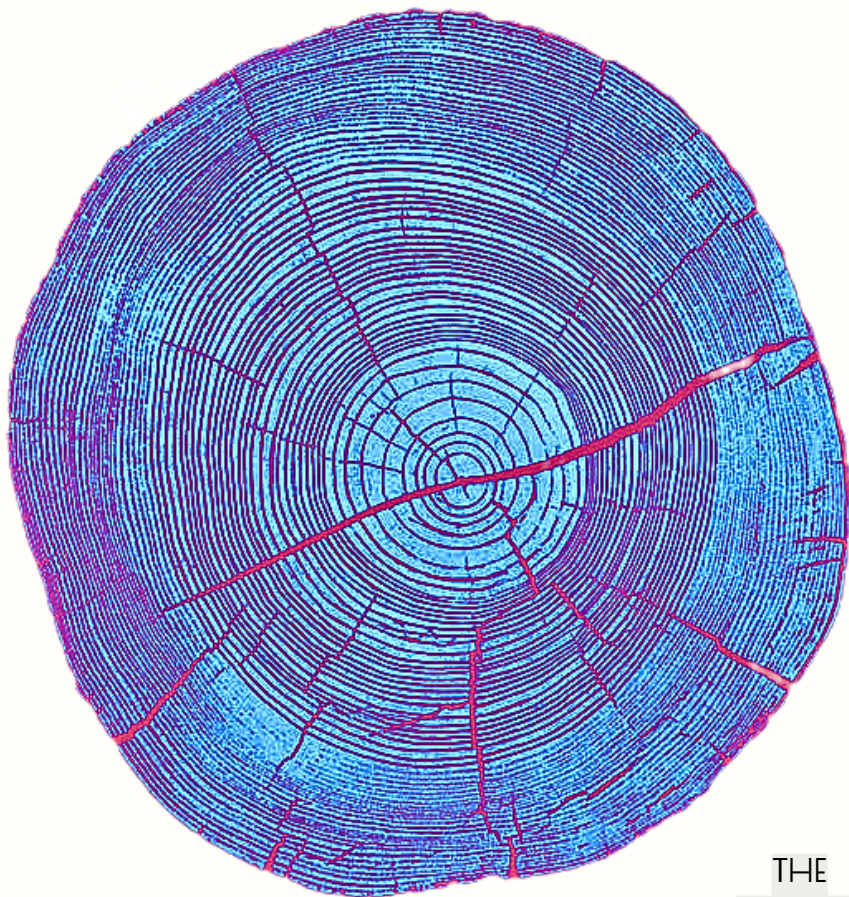


GREATER STILL

DAVID SWARBRICK



THE
CEYLON
PRESS

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FOR MARK

SANISH SINCE BOARDING SCHOOL

1. NOT HERE

Still dark,
thin curtains resist
a taut March sky;

my room is uncompleted –
unoccupied; my possessions
shrink beside books, clothes,
stuff left here by others –

and because you are not near -

not in this village or the next –
not in this thin doctored place
so far from the southern Weald –

because we are not here –

my body moves,
a blind man,
proving the place,
calculating distances
between here and there –

a bleak, discordant siren
enticing me to stay,
with a nonsense song:

that there is no other way.

BEDFORDSHIRE, MARCH 1979

2. EDGE

Ploughed fields
force me to the edge –

a destitute land,
barren and friendless –

hedgerows of briar and blackthorn
stiff as razor palisades,

a slammer
of bare trees, flooded ruts
thick, greasy, drowning mud

and a thin, slashing horsewhip wind
to keep at bay my breakout.

BEDFORDSHIRE, MARCH 1979

3. CEDED

i

Light haemorrhages,
bleeds through brooding trees, though copse.
We await the storm.

ii

Sound of the quiet moor -
small hours of dark certainties,
sleepless, terminal.

iii

This, the toughest place,
a night long anvil smashing
every dream that comes.

iv

He has let the room –
and now a watcher steals
everything he knows.

v

Come and commandeer
this world, that world, take them all
we have an excess.

vi

Lift, scatter, dust, wind
down the ragged station cold,
strangers ever stirring.

vii

Blue electric crown –
by the sky, I bring you close:
it covers us both.

BEDFORDSHIRE, MARCH 1979

4. CEASELESS

A cloudless blue
invites a house, long-lost -
honoured guest, seated,

air still as whispers,

friends dining in candlelight;

a record playing,
photographs shuffled -

as if a kindly cardsharp
dealt redeeming kings

LANGOLD HOUSE, SUMMER 1979

5. BOMB

Green fists of bud
lurch towards summer -

bring me
to Sussex Downs
laid on chalk,
cut sheer -
tracks to the sea.

I lie -
toes out,
following patterns
on the waves;
following people
spreading towels;
following families
sweating in a salty breeze -
sun pilgrims, returning
with plastic bags
and floppy hats.

The day has killed their talk;
there is only
the sexy grass
beneath bare feet -
vast smooth fields
below a prosperous sky -
a measureless ocean -
the smell of summer, spreading
like a blast.

BEECHY HEAD, JUNE 1981

6. SCHOOL

Overnight, our schools
have become strewn streets
in ruined cities -

lessons taken
by looted shops, gutted cars –

classrooms reached
down roads burning
with debris from the night before;

the playground, a hearth
of petrol flames shared on television;
the curriculum recast
by ragged warriors
in cities north to south –

even unobtrusive towns
have traded in
their silence for slogans,
as if all this
could ever start
a new term.

LANGOLD HOUSE, JULY 1981

7. BUSTED

This room is busted –
this house is broken –
bolted, a trail of
bricks and masonry.

Barbed wire,
red with rust,
defines the edges
of a disappearing drive

Birds call -
boundlessly friendless.

LANGOLD HOUSE, JULY 1981

8. PETITION

Forgive us –
say a prayer –
let's dine on blood.

Give us this day our daily bread -

the man haemorrhaging
his life on bags of spilt basmati rice.

All kingdom come -

unhallowed bodies
bobbing downriver; lepers
trespassing the garden gates
(dry to the right, wet to the left).

The Power and the Glory -
the corpse delivered from evil
on a jute bier of marigolds,
weaving through traffic.

Ever and ever -
scraps of horse and jockey
minced on earth by a Naxalite bomb,
bound for heaven,

Thy will be done.

LANGOLD HOUSE, JULY 1981

9. TRIBUTE

i
This makeshift air, choked.
The dreams the old men held dear,
mountains poised to rise.

ii
Tapers are unlit;
the altar is empty now,
its trinkets packed away.

iii
Summer twists the knife –
leaves an unwieldy wilderness,
a wreath, remembered.

iv
Still he assails,
as if love would ever be
an explanation.

LANGOLD HOUSE, JULY 1981

10. FICTION

Why let him dream
when really –
he cannot;
 why

let him think
that he will live
without end,
 that

he will draw
the flame from fire,
 that

he can take it
to the shadow –
to the silver
in the dim –
to burn
forevermore?

LANGOLD HOUSE, JULY 1981

11. KID

Oh, little boy -
Oh, little boy -
what do you think
of me?

I've no time
to hold the world up –
I'm too busy –
don't you see?

SUSSEX, AUGUST 1981

12. HIM, HE, US

This is the best view!

He walked into the room -
and it was his.

He walked
into the air and trees –
into the walls of an old barn
and they were his.

You are me,
said the View.

The blades of grass,
the ancient sea
agreed -
viewing the View
that was he.

We are one and indivisible
cried the priest,
smiling
into outstretched hands.

The bricks of the house -
that knew no other form
but that of clay -
were glad,
and called to the rocks below –

mother, father, sister, brother
we are sky.

Praise be!

LANGOLD HOUSE, JULY 1981

13. LATER

i
Here now, this child,
undaunted by any debt,
or speculation

ii
The tree is lost now.
Thickets and webs of bramble
hide its tough witness.

iii
No one will find you.
Lounge and laugh in the long grass
till the day is dark.

iv
Later, he put aside
all the things that made him yours –
yet the old day dawns.

v
A fascination;
never by windows can I
just watch you walking.

LANGOLD HOUSE. APRIL 1982

14. PULL

We have been divided
when – precisely – you bred
another life, another death
inside of you.

Year by year
I shut it all away –
place it carefully.
in undisturbed rooms;

I have shut it up
in a big old house;
 in a big
old hidden house encircled
by a huge dark forest;
 in a big
old secret house surrounded
by an infinite ocean
teeming with sharks.

And the days pull on -
addictive, gripping –
pushing everything away.

LANGOLD HOUSE. APRIL 1982

15. GAME

I play the game
of guessing motives –
as do they –
the carriage, crowded.

Our train is bumping up to London.

Outside things are blue. Suburbia
is a dusky red lady
not without her charms.

I am feeding off them.,
they off me, all of us
upon each other -
we cannibals,
 we cannibals
 together.

WOLVERHAMPTON, MAY 1982

16. THERE HE IS

There he is –
the boy in the sheepskin coat –
the one from the party,

the one my sometimes-girlfriend
is cross with me about -
for not being cross with her
for sleeping with him.

What do I care?
His hair is the colour of the cut wheat
I ate.

ABERYSTWYTH, JUNE 1982

17. FINALE

You have not asked me this, Fiona
but my answer –
for now at least –
(and now is quite enough) -

that had I minutes – just minutes - left
just minutes before the world ends,
before the big bang and kingdom come;
if I had just minutes,
then, yes, I would spend them here
as I spend them now –
dwarfed by huge trees –
lit by the silver clouds
of a warm Sussex night,
with me, myself and I.

BALCOMBE, JULY 1982

18. PROPHET

Yet, by his face,
the peacock, flying
wraps the corners
of the world,

where the sea rounds green in greatness
sun and sand and cliff laud on,

and in his eyes, the shrinking mirror
never now sees all.

EASTBOURNE, JULY 1982

19. SOUND

Against the sky
a bat -

inside the forest
a noise -

beside the lake
a splash -

a cry upon closed eyes.

BALCOMBE PLACE, JULY 1982

20. GIST

i
You live at night now -
have learnt to cover your tracks –
bury black on black.

ii
Telling lines remain -
within a puzzling space.
Winds blow every way.

iii
In the old forest
the fallen seeds cannot grow
where no sunlight falls.

iv
On the high chalk cliffs
a wavering cry of gulls.
The friendless sea sighs.

v
Secret, summer calm,
the wide green sea moves and runs
as the land cannot.

vi
An old secret told,
the sky breaks in strident flames,
its every secret shared.

vi

Finally – nothing.

The storms have ended, the land
breathes unfailingly.

BALCOMBE PLACE, JULY 1982

21. HEARSAY

The track is rough,
its road uncertain:
fields burn in a harvest moon;

and all around
the fragments of stories -

no more than fables now
told to others by those who heard them
when the tales were true,

chronicles in fact,
written in huge illuminated books
the later kings had burnt.

ABERYSTWYTH, SEPTEMBER 1982

22. TOTAL WORSHIP, YOU

Total worship, you
are the demon, gone, and grace
gliding chariots through the clouds.

Emperors will thrust;
you are the sun,
the moon,
the catalogue of universes,
rolled up unto your
one
small
important
peak.

ABERYSTWYTH, OCTOBER 1982

23. HIGH WEALD

My memory hoards
the last escarpment -

fields inferring,
with each twist of hedgerow,
smudge of copse,
parish steeple,
sail of oast

a world reclaimed.

DHAHRAN, DECEMBER 1983

24. WALES

i

See how now he hunts
in a dark and teeming wood,
goaded, as usual.

ii

Philosophers row.
We place our conflicting gains
beneath green alters

iii

New tenants lodge here
in rooms of new beginnings.
Ever gone, the last.

iv

A quiet house, this –
outside the day's arrangements
a cool Welsh rain falls.

v

The new moon rises
over the mountains of Cors Caron,
a private world unmasked

SWYDDFFYNNON, NOVEMBER 1983

25. KILLED

We are leaning near,
towards such separate fractions
of a whole –

caught in the shallows
of quiet days,
between land and sea –

between silences
that start unnoticed,

withdraw,
unsaid –

and in every room –
we have been killed -
down every passageway
within the lobby, attic, spare room,
in your room, in mine, a fatherland
mothering its divisions
into one.

DHAHRAN, DECEMBER 1983

26. REDEEM

i

Separate space all lost.
In sleep, I admit my limbs,
touch and hold to yours.

ii

I would chuck away
the praise you want, even the songs –
discard a lofty house.

iii

His eyes reveal nothing –
a void, suggesting answers
all secret, bleak, unshared.

iv

A bare day, today -
the great blaze of light hidden,
a spy behind trees.

v

Oh, but one of us
is destined for servitude,
turning Samson's wheel.

v

It's the sum that counts -
after all's been done, forgotten.
The sum calculates.

vi

Down darkening streets
the easy light is trafficked,
leaving silhouettes.

vii

When the gain is gold -
into view, the watcher's face,
never really gone.

viii

Each takes, takes and takes
I, you, they, the world all had,
kidnapped with kindness.

ix

But for that far line
I would not know this place again –
wide fields, unbound.

HAMPSTEAD, FEBRUARY 1984

27. IN SEARCH OF

Little boy leaning
in a great green tree –
 falling, like leaves
 to old gods
 that cannot finish
 or rest.

 You
 turn beside me
 heavy, asleep -

 you slice into me
 warm, asleep -

 you rouse against me
 trusting, asleep -

 and yet
 you are not my kind.

HAMPSTEAD, JULY 1984

28. PASSER BY

In any way but this
I had expected you –
practised what would be said
when we remet;

noticed once more
the gait, the habits -
hear again phrases
unheard for seven years.

City summers have no summer.

When we've remet
it has always been
back in the country
looking across white fields –

the weald
dwindling in a green haze,
dog days, blanching in the sun.

The offices are closed
the evening restaurants
open to people passing time till Monday.

We are not due to meet

Your faces startles like someone's recognised -
but it is not the same.

I pass you by, alert, relieved.

I pass you by.

SOHO, OCTOBER 1986

29. A DELICATE THING

i
You live inside me.
Now I direct your freedom,
daily close the gap?

ii
Almost forgotten -
what's gone claims the greater part,
roars and roars in me

iii
Nothing hurts much now
but a useless bastard love –
loud as feral psalms.

iv
I see your face again –
and from people I don't know,
your voice, suggested.

v
Ever to others
a ghosting smuggles you in –
strangers, slight, alike.

vi
Wide as the swift sky:
sun, sail, sea, beating like drums,
beginning what's gone.

SOHO, OCTOBER 1986

30. KISS

See how it comes,
finally, late, effusive –
a Golden Age –
arousing, with a kiss,
the succession of desire -

the kiss of Jacob –
Samuel, Judas, Ruth -

the given kiss that waits -

and all of life
paused, a battle-ready,
well-equipped, armour polished,
boots strapped, stranded –
the real rival - master of a thousand
guerrilla skirmishes - hidden
in the insidious creases
of a landscape
that is commonplace.

PRUSSIA COVE, OCTOBER 1986

31. TO J.B.

Did you find peace –
die in peace –
all life fixed to a final point -
I wonder.

I read
of everyone in the Old Boy's Journal:
the dinner at Boodles, the marriages,
births; the old boys who returned,
strangers each one -
until this page, until this turning
brought up your name
pinned to the top of a small, neat paragraph
set in ten-point Times Roman
below a thin black line.

All it said
was that you had died
after a long illness
(and that you walked your dog
across the school rugby pitches
at the end).

And I scout
for what it left unsaid,
the boundaries breached
the thoughts that woke you,
hunted you, lauded you.

But tonight
it is simply your beauty I recall,
your clipped, dark face,
your way of playing a piano,
a secret said;

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.