

PILGRIM

DAVID SWARBRICK



THE
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PRESS

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FOR SIMON AND BEATA

WRITTEN IN & AROUND
LANGOLD HOUSE
BENEATH THE NORTH DOWN'S
PILGRIM'S WAY,
IN BIRLING, KENT
FROM 1977 & AFTER.

1

in tight lines
a dozen houses
line the winter wheat –

already:

frail bungalows
with front lawns,
at the village edge;

homes, already,

transitory as inns,
and clamped
to a new access road
that slices
through the down.

diggers have quarried
the chalk -
upended it;
torn out the clay beneath -
heavy, dark,
greasy as abattoir meat
embedded with flints,
clewing
to a long-departed sea.

in a web of cul-de-sacs,
of silent gardens

of chipboard walls

history is being forgotten;

the land is practising
how to die.

SNODLAND, MARCH 1977

2

clouds clog
the river's fallen level -

a dry day
at the furthest edge
of summer;

at the month's
almost-final,
almost-end-point,

flat and still;

indestructible.

hay,
cropped in silent meadows
rests in long gold lines;

the battles to be fought
are far away;
nothing is corruptible;

now is all there is.

THE RIVER BEULT, AUGUST 1977

3

wade
in the corn waves
undisturbed;

come home -
there is no toll;

the hip-grass
will conceal and recall;

fearing no fall,
the dusty green
will restore the world,

its marks, its scars -

bring it
to a field of sun -

to this home,
crushed out
within it.

NEAR CRANBROOK, AUGUST 1977

4

of course
there are grander things
than this Victorian rebuilding
of medieval stone;

but not for me.

for eight years i have been
its steadfast visitor,

a pilgrim of sorts,
returning to a place
where nothing
is urgent;

where custom points,
like transepts,
to the enfolding
fields and woods
first written in Doomsday.

THE CHURCH OF ALL SAINTS, BIRLING,
MARCH 1978

5

amongst the few remaining leaves
of last year's autumn,

daffodils shake
in a slight breeze;

they lord it over the wilderness -

the stone angel
drowsy under moss;

the mausoleums,
rectangular, preoccupied;

the crooked tombstones,
dreaming of places
other than this;

the sleeping columbaria
spread between
the shot green shavings
of recent trees -

defiant,
redeeming.

BIRLING CHURCHYARD, MARCH 1978

6

winter rain
has darkened
the hayrick's sides;

now
a nine-hour sun
expands upon it,

restores it,
saves it
with lengthening days;

returning all.

SNODLAND, MAY 1978

7

only
on the road
between the trees;

only
on Birling Hill
do i evade
the day;

slip the sun
under leaf;
freewheel
on the scarp,

believing only
in Cistern Wood and Coney Shaw,
in Stonebridge and Ley;

in the fields that flit by,

worshipping only
the swift
dark woods,

the down's allegiant
oak, and beech, and chestnut -

saved by speed
each time
i turn into
the ceaseless haze.

ON BIRLING HILL, JUNE 1978

8

now
the cool weaves
white;

the high day
ends;

the ridge
simplifies;

the downland
tightens –

a narrow gate,
darkly green -

trees open
to an ageless sky;

a time for nightjars, nightingales,
sparrowhawks;

and i am
washed away.

TROTTISCLIFFE, JUNE 1978

9

this is a road
for sunday walkers,
wanderlusts
who go just so far,
their communion curtailed
by an absence of magic,

fitted in
between reading the papers
and lunch,

as is customary now.

THE SNODLAND TO BIRLING ROAD, JUNE
1978

10

clouds shift;

over the hill
the moon swells,

the grass,
dark this side,
lights up -

ignites a sudden thoroughfare
showing me the way,
night by night,
as i cycle sections
of the old pilgrim road,

all difficulties shattered,

past fields of clover, cowslip;
past Blackbusshe, Badgells Wood,

past the Battle of Britain cross,
and the ageless unruly hedgerows
of coppiced chestnut.

THE WHITE HORSE ROAD, BIRLING, JULY
1978

11

they're burning
the fields
now the summer's
slipped away;

heads of corn
feed the flames
in places
where we lay;

and we are lost
where we now walk -

we, the vagabonding lords.

CLARE HOUSE, EAST MALLING, SEPTEMBER
1978

12

in drenching morning dew
i read –

the winter mists;

the long sad autumn
readying itself –

a last hurrah,
sweeter than sweet –

and I run,
doing all I wish for.

CLARE HOUSE, EAST MALLING, SEPTEMBER
1978

13

overnight
the tree has fallen –

the warrior sleeps;

wind shakes his tent;

the stitching of his blanket
break;

leaves fuss,

leaves rearrange
their shattered shade
upon his form;

armour
crumples at his side;

he is still,
completed, finished;

his Avalon
a meadow,
of long grasses
flickering and shifting
as shoals of fleeting fish.

BIRLING, SEPTEMBER 1979

14

walking
through the churchyard
i see the mother;

last night's rain
has washed
the prints of mourners
from her side;

through needles of yew;

through the barest
tight green hints
of hawthorn buds,

the quiet churchyard
moves, ordered,
to its modern quarter

and the stones
are smaller,
smoother –

remembered,
attended;

adorned with flowers,
wrapped in plastic,

as if all her friends
had left their home made dainties
by her grave,

a tea party,
itinerant and full of grace -

gone, but not forgotten.

BIRLING CHURCHYARD, FEBRUARY 1979

15

i should be sleeping in this hot,
this steady night -

yet I walk:

I am cycling, travelling;

I am
on and off my bike;

I am
peddling, pacing,

watching
the line of the downs
that floats on one side,
a coastline
keeping safe
a small ship
without compass,
without telescope.

the road is silver, small, tight
the land shines, flat,
stretching into a smooth
unbound swelling;

lifting to five hundred feet,

to fields of flint and wheat
laid out on river grit and chalk

on clay,
on sand -

taking me in like Simenon.

travellers tracks disappear
through oats and barley;

Medway streams
tumble underground
traced in ghost ponds
and in the depressions left
by medieval stews.

it is one, two, maybe three
in the morning;

I move through the old manor
that the first queen visited
before it burnt to the ground,

I move
through all that is saved,
a domain of night animals,
of roe deer, bats and badgers,
owls, otters;
of the fox and the rabbits
the Normans left behind;

and the covet blue hawks
that come from time to time.

BIRLING MANOR, MAY 1979

16

in steady nights,
my sleep emboldened,

the watcher, tamed,
attends on me -

flings the windows
wide and open

knowing what to keep out,
what to let in -

my dreams
form no mean wish;
are no more unguarded -
set now to what I will.

BIRLING, JUNE 1979

17

now,
a wide, white sun
bonds the atoms
of the air
into a wall;

with a million blades
of grass
lawns mass
from the house;

the three windowed room
encloses upon itself -
a land of sun-bleached chairs,
a gillow table
set with an unfinished game.

a car arrives;

in the green
i hears the shuffling gravel
grind in its place,

but cannot move
and am unseen.

LANGOLD HOUSE, BIRLING, JULY 1979

18

curl in your nest
stamp and arrange
the crop;
form
your place with me -
immersed,
at the very centre
of the field,

under the downland
where no one
will ever look.

we are invisible.

BIRLING, JULY 1979

19

bully-new grass
spears the winter lawn;

on the walls
new ivy spreads,
establishing its right;

winter jasmine,
like a crown of gold,
hangs over the door -

and all
that will be,

will be
unstoppable.

LANGOLD HOUSE, MARCH 1981

20

push the door,
push, push the door;
press, press
into the unlocked
open
outside;

it is easy as air;
heaping more on each move
than ever i cast off -

it is almost summer;

the air is green.

LANGOLD HOUSE, KENT, MAY 1981

21

i could love death
creating this place;

across fields
the spire is blunt and warm;

the clock imprecise;

the new cut grass
already white again with daises -

a modest pagan immortality
that comes,
that goes
unnoticed.

BIRLING CHURCHYARD, MAY 1981

22

taste it,
take it,
devour it –

this time of sun and fields,
as once it was,
without doors –

wordless,
a life
that cannot end.

LANGOLD HOUSE, KENT, MAY 1981

23

through the
down hearted garden –

best now,

buds,
break -

buds
burst -

buds
shed their raw and feral scent.

LANGOLD HOUSE, MAY 1981

24

the
Wife
of Bath,
she had no hearth
and
this
road
was
her
stay.

HOLLY HILL TO PILGRIM'S WAY, BIRLING, MAY
1981

25

neatly,
the Ryarsh road
embarks on its wild wanderings -

a willing,
unexceptional odyssey,

moving through orchards
hops;

branching off to other villages,
to Small Profit Shaw and Stoney Wood,
to hamlets, breweries, sawmills,
lone farms,
dead-end fields
beneath the rising downs;

and open gates
where I can enter
certain now
that this was it,

the fixed imperishable
chambers of the long barrow
sheltering the family,
abridging four millennia
to yesterday.

TROTTSCLIFFE BARROW, JULY 1981

26

you sit
across the tennis court,
a broken bamboo chair,
casting the late sun
like prison bars,

pliable on the grass.

weary with magic,
we are summoned to die
time and again.

the light thickens and dims,
falling from its own accord,

sweeter than sweet.

LANGOLD HOUSE, AUGUST 1981

27

on the rising
line of dawn
the sun leaves
a single star.

LANGOLD HOUSE, AUGUST 1981

28

upstairs
the infant sleeps -
sheets thrown back,
fringe stuck
in a summer sweat.

LANGOLD HOUSE, AUGUST 1981

29

there is no need to dream;

it is not difficult
to return –

open wide any window -

witness how the light
still falls across the grass
from the room above;

how the high downland
carries the path
the travellers took,

weaving purposefully
between trees,
hedgerow;

presenting no difficulty
to their progress –

look,
see:

it is all still here.

LANGOLD HOUSE, AUGUST 1981

30

from farm to farm,
field to field –

what is it
at the end
of all that done –

that slips the tether,
makes the future part
of what's already been done,

finishing it all
before the barn
is filled with wheat and barley?

LANGOLD HOUSE, OCTOBER 1981

31

we rest

in these last
open-ended hours,

we rest;

we move,
room to room,

until this room
lifts from hands
their final tasks -

cleared tables, stacked dishes -

now with coffee
we talk -
the quiet house found –
straight as a gate
pushing out the frosty dark.

LANGOLD HOUSE, DECEMBER 1981

32

all afternoon
we have sat here
under a roof of leaves
reading, talking, smoking,

from lunch to tennis,

tennis to tea,

the air smells of grass;

the trees are subtle
with this start of summer.

LANGOLD HOUSE, MAY 1982

33

flames
reflect on windows;

twist in the fireplace;

a late autumn wind
rattles the casement windows.

the summer has gone.

around Langold
the turned fields of clay
are full of new flint
glinting like grails.

LANGOLD HOUSE, NOVEMBER 1982

34

in Holly Barrow
by Holly Henge;

in Dode's black rooms
the tenants lodge
around the church
the Conqueror's son
had built.

soulful
solstice stone
guard the old beginnings,
mark the martyr's proclamation,
the points of pilgrimages
that came to a sudden end.

DODE, NOVEMBER 1982

35

buds,
break new

break green

break best –

spin colour

span time;

and the weary
rest.

LANGOLD HOUSE, APRIL 1983

36

now it is cold
the love returns,

a lost inheritance
warm as the tall blue skies
in a waste of ice;

i can bathe naked,
and nakedly,
begin without a start.

LANGOLD HOUSE, JANUARY 1983

37

i know you,

and i know too
that today
you are still standing there
in the shadows
under the linden tree
where the drive turns
from the lane
towards the yellow house;

i know who
will come through
the large glass doors,

who will wake
in the nursery
as the afternoon cools,

who will gather
under the laburnum trees
for tea
forever.

OXFORD, MAY 1998

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, broadcaster and writer. He was born in Colombo and lives in Sri Lanka and the UK by way of India, Singapore, the Middle East, Wales, Scotland and Sweden.