

The Woman in the Leeds Cafe 1970

I promised her some white heather, the lucky kind.
I'd hitched from London, lifts were few and hard to find.
I'd ended up in Leeds and so I thought I'd have a bite to eat
and found this caff, went in, and took a seat.
I ordered something, what, I can't recall.
Surprising I remember anything at all.

*I like you Scots, she said, and handed me my tea.
And love that white heather, and smiled at me.*

*We have it in the garden, I said. I'll send you some.
I'll stick it in the post when I get home.*

Did I remind her of a young man long ago
who came and went?
And that white heather?
It was never sent.

John Gordon

Heather

She could do it herself –
fumble a spray and twist it
in tin foil. She could pass it
to her hand, from her hand.
She could even say their words:
Be lucky, love.

She knows that's not the way
it works. She missed the trick.
If she could just get back,
she thinks, to Lands Lane
where the buses stopped –
where she was sixteen, smiling
away those offerings of heather
week after week
as though life would bring her
abundance, as if she had no need.

Be lucky, love they call
over and over as she slips through,
slips past those urgent outstretched gifts.

Rachel Curzon

The Ship

The barman asked us what we wanted,
what we were doing there.
You said we'd come to have a look around.

We'd been to a guitar shop,
now we were killing time,
though who of us has any time to kill?

Of course we didn't know it then
for all days are much the same:
we get up, go to work, and come back home.

I recall that day was sunny
as we waited for the girls
and had a pint and chatted, as you do.

The place seems dark and gloomy
when I think back on it now,
though the wood and brass were charming at the time.

You said it had been there for years
and would be here when we're gone.
You didn't know how soon you'd prove it true.

You'd worked and taught and played guitar,
You'd watch a film or two,
You'd go and see United play at home.

You loved your music and your pals,
you liked a pint as well,
and by the end you didn't want for more.

John Gordon

Middlethorne

We went away for a spell. We did things in the interim: grew out of knee socks; rode on aeroplanes; made ruinous marriages. We didn't think about it.

When we came back, it was accidentally, and to nothing we remembered. They'd put a dozen houses on the Science block – or perhaps it was the all-weather pitch? The Hall was full of cul-de-sac. The hill where the Head's black Lab would flop back and forth after his revolting ball was a double garage, or utility room. It was discomfiting.

Having given no thought to them for years, we needed those walls and windows. We needed them now. We might have likened it to finding our particular treasures set, haphazard, on a lawn – the cabinet that had held them vanished, or smashed to firewood. It was not enough to turn vaguely about on a block-paving driveway and say, *This is where Mrs Grace screamed at us for putting our fingers in the food processor*. We trailed the postmen through the raw streets, looking in on amaryllis and wall-mounted televisions. There was a feeling of lostness.

We grew suspicious. We felt ourselves shift. Was it true that Kevin Ellis had opened a textbook to a harpooned whale and said, *I'd like to twat them all*? Had Mrs Walker insisted that we pronounce that one word '*kes-ti-onn-aire*', as if we were suddenly, selectively French? Could we have been banned from Art?

We touched our foreheads to the smart conservatories and murmured how, just on that spot, we'd played Bash the Rat to help to patch the hole in Maria's heart. We had. We'd sent her to America. There'd been a postcard of Niagara Falls. The tannoy sounded – like a doorbell, or a bird. It was getting dark.

We went home slowly, thinking to look in our parents' loft and bottom drawers for photographs. When we arrived at our house we could see that the beech hedge was taller, and there was a carport with a corrugated plastic roof. A ceramic tortoise sat in the corner of the lawn. And of course, when we knocked, it was a stranger who came to the door.

Rachel Curzon

Changes

It's something we accept,
the way things vanish from our lives:
the pub, the bus stop, old school room,
the path that led to your front door.
And yet a blink, a heartbeat, and they're back,
exactly as they were before.

Places, people and ideas,
they disappear for years
then reappear in memory but
they fool us to our cost.
We think we know about our past,
but it's just everything we've lost.

I could see it in her eyes, the lack of recognition;
and that she knew that I had seen.
We find it hard to look beyond
the now to what has been.

You haven't changed a bit, she said.
And what she said was true.
But she was both right and wrong:
our lives point out our narrowness of view.

John Gordon

Standing Before The Lady

You tell me how the long years turn
as though your rich room were a zoetrope –
as though the world were just a jumping trick.

I know, I tell you, all of it.

You dream of circles. Look, you say.
The window is a porthole, and the matching mirror
drags each bright joy to it like a sun.

It's true, I say. I watched them come.

They gave me golden threads for toys,
you sigh. They would have tried to lead me somewhere
if I'd ever thought to follow them.

You spun, I answer, widdershins.

I didn't touch the glass, you say.
You're weeping now, or laughing. Which is it?
You were ambivalent; you didn't know...

These things sometimes happen, though.

You watched it crack. You heard it split
to make a shape like something taking wing.
Pity lifts my hand to touch your dress...

You turn. Our twin palms meet at glass.

Rachel Curzon

*John William Waterhouse's 1894 painting, 'Lady of Shalott', hangs
in Leeds Art Gallery.*

There's No Place

My Lady Lane is never one you'd know,
with *The Regal*
and the *Cellar Bar*;
and Great George Street, so steep;
I remember one winter, that sliding sideways car!

Queen Street with the poet's house,
its roof of thatch
that went on fire;
and King Street where a girlfriend lived;
the crematorium close by.

These places that can seem familiar,
I'm almost sure
you've never seen.
You understand the words
but don't know what they mean.

There *is* no place like home.

As I might do with monkey
or with pack,
all the homes I've ever known
I carry, snail-like, on my back.

John Gordon

Leads to Leeds

Looking back, I think the sky still had me.
How else to explain the way I tried
to make for home, but found myself waylaid –
or hoaxed, perhaps – by this insistent journey?
You'd say I was following a ghost.
Flight attendants smiled me on my way,
and let me sleepwalk to the fastest train
to take me to the city we loved most.
The station cut me loose at last to show me
how a place can change and be unchanging.
All the windows lit themselves to prove
you were not there. But, like a blind thing
feeling for the light it used to love,
I searched a street that couldn't claim to know me.

Rachel Curzon