

HOME (1956-65)

I

The rainy fields
of sheep and cows in Leicestershire.

The Morris Minor
ambling the narrow roads and lanes.

And at the front my parents,
young in their coats.

II

Every road
led out of Leicester into Leicestershire.
Peatling Magna, Peatling Parva, Wistow Hall,
Leicestershire moving in the small
triangular window.

IN THE PLAYING FIELDS

“He played for England twenty years back,” one of their fathers remarks.
But to the scatter of small boys
dashing to the soccer pitch,
he's that old nutter at it again, shooting at an empty net.
The taut-seamed ball
wristily spinning
into the fingertips and
placed upon the spot (precisely on the spot:
it mustn't budge from where it's put: the spot), and then the sternly-paced-out strides
to where he stands (unrattled by catcalling fans whose jeers, whose jeers would make a weaker man
lose his nerve)
thinking it through
from run to swing to high up to the left
beyond the reach of any flailing glove
of any goalie,
any fucking goalie in the fucking world—and charges in to strike.

The boys are gone. The damp is on the rise.
But still he steadies, pauses, takes his aim
at goalposts dimming into ghostliness,
thunders in to make the leather pay . . .

Around the playing fields
the poplars darken and the street lamps gleam.

ARAD, ROMANIA

At ease on a cracking
splintery bench in the Serbian slums,
with the Old Theatre on the eastern side
flaking down into the street,
I'm savoring the early sun's
clarifying warmth.

In the market round the corner,
boxy slabbed cafés are serving
rum as well as coffee to the men
who smoke all hours.
There's only me, though, in the square.

The pigeon-throating air.
A fountain. Puddled, strewn. A concrete arch
with concrete soldiers issuing.

Loneliness, lonelinesses driven into life
down aching streets to twilight and beyond,
recede into another person's past.

Hours could pass without my stir.

(Perhaps the river, later,
if there is a path.)

EXILE

I

On his third day eastwards, hunched at his pane,
as towns grew shabbier, became
shtetls to the thrum of iron on iron,
he stared into her snapshot taken
four years earlier, in furs,
and sensed the droshky outside waiting,
as it would wait tomorrow.

His promise.
His promise.

II

Those unmeeting curtains, dishrag dawn, the first
Gauloise

drawn from its blue soft carton
like a handkerchief; and again

the dank steps snailing
down to the bleary

scrapes of table, trawl
of an awning, the

gristling
latch's

give—

air, world,
fantasticalness

heralding at this temples, spreading
unbelief at being here at being

here

as if a greater man were walking
the street of his own purpose to a room
of dark and turpentine.

Now verst after verst,
returning him home, returning him home . . .

III

(Dry goods. Tallow. Inherited feuds.
A grind of bad roads, rutted tracks.

And Paris worn to a shrug.

The poplars and the willow trees.
The river.)

Verst after verst . . .

IV

Fretted to sleep at last
beneath his seamy overcoat,
perhaps, with a jolt, he woke amidst

a vast stupendous star-stretched stillness,

peered out, heard
no crunch of hobnailed lantern-swinging guard,

only the crickets

then felt his fingers thrilling
as a child's at something forbidden,
the handle yielding and the carriage door
opening of its own accord

and there he stood, amazed-appalled,
the great inhaling world before him,
before him now, his to . . . his to . . .

the steps, the drop, the—

stumbling bloodying stones.

“THAT EARLY EVENING”

That early evening, she and I
went strolling by a disused railway line
somewhere in Leicestershire.
It must have been the time of day,
because from field after field on either side
the cows and calves came lumbering,
thistledown-cumbersome, gathering speed
towards us, up to each field's gate,
where clankingly they stood
in a jostling hotness, nostrilling hard.

Pathos reaches where no grief can touch.
Fifteen years have passed, but to this day
I see the guileless creatures at their gates,
each one's brimming luminous gaze
drawn to me, drawn to me, betrayed.

TO OLGA KORBUT

Like a slowly-rotating star,
you began your progress, dignified the beam,
then ridiculed its four-inch breadth
as if you were an urchin skipping away
on flagstones in a grimy street
and not, fey Soviet,
prancing into the world's hot retina
that German city's summer
in the Brezhnev time.

But soon, as they were bound to do,
the others came.

And you?

There must be books, a biography or two.
Footage. Interviews.
I could find them if I wanted.

Instead you have known contentments in your life,
thought folding into thought along
great beech-lined afternoons of unremembering,
and you no longer caring
how you are remembered, or if.

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF POETRY
(THIRD EDITION)

Compressed
exhaustingness: the energetic dead exerting
language wrought full-stretch in centuries
on those not yet.

This room. These sheets.
Inertia at its creep.