

*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.