

landscape

by Val Whittington

May half term – at Kingston

plants in the boot - ones we'd found
by the honesty box in the lane

geraniums, cucumber, celery and mint
amidst the end of semester

we climbed the hill behind the pub.
English village stuck to our feet
we trudged the hill

one third of the way
in the hard long grass
against the hill's flint knuckles
we spread jackets and sat

the golden valley held the door of night ajar
dusk and the blowsy May
dug wells in our weary selves

while all around white hawthorn bloomed

unrepentant

Autumn Walk - Woodingdean

wide fields my feet have never crossed
a view of twenty miles or more of coast
a far and high horizon
great tankers and container ships
piled with the work of men's and women's and robot hands,
things made for sale migrate
like birds that follow not seasons, but sea lanes
I breathe in the breeze, and see rain falling
far distant over Portslade and Worthing
There the livid orange clouds hang like the pall of battle
while here the sun is bright and the clouds shift by
Marilyns stepping out of salons
great bouncing curls, and full of light
They stride as if to dazzle the admiring sky
in the blue suit, who always hangs by

suddenly in the valley
not another sign of human life
except the path itself and fence.
Your sore-eared dog drops his head to walk
uphill into the tugging wind
on the Downs

Jackdaws - Ovingdean

jackdaws chirrup like dolphins
riding the air overhead together
a pair match each other's moves and land
on chalk footholds against the cliff

the music is loud
happy folky dance bands
bounce my heels, re-spring my tight calves
and when I stand nose to air
watching the jackdaws weave
- air skaters, a dancing pair - as welcome as larks

descending the afternoon
darkening from the east
below high grey cloud

the peace aligned on this undercliff
this present ground the gifted air
where sea grinds all my bones
I am entirely here

Summer – at Devil's Dyke

I have not written this
not yet
perhaps – perhaps it should not

walking across the hilltop
too sunny, too hot
But I walk – guilty
friendly I walk

We talk
in light intense
July broils us as we tramp hard grass
thumping the chalk with our hot feet
while the light gets brighter

We talk

I know you do not know
I know
I was told – 'perhaps
you could go for a walk'
Perhaps I could - just talk
But I think this is
the light
the sun
the talk
too light
for me to know you've thought of suicide
our chat too much off that track
instead we are on this
hard pressed chalk
so bright it hurts our eyes

We face the slice of
long remorseless Dyke

as jolly walkers who smile or nod
avoid 'morning' or 'afternoon' because
at this peak we are at neither
only one foot after another

You are as tired as I
the sun is exploding
on the long hot Downs

The silent places we go – Beacon Hill, The Undercliff walk, Friston forest

The places we go, the chalk hill, sea or forest
are all alike, speaking in tongues
our sleep mode ears suddenly woken by larks
mark the rise and fall of wind and distant traffic
Lark song layered with close-by dog and dogwalker
silent butterflies drift across the grass
house martins swing like batons in conductors' hands
The ears are listening attentively
This is a canopy for moments
when sudden by the road the wind drops and we
stand with the grounded larks all around and with them also
Listen

Beside the sea, lapping deep
walking by stark white and blue, under chalk cliffs,
the flat concrete path whirring with cyclists
more in themselves than in the world
they bring impatient bells stark as triangles
– slow bullets whizzing past
against the whispering summer breeze you hear
tread upon flint, the sliding rubble of shifting rock
not shingle, not sand, the noise that flint and chalk
together make – a rumbling echo of shellfish bones and fern
the mash of millennia stirring in its mineral tomb

The shifting sea - Its gentle surge
strokes the chalk edge of beach
before the landscape of rock pools rise
and the stumps of teeth emerge worn down
from the draining mouth of the sea.
Breathing out upon the stones, then resting,
the deep release between breath
that hangs an age, then panic-less draws
towards its rising and receding belly.
The sea makes silence seem easy, lazy,
indifferent to cyclists' bells.
The sea, remembered wild
in lifting rage and falling fury
now calmly lolls its tongue, rolls the silence
between gentle laps, between its soft lips
it shifts, effortlessly.

And distant Friston, hot and still
closes its eyes as light breaks through
in a thousand shafts, unknown birds
make calls unrecognised
speaking decisively, but not for us
their sparse chatter does not fly in flocks
though human voices carry, and the feet of children
between the trees break twigs abruptly
when you turn a forest corner they fade
and the woods listen for that lull
between the sea's breaths and behind the wind -
as we do on the chalk hill, after the larks have grounded
we have imagined silence

Winter – Ditchling Beacon

between the barrows
the winding road and the horses resting points
clacking gates and claggy shoes
and the great lake of fields above which
from the car park's rim
a busy thoroughfare of men on expensive bikes
of women running with dogs
and then more dogs
and breath clouds upon the air
where people lie down
to watch meteor showers

the visible souls

Some days silently
53 men walk over the hill from the Chatri
to share a glimpse of their past life
the one that ended
here

On Beacon Hill

On Beacon Hill a Saxon warrior
lay not far from the barrows
On Beacon Hill are war and death as well as larks

On Beacon Hill I say hello
to the redundant windmill
its sails are stuck
I say hello from Jack and Jill
who stand like you at Clayton

But the windmill says it does not know them,
and if it did, it would ignore them
its eyes are on the turbines
in formation
the approaching Armada
gathering offshore

the windmill watches them
entirely still but turning