

Extracts from *Skying* by Steven Matthews

INHERITANCE

In the choking heat,
big purple dahlia heads
loll against taut wires
along the concrete path.
Inside the wooden shed, full of the smells
of stale tobacco and humus,
yellowed newspapers have been stuffed into gaps
against winds that are not blowing.

Sweating, thin in a greying vest,
fag never far from his eager lips,
my grandfather rages at betrayals,
let-downs and a daughter's ingratitude.
I'm too young to understand,
but, maddened by the pressure
filling the shed with overwrought heat,
read the patiently written blackboard
which gives his price for chrysanthus, peas, leeks
and those purple lolling globular heads.

Once, he told me to choose myself
an apple from his heavy-laden tree,
I strained myself way taller than my height
after the largest, swelling there vivid red.
Coming out of nowhere, a stone
richoceted from the trunk beside my head.
Then the smack of his ferocious shout — 'Because
I let you have the pick, it doesn't bloody mean
you can take from me what's best of mine.'

SPOILS OF WAR

'Treble seventeen, two, then double top.'
The plastic dartboard spasmed on its nail
as misdirected darts clattered the rim.
He inspected their silver tips with concern,
wiped them on his sleeve, handed them back,
and told the boy to take more care next time.
His ready knowledge of the ways of winning
had been gained during the stalled Desert War;
during the many long, unexplained lulls
in battle, when a board was hung from the tank.
Pyramids of white sand stacked up on its wires
over the nights, then gently showered
like grained snow with each morning's first match.
Hundreds of hours, hundreds of finishes
to be fought through, before the cobalt sky
again shed avalanches of mortar shells.

One time, after the board was taken down,
he disappeared for ages deep inside
the under-stairs cupboard, ransacked cases,
and emerged from its tomb-cold with silver.
One by one he offered them to the boy:
a match-case with its inlay chipped and gashed,
a heavy watch-chain, a battered snuffbox
with the portrait of a girl inside its lid.
His burn-scarred hands shook as he passed over
each with pained care into the boy's fingers.
From the desert he'd been posted next
to fight on up the boot of Italy.
'I got these bits off an officer's body.'
His voice wavered and stalled. The girl's snow-shine face
stared up at them from the tablecloth;
his wife blurted the man had been dead
already. Yet the boy could see, from the taint
of his ghost-ridden eyes, this man was not.

PLACES OF WRITING

I

Yeats at Rapallo

For some days it sought to force itself
between pen and paper, or leapt and sat
on the typewriter carriage as keys sang
until, at last, the poem clicked like a box.

Now, the actress's beribboned Persian poses
on the ledge, gazes blank and pitiless,
and throws itself across several storeys
to the radiant-cobbled street below.

A leap into azure-hazed coastal air,
and the beauty which had lured the ageing poet
achieves suicide through poetic neglect.

Later, he strolls to a foul, unswept street,
and casts doubting eyes, as lion-maned Ezra
compulsively feeds a whelming horde of wild cats.

II

D.H. Lawrence, from Garsington Manor, 9th November 1915

The pond chockfull, the silver water stirs
near the conduit, a muscle sallowing
in its sudden heave toward the stone brim.

Oil-worked clouds, statues, ilexes, angle
into reflection across the long trench;
torn white feathers strewn over its banks.

The boathouse harbours dull-green autumn light
full with a tortured, repeating sadness.
In retreat from fire-splashes and Zeppelins,

golden fingers in a gleam of cloud
over the city (a Miltonic war
in heaven, the cosmic order gone),

this pond and manor are poignant, soul-breaking
England, its past crumbling apart, breaking down
in a drift of leaves. Here, far from the flames

of that nightmare at the heart of the world,
in the mound of the pond's banks, irises
have been set against the winter-darkness ahead.

III

Wittgenstein in Ireland

As Tommy Mulkerrins pulls the rowboat
beyond the shallows off Killary,
the philosopher fishes a handbook
from the top pocket of his tweed jacket,
and then silently matches its pictures
with oystercatchers, puffins and gulls.
Tommy, feeling alone, counters such stillness
with tall tales of the local madwoman;
the philosopher leans across the gunwale,
exactng a true aspect as he must.
A tensed expression freezes his features
at the discordant music in his mind —
in the hazed grey Connemara shorelight
remoter shapes are now curlews, now terns.

IV

Emerson at Rydal Mount

The whole thing, extempore. Old Wordsworth
scuffling in his gravel path, bursting
suddenly into long recitation,
set me first near to laugh. But, recollecting
myself that I had come thus far to see
a poet, and here he was now chaunting,
I saw that he was right and I was wrong
and gladly gave myself up to hear him;
swaying with his agricultural pace,
his gestures wild as a truant school-boy's,
this seer disfigured by his green goggles,
with hidden powers touching the affections,
trances of thought and mountings of the mind
now seen as through glass, darkly; now face to face.

V

Beckett at Ussy-sur-Marne

with the Marne's broad plain
bricked out
the winter journey
crawls
round and around
as so often

within

the longitudinal house
the sheer distinction
between end and begin
is
between 'begin'
and 'end'

AFTER TROY

No longer do my fingers sleek
over smooth groin or bronzed sternum.
Time weighs on my rings: the gemstones
clack and snag. The faltering run
of my thread through cloth
is like Hector's body dragged
by swift horses across the dry plain:
each night, my cries used to escape
our disheveled bed and break
like a baby's in the empty streets.

Old Menelaus will be here soon, no doubt,
and mouth his slack lips at my soft nipple;
had poetry and history not begun,
I would have lived to know my true love so enfeebled.

PORTRAIT

The portrait which emerges
in the barber's mirror really
is not so much of his self,
but rather of his grandfather,
napkined and sat in front of his dinner,
cutlery poised over his Yorkshire
as his Santa-hatted second wife lowers
the spout of the gravy boat,
and the family awaits the slight dip
of his contained and clipped head
to indicate their Christmas might begin.

DAD, WRITING

As a grammar school boy, what upset me most
was his fist's awkward grip, thumb crooked back
on itself, around those black-stalked 2Hs,
as though he was struggling to etch the letters
into the poor wood-grained ruled paper, not
just write his slowly ground-out capitals,
jumper cuff scuffing across the page.

Imagine then
my hurt for him when, after an evening
tense as he inscribed a short letter asking
for that better job, I sneaked a look
at the reply when it came back weeks later,
and saw his own signature cut out from
his application, and sellotaped onto
this rejection, which told him they could not
decipher who it was that had written,
nor most of what he had been trying to say.