

By Lake Geneva

an extract

*Have we vanquished an enemy? None but ourselves.
Have we gained success? That word means nothing here.*

—GEORGE MALLORY, *Alpine Journal* (1918)

It's near midnight, yes?
About me the mountains
Remain in tact,
Rain sweeps across

The manicured lawns
Of formidable chateaux
Down to Lake Geneva
Where the good people

Walk their dogs.
The weather is inclement.
In pension and apartment
The very old refuse

To give in—hardy souls
Who ended up here,
Like the white-haired girl
Behind half-curtains

Feeding her Siamese cat
In a balancing act
Between high window
And the long drop below.

★

Everything is in its place—
 A tin can or bottle
 Would spell trouble.
 Here on the lakeshore,

In the downpour,
 I can hardly see before me
 The excellent inn of the Trois Couronnes
 Where Daisy Miller in muslin

Draws near, or imagine
 The dark old city
 At the other end
 Of this most silent lake.

★

From the night sky
 Planes prepare for landing.
 The lake is luminous now
 But not a word is heard

From the immaculate
 Living and bedroom, the hallway,
 The underground car park,
 The narrow balcony with its

Potted unspilling flowers
 Closed up for the night.
 Is there anyone there.
 What goes on? I want to know.

★

The dog on his leash
 Moves out of the sun.
 Without a by-your-leave
 Two horses clip-clop, clip-clop

Under my window;
 A car heads into town.
 Business is business
 After all.

D A W E

The man opposite,
Whom I haven't met,
Speaks into a mobile phone.
Is he Romanian, a Serbo-Croat?

The light behind him
Is a flickering screen.
The kids blast out MTV:
The same, the whole world over.

★

And for some reason I think
Of the fluorescent evening
At Shaftesbury Square—
It's 1974 or thereabouts,

A body's slumped
Down a back lane.
The police van
Turns in, slits for windows,

By unnoticed slogans
To the long war
At the Cobbles Bar.
And where are you for?

Home, sir? Hurry on, then.
(It's as if you're not there.)
The gutted off-license,
The boarded-up bookshop,

The cavernous hotel
Of silver city.
The river sweats
And the embankments

Are blind to our footsteps.
On Sunnyside Street
Moonlight, and the darkey
Darkey night that follows.