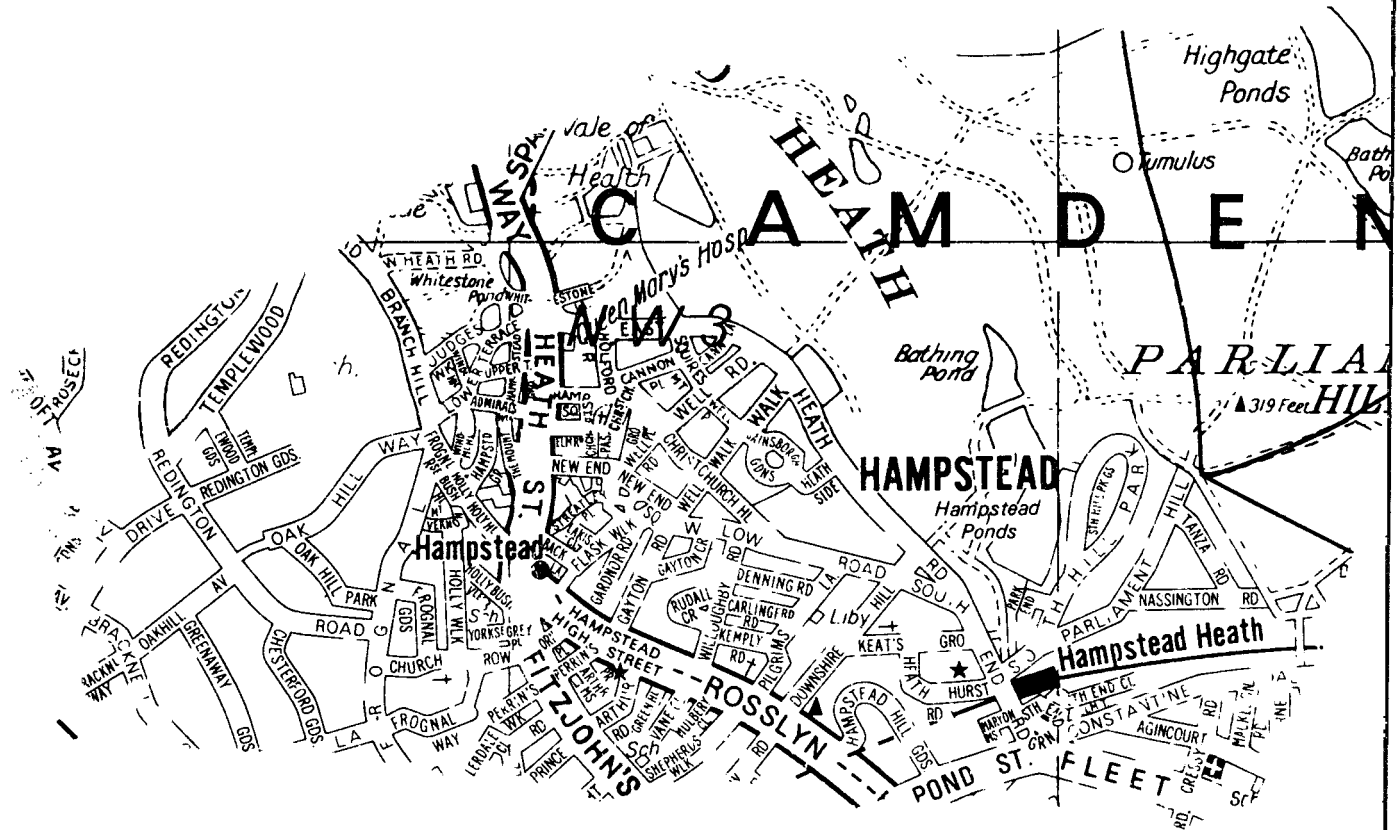


hampstead revisited

(london)



flashing back

1

Under a slash of diagonal moon
seven miles up, cloudbanks sealing
the night earth, outside my nose tip
the sky (can it still be sky?)
sweeps through all the shades of blue

while members of the crew
skate up and down the aisle.
BOAC. England from the start.
O the recollected timbre of the sound
of voice, the candor of eye.

Never mind. Always cope, eh?
Not to worry. Smile. Blink.

Into a snoopy cushion sink
stuffed with a millennium of proper reflex

o jolly well done o simplicity
going by with a tray of drink
the motions of service as right sir
as the stratified stratosphere.

Infinity above, we are passing over
Belfast. Next is Isle of Man.
Over Mersey. Blackpool. Haze.
Do you know the North of England?
says the lady next to me in a salmon suit.

We are rushing away from the sun into dusk.

The landing, we are told,
is fully automated.

2

Heathrow arrival.

Tired eyes
lazily jump over the quick brown bags
in the eddy of carousel.

And there
waiting like the rest of us a human star
of all the visual media (and audio too).

From the back he looks quite young
tweed shoulders tapered down
narrow brim tyrolean
with a dashing peacock feather.

On either side of him an elder woman
and a Florentine masterpiece
exquisite young man from central casting
curls like blueblack stone, jacket
carelessly draped on birdwing shoulders
sophisticate

Italianate
(to whom does he
belong . . . forgive the speculate).

I have always been an admirer
of your work, I murmur
dropping signals of my own connections
with Shakespeare, our mutual friend,
and he says just as quickly give them my regards
the thespians doing Hamlet in Central Park
that summer.

He has the ease of centuries.

The skin of his face is pink and hairless
the wrinkles of age an extraneous
afterthought. The eye are shrewd and curious
he has managed to retain in them the infancy
of first age as he approaches the seventh and last.

I risk the autograph request:
he signs my notepad graciously.
And is gone, quite gone
in the coincidence of travelers intertwine
matched luggage, cases, people.

Shuttle bus to London.

Two women in front of me pull the plug:
did you watch that democratic convention
well my dear the mcgovern *people* it's a wonder
television all smack in your eye it was scarey
and funny (they laugh together sinfully)
and can you imagine what would happen
if the Church Board, if it were run that way?
And o poor hubert it was his swansong
you missed it? brave, brave, it would have
brought tears to your eyes.

O look!

A Honeywell sign along the M4.
Minneapolis, right in the breadbasket.

From Victoria it's a cab ride north
and coincidence again and isn't it always
the young hackie began studying the tangled yarn
of London streets ten years ago and I
recall that winter when he was a novice
and me too, he his routes and me mine.
The worst in two hundred years,
six weeks below freezing.
But our climate here, he says, is more moderate
no need to lay in heating for the odd short spell
of weather. A paraffin stove saved our lives,
says I, and why do you expose your northern pipes
and why the gas lines in shallow trenches
seeping into basement flats, I was scared stiff,
afraid we wouldn't survive. You did though,
didn't you, mate, says he. You ain't just
whistling Dixie, says I. He laughs.
He knows I know he's thinking rule brittania.

•

Jack and Liz are waiting in their living room
and it might have been yesterday
so at home so fast.
The silver drink tray dazzling
and the puffs of cat fur on the stairs.

One thirty in the morning, me sleepless
for twenty hour, I follow Jack who is led
by Punchy the gamelegged dog
up Kemplay Road, both of them
with Raleigh beards on a fierce incline.

Dogshit on a discarded meter
on the flagstone walk.

Jack says the reconversion is almost complete
a natural gas from Scottish beds.
I miss the coal fire though, says I
and Jack explains the smokeless zoners have won
a certain legal coke and there will be no more
sulfurous fogs in Londontown.

•

Still I cannot sleep
and at three a.m I wander the long hills
alone, pale and ghostly the low
brick shops and houses washed by the new
lights, ashes of sodium.

forward flash

1

Parliament Hill, midmorning.
On an air mattress a man with binoculars
and thermos and his portable's chromium twig
erect and a black dog yawping

at a tramp who has just touched me, two bob
worth, though the inflated man gave me a wave
of warning. The latter approaches me now.
Not worth a light, says he, wouldn't give
him a sausage. Layabouts.

By a tree down the slope
the wino is joined by a mate
and they skiddle the mud
down down to some melodious lay.

They'll piss it away
grumbles the man. Clicks his tongue.
Points toward his goodly hoard.
Keep your eye on that, right?
While I go in the bush.

He trudges toward a wedge of green.
From his airbag a radioed baritone
thumps the road to mandalay.

He takes his wee, I watch his chattel
as the men I spoiled
make for the boozier
like homing cattle.

The toy shop where my sons when young
bought their corgis and I my wooden darts
is now a health food shop, whole grain.

Across Rosslyn Hill a nursing home glowered,
Victorian. Now it is called Mulberry Close
a room above a room below for twenty thou
in pounds. Disneybuilt cobblestones
aged from plasticene.

Beyond it up the slope is a scaffold skeleton
wood as old as the hangman's stand
amusing the elizabethans.
I remember a showroom for motors posh
as postwar movies. Now, says the sign,
to be a modern post office, the dickensian
one up the High Street no longer services.
I send an air card to Eve.
Hampstead Golden Yard.
I tell her my retreat is going well
the well is filling up.

I carry her blue heart locket
with me in the pocket
of my light brown suede.

•

Taking the long way round as if
(and this is an inside joke with Liz)
I am surveying my estate's condition.

2

In an enclosed green along the Heath
two pretty young mothers remove
their clothes, down to bikini undies
and their children into bathing suits
dimpling voices blending with the other birds
in tree limbs as into the thick grass waves
they sink.

The sun is no more than a shilling
in the roil of clouds. The way they lift
their faces you'd think it was the tropics.

O lyric imagination
England's necessary soul.

•

Near Keats House a familiar manse
where a Rolls in the driveway was washed
by a chamois chauffeur in knee boots
and that's the way I remember it.

Now empty and building on (reconversion
is rampant) and freshly painted gray
and across the door of the double garage
these blocked in black letters:

BOREDOM IS EVERYWHERE

But o there is also the crystal air
the serenity of green the bustle of birds
in the cathedral of trees
along these wellworn walks.

•

This attic room is all I need.
All the other lives I lead
now simplified to one.
A place to sleep to wash
a bite to eat and then the pub.
Cheers.

Dominoes.

Dear

old Bottle nose Ken
master mechanic of Bentley and Rolls
sharing his snuff from regency silver
his body is betraying him but his wit
is sturdiest of the lot
funny old world says he
telling us of his Friday cobalt shot
and how his daughter's goldfish nibbles
his finger and does a somersault
and he looks at the dour dog staring
up at him, jowls on paw, leash in mouth
and says: put spectacles on him
and he'll deliver the Sunday sermon . . .

Sylvester, night custodian seaman linguist,
the halo of his white quixotic head
and Ron Brown gent's furnisher in a neat
foulard and shaggy pyramid
of thick moustache and sideburns
and Jack the cockney catalyst
and journalist and now a civil servant
impatient with the tiles that click
too slow in the easy banter
and loving every minute of it.

•

My turn in the chair
and Henry Martin the publican
who taught me first principles
of accent and order
relishes my rote:

Three jay c's by the neck, Guinness
by the neck and 'alf a draft keg
Henry please.

In the lull a break for the loo
where the graffiti is prime.

. . . This Wall Should Be Published . . .

I remember the sheet of ice here
and wobbling my initials in it.

●

Feeling mellow I try my hand at darts
my favorite sport ten years ago
but now Jack would rather domino
a smashing girl watches my throw
uplifting my John Couraged ego
but when I turn it is to realize
that she and her friend, a boy,
are waiting patiently for me to go
leaving them the board.

●

Liz the picasso of culinary art
never doing the same dish twice
tonight it's casserole italienne
appropriate wines with fruit and cheese
in front of the telly news.

The names of the makers have changed haha
from Kennedy to Nixon
the Cuban Crisis then
now Watergate just around the bend
followed by a documentary
the Battle of Kursk, 1943.

Over brandy immerse
in the ripeness of discussions
the changing standards
materialism
the quality of life

and so to bed, up top
and I am in a trance
no duties no swords of damocles
am I out of it or into it

Something in the air here
echoes from a long long history
still and eternal: accept, be beyond surprise
but nimble: make the best of everything:

and isn't it the best
here in the night air
eddyng inside out
seawinds washing the isle.

In the maze of untouched woods
finding the pond the white bridge
the green lawn peaking Kenwood
o the understated House

the floorboards immaculate restored
and waxed squeak as crepe soles turn
the corner. And there, casually hanging
on a sidewall near the window, Rembrandt.
Pilgrim, hold thy breath.

Same old brown fur collar.
same old undershirt
and turban jaunty as a crown.

Past technique past brushstroke
paunch like a dipping planet
on which his palette rests.

He studies my face.
I study his
still wet with life:

the twinkle at the edge of lip
one eye inquisitive
the other a dark hole in space
questioning showing

time is fantasy
life the eternal child.

Eternity bellowing in and bellying out.

The oil the flesh the skin dissolve.
Smile. Wait. Weep. Breathe. Nod
and turn, tingling
with his eyes, knowing he knows
I will come again, knowing I know
he will be there always
sketching the daily parade
of portraits.

A biog of Russell under my head
I doze on the monumental green of lawn
behind my lids a vision of a goddess
in tight jeans and a quivering teeshirt
mowing the grass
while the rest
of the ground crew, oblivious
turns the tide of flowers
in the moistened beds.

I find my way out through the forest maze
awed at the roots like thighs of titans
and tree trunk arms that lift
a canopy of greenleaf sky.

I want to plunge
deep beside those graygreen
roots to where they touch the center
of the earth's atomic eye.

Vale of Health.

Byron Villas.

D. H. Lawrence Lived Here in 1915
Poet And Novelist

Tagore in 1912

A barechested man pats his dog
in the sun a woman on the doorstep
combs and trims her hair

No evidence that it is six decades
later in this cul de sac filled with light
like a pint of lemon squash. Not the clothes
(man in pants and slippers, woman
in velour robe, dog indifferent furred)
no autos choking the lane
only the blue disc of commemory
pinned to the rustbrick wall.

There is something in the concentration here
that man: his dog, that woman, her hair
that sun: small stopper for the jar
and me: shooting from the hip.

I pull out my pad. Word sketch.
And for some reason I make a note
about nothing I have seen, all of which goes
unrecorded, except in memory, the reservoir
of creativity (according to the Joyce
who lived in Trieste erecting Dublin)
Instead, there's this:
the man with an obsession
is more interesting than
the moderate balanced man.

interlude

The attic windows rattle
it's the predawn wind
outside the panes.

I sink back, sure that the house awake's
asleep again a channel raid all clear

swept with a plumbline of serenity
the rightness of solitude now.

Variations on postcards sent home:

wandering
withdrawn
contemplating
soaking up

neither beer nor birds
listening to songs without words

going sane

listen:
seedsounds

The string is playing out.

late prelude

1

Time goes on, the hours, the days.
I make the calls I've been delaying
that take me out of Hampstead.
The dreams are fading
the centre slipping away
Wesker in Highgate
Mike H in Regents Park

phone surrounded and client foldered
and a call from a film group
his empire building
and Anne is with her mum who's had a stroke
and the au pair's with the kids at the zoo
and it's funny how Mike his head filled with data
his acres of books and music and art
that he reads and buys and looks at
and listens to and the five per cent
that's there in front of you makes real contact
a decent bloke, I'm very fond of Mike
you must see Lower Depths says he
and he dials in a seat for me.

•

the motions take over

the 24 bus red as royal slippers
moves out from south end green

(even the capitals are diminishing)

on agincourt road a young priest
with a pipe in his mouth
and a smiling brow
is waving his flock down the weathered steps

a rolls with baronial crest floats by below

up front is naughty lysander
bad boy lysander sit still

behind me, americans drawl:

- I don't like this city.
- ?
- The reason I wasn't so annoyed with Paris
it was a novelty.
- This isn't a novelty?
- No.
- What was such a novelty about Paris?
- I don't know.

a young pair matching shag.

•

the rsc did well by gorki
marvelously well old max
though luka was a bit too much
like an anglican bishop

instead of the strand
to trafilgar square
take the embankment along the thames

the pubs are closing it's late eleven
I envy the couples close hugging
and some real drunk and some just playing
tiddly, group songs

from the river a smell of woodrot and oil
and stone tunnels are j arthur
rank with piss

boats whose lit skirts gild the river

westminster and ben in a postcard sky

and nelson is shafting the lowslung
bottom of the slategray clouds

london tarts itself up
but the bells are gone

ebb and flow

time to go.

So what could be fitter
on a last Sunday summer
this trip to Britain
than cricket.

In a convoy of chirrupy cars
Jack's club (Pretenders) a crew
of motley talents and life's walks
makes Potter's Bar its rendezvous.

Lemme hit a few
says I and Jack bowls
sneaky and twisting away.
It's not a baseball he warns
and I swipe at a couple then belt one
a country mile (as we say) across the plain.

O, says Jack, tight smile, well done.
Lucky, says I, passing Barbara, the volunteer
scribe for the club. She whispers: enemy for life.

I sit at the boundary's edge.
I've been told the rules by Jack
and I can see the fascination
the dramatic architecture
pauses and silences and fissures
and then: eruption

howzat?! screams the bowler, leaping high
all limbs spredeagling toward the wicket
outstared by the umpire graven behind it.

Hour after hour.
Over follows over.
Batsmen skedaddle.
Leisurely catches and rocketing shots.

In the western hills the shadows deepen.

A posse of dog disappears in high green
a man with a walking stick follows them.

●
Lithe as a lotus in black corduroy
one of the ladies silently yogas

her blanket a focus for those of the batsmen
lounging on careless elbows, waiting their turn.

Used as I am to the native conversation
I am surprised by the lack of it here.
The other team is quiet too. Neither
the game nor the yoga nor each other.
Murmuring mesmery.

My own voice startles me
and shakes Barbara like a bird from a tree:

“ . . . I guess it is all happening — out there.”

Barbara dissolves. And the remark makes
the rounds. Destined to become a classic.
What the American said. I wonder why.

A farthing of sun unlocks the sky.

And I find myself releasing
as if it is a hand of Buddha
spinning the endlessly spirally curve.

Tea break. The low wooden shack
smells of dog and chemical fertilizer.
Sifting into the chalky sandwiches.
There is no talk of the game.
The teams intermingle. No sense of contest
and Jack, not one for clichés, repeats one:
“ . . . a way of life, this.”

Doesn't anybody want to win?
One doesn't say so.

And after the break Jack hits for twenty
to a good round of handclaps and he can't help
looking pleased, my lusty old friend.

●
I pace the boundary
passing the lawn chairs sacked
with women.

Liz hasn't moved since the match began
at the turn of the century. Barbara
is frozen to her pencil stub.
Skins turning blue.

(I think of their ancestors
perhaps it wasn't paint
but adaptation to environment)

I shiver too.

envoi

And as the shadows in the hills go dark
and dark goes Potter's Bar, the silences
thicken and the white costumed figures
gloom out of focus and stop like a photo

a frieze on some wall of the future
the peking museum of british antiquities

only the zenlike sound of a cracking bat
a hammerless pistol zinging
over the faraway blur
of the cricketing

sunset

cheerio

londontown

londontown.