When challenged by the police,
Speechifying while I do so
About the ruses of time
And the interpenetration
Of the now by what was then.