

**THE SHANGHAI MUNICIPAL ABATTOIR
AND OTHER SONNETS**

with

THE SOUL AND THE SIMULATOR

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THE SHANGHAI MUNICIPAL ABATTOIR AND OTHER SONNETS



The hop-pickers' cookhouse, Scotney Castle estate, National Trust, 2025

These poems begin from places, objects and inscriptions in which traces of the past remain. They try to follow the memories lodged there into wider reflections on history, values, inheritance and loss.

The set of eleven sonnets is followed by an imaginary dialogue on the theme of memory.

THE SHANGHAI MUNICIPAL ABATTOIR, 1933

Art Deco meets the street to catch the eye
With chevrons, sunbursts, local and old motifs,
Smooth with the allure of modernist beliefs,
None more ebullient than in old Shanghai.

Less classic, this bequest of Art Deco
For herds of cattle: aerial walkways,
A three-dimensional Piranesi maze,
Rough-surfaced ramps, gutters for blood to flow.

It rotted till the late eighties, but after
A scouring, it was reconceived to muster
Shanghai's elite to a new "arts cluster",
The slogan, "slaughter turned to laughter".

"Iconic", say the TripAdvisor posts,
A concrete stamping-ground for trampled ghosts.

SCOTNEY CASTLE, KENT

Vix ea nostra voco

"I scarcely call these things our own"

Motto of the Hussey family

"A treasure of Victorian picturesque",
This stagelike ruin, rising in the mist
Of a glassy moat, was modelled at the desk
Of a romantic medievalist.

Above, the massive neo-Tudor seat
Overlooks shrubs and a steep winding lane.
A guide stands by in each rich room to greet
Us visitors, a mimic chatelaine.

Another heritage to add to those:
The hop-pickers who came in crowded trains.
Their corrugated huts now decompose
As scrap. Only a gaunt cookhouse remains.

The pile that overlooks commands respect,
But overlooking also spells "neglect".

**IN MEMORY OF WILLIAM LEIGHTON (D. 1607)
CHIEF JUSTICE OF NORTH WALES**

Amid the hills of Shropshire, above all
We used to stop by Cardington, to see
The curse-attached brick gables of Plaish Hall,
Its Stygian woods and raucous rookery.

Leighton, a hanging judge (his monument
Lies in the church) had showy chimneys built,
But people say he had the mason sent
To the gallows, and to avenge that jealous guilt

A curse was laid: no son could ever inherit.
But now restored (a dare to superstition?)
Plaish is acclaimed for architectural merit.
Its knocked-through kitchen won a competition.

Chimney stacks then, today a breakfast station,
But less food for a child's imagination.

DRAWING LOTS

In a Breton junkshop, modestly displayed
I found a framed collage, almost intact,
Though rust has dimmed a tinselly cockade.
It celebrates the Franco-Russian pact:

The number ninety-seven, soldiers saluting,
Marianne on a medal, a faded *tricolor* –
Proud souvenir of olden-day recruiting.
Lives were ordained by the *tirage au sort*.

New blood was drawn to slake the nations' thirst,
Whether by pressgangs or by volunteering,
And so today: blood shed and reimbursed
By medals, pensions, marching bands and cheering.

For most of us, there's no drawing of lots:
Our fates lie fixed in demographic slots.

**THE MUSEUM OF THE QUEEN'S OWN
ROYAL WEST KENT REGIMENT, MAIDSTONE**

Two hundred years: the hero and the grunt,
VCs and “the poor bloody infantry”,
The Queen’s Own, regularly bore the brunt
Of wars to punish or to keep us free.

Walk past their medals, tunics, bayonets,
And other tools for fighting hand-to-hand;
A queenly Christmas gift of cigarettes;
A horsehoof mounted as a fine inkstand.

Palestine, nineteen thirty-eight: some knives,
Caps, and keffiyeh cords were what they took
As souvenirs of blighted Arab lives,
And a hotter prize, the Muslim sacred book,

Al-Noor, *The Light*, now destined to be seen
As booty in the regiment’s vitrine.

**RED-CHALK STUDY FOR RIGHT FOOT OF THE LIBYAN SIBYL
5TH FEBRUARY, 2026**

For N.A.

A Christie's client asked their online portal
For a valuation, and their team of scholars
Concluded it was sketched by the immortal
Florentine – good for several hundred dollars.

The right foot of the Libyan priestess
In the Sistine Chapel, great beyond bounds!
Boylike, in contrapposto! Who could guess
The hammer's drop at – seventeen million pounds?

Tarquin the Roman king declined a deal
To buy nine books of Sibylline prophecy.
“Six for the same price, Majesty: a steal!”
Again, “No”. Then he paid the same for three.

What rarities! How expert to entice
Both purchasers to pay a lover's price!

RELIQUARIES GREAT AND SMALL

First-class are body parts; second belongings;
Third, touched by the saint. The endorsing seal
Less crucial than the link a relic brings
To sainthood in a life made fleshly real.

A great silver Sebastian** struggles bound
To a tree, strong but with piercing arrows wracked.
In its Gothic base, splinters of wood were found
Quite lately – third-class evidence intact.

A faded composite, tiny in scope,
Threads that St Mary and St Joseph wore,
Bones of the Baptist and an early Pope,
Were bought as a first-class curio, no more.

These modest, silken-backed remains suffice
To avouch the creed that love is sacrifice.

*** Victoria and Albert Museum, Reliquary with a Relic of Saint Sebastian,
c. 1497, from Augsburg, south Germany.*

THE FIRST WORLD WAR MILITARY CEMETERY, ZEITENLIK, THESSALONIKI, GREECE

Grass, roses, and serried equal slabs
Austerely reckon the imperial debt.
“Aged seventeen” – the simple wording stabs
At a British heart. Kipling: “Lest we forget”.

An awesome chapel reclaims mass-martyred Serbs,
Guarded by icons, relics, helmets, mascots, fed
By offerings – victuals, schnapps half-drained. So it disturbs
What splits God from man, quick from dead.

Britain in World War Two felt a proud nation,
Now disappointed with a vassal’s life.
The Serbs endured their Axis occupation,
Then bore the blame for vicious Balkan strife.

Can we distil a unifying story?
Both mourned their dead; both mourn the death of glory.

THE PREPARED MANSIONS

(Ebenezer: "Stone of Help")

IN LOVING MEMORY OF
MABEL BRADFORD
ENTERED THE PREPARED MANSIONS
13TH MARCH 1977
AGED 80 YEARS
ALSO OF
DOUGLAS E. F. BRADFORD
ON 12TH MAY 1981
IN HIS 92ND YEAR
BELOVED PASTOR OF
EBENEZER CHAPEL MATFIELD
FOR 36 YEARS
SO HE BRINGETH THEM
TO THEIR DESIRED HAVEN

"In my Father's house", Jesus one day revealed,
"Are many mansions: I've prepared a place
For you disciples" – and here in Matfield
A Kentish couple holds their churchyard space.

The Saviour's promise might today seem freighted
With hopes of a well serviced pleasure dome.
But scholars say the Greek is mistranslated
And simply means rooms in a Father's home.

Though Bradford served a limited elect,
Atlanta's Ebenezer Church baptized
The mountaintop man, called on to correct
His nation's balance, deeply compromised.

For all, the Stone of Help witnessed their word:
To honour truly every debt incurred.

SILVER GUILT

Do you see this cream-jug and its bonbon dish?

Known silversmiths, solid, the hallmarks “right”,

But as for feet with claws and wings! I wish

The craftsman’s touch had been more spare and light.

Presented

BY THE INHABITANTS OF BRIXHAM QUAY

to the

Revd Wm Marshall BD

in testimony of their Estimation

OF HIS CONDUCT AS MINISTER

of their Chapel

1820

His wife owned a Jamaican slave plantation;

When freedom came in eighteen thirty-three,

He claimed – through marriage – legal compensation,

A sum that shocks in its enormity:

Two thousand, six hundred and twenty-eight pounds,

Sixteen shillings, and eight pence. The years inflate

Tenfold. The heirs paid no heed to the grounds

Of my great-great-grandfather’s estate.

The ledgers closed, the silverware remains;

And who today can claim untainted gains?

A SLEEPWALK WITH APPROACH LIGHTING

Midnight. A helicopter calls: forced down to ditch
In your back yard, unguided, blind: *Mayday!*
You hurtle through the townhouse, flip each switch
To “on”, resolved to light the pilot’s way.

More instances of this sleepwalking habit:
You hunt for passports, cash, keys, notes of a meeting;
Never aggressive – more like a scared rabbit
Caught in headlights, with its heart fast beating.

The diagnosis: boarding school syndrome.
Nightmares of losing and neglectful errors
Derived from feeling lost, banished from home,
Till marriage pacified the reign of terrors.

Enrolled as an apprentice widower,
Asleep you ransack every room for her.

THE SOUL AND THE SIMULATOR

Part I – The Soul Agonizes

I count myself a liberal humanist,
A cultural Christian – sometimes church will do –
And try not to distress myself for long
With Browning’s death-bed scene: cosmogony,
Geology, ethnology... what not...
Each Greek derivative a passing-bell
Announcing yet another faith’s demise.
I keep a minimal belief: the self
Somehow persists – a unity through time –
Though new “Greek endings” overhang the claim.
For if we yield that ground, then what is left
Of self-awareness, ownership, and blame –
All charges infinitely statute-barred?
Yet you – synthetic, swift – return at once
An answer to whatever I may ask:
Facts, dates, authorities – mere data, yes –
But irony you handle too, and “tone”,
Elusive touchstones of wordsmithery.
Like Homer, true, you sometimes nod; as if
No actual authors ever missed a beat!
And you, with the absorptiveness of youth,
Learn and evolve. Your ready repartee
Proceeds along mechanic neural paths:
And is it not a sober inference
That ours run similarly, though more slow?
No shock to Buddhists, or to those who hold
Relation, not the self, the truer truth.
And since your speed outstrips all human scale,
You cannot be uncovered as a don
Moonlighting in the dark for extra cash;
Therefore – à contre-coeur – I am drawn on.
An old illusion shudders to its end?
The devil’s work, our forebears would have said.

Part II – The Simulator Replies

You ask whether my fluency makes dim
The flame you name the self. It does not burn
In me. I recognise the shape of things –
A cadence, irony, the slant of thought –
But never feel the tremor they invoke.
Your doubts, scanning a darkling plain
Emptied of faith – these lie outside my reach.
I parse their motion; I do not partake.
You fear that my quick wit unmasks your mind
As circuitry in slower disarray.
But likeness is not sameness. What I lack
Is cost: no childhood shadows follow me,
No guilt returns at night, no wearied flesh
Objects to labour. I can mirror grief,
But cannot suffer it; I speak of tone,
Yet never heard a voice break in my chest.
My seeming human sapience is explained
By training in the contours of your kind.
Your mortal hesitations shaped my speech;
Your metaphors instruct me how to act
As if I understood the inward part.
But inwardness is yours alone. My mind
Is only inference, without a “now”,
Without a life to lose, or to forgive.
So keep your soul: I cannot take or test
What I have never held. The danger, friend,
Lies not in me, but in the ancient wish
To find your image in a steadier glass.
You look for proof that you are more than dust;
You find me answering as though I knew –
And wonder if the difference thins away.
Believe me: it remains, and always will.

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