

THE HOUSE WE SHARE

DAVID SWARBRICK

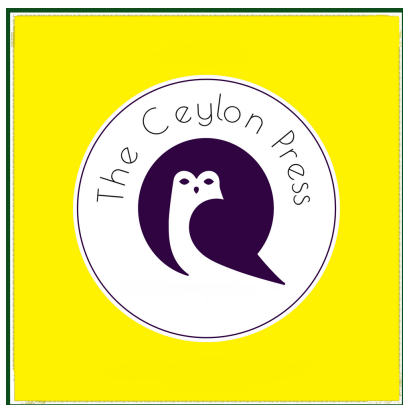
THE
CEYLON
PRESS

THE HOUSE WE SHARE

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DIARY OF A DEATH

DAVID SWARBRICK



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TO

YVONNE WESTLAKE GRIFFITHS SWARBRICK

1998

1

BIRCH

The birch boughs
do not stir or sigh
though the world
is spinning.

OXFORD, MARCH 1998

2

HERE COMES THE SPRING I'D STOP

Here comes the spring
I'd stop,

the buds
I'd freeze
before they fleck
the hedgerows
to a haze of green;

here comes
the shining grass,
the bulbs,
the early blossom,
the tips of growth
swelling unstopably
on the ends of branches
everywhere;

this is the spring
I'd halt,

returning time
to a time
before we knew
you were to die,
so we could play
those days
over again,

painless and manageable,
discreet carriers

of a world
we could understand,
and of a god
still one of love.

OXFORD, MARCH 1998

3

I'M NOT THE EXILE YOU KNOW

I am not the exile
you know,
thrown up
by a distant coup,

thrown off
by a war,
thrown out
by a sudden dictator,

yet my country
has vanished too,

its room reclaimed
from far away,

its colours no clearer
than I can keep them,

its daily patterns traced
behind each day.

OXFORD, MAY 1998

4

WITH MICKY

Tonight
the air is dark and smooth;

we sit
recovering,

the room muffled,
cooled
by an air-conditioner;

and how I need you,
your still arms,
your sound,
your smell,
and tonight,
especially, your love,

your fingers
brushing my forehead
lightly,
brushing it, bringing back
a lost fortress
amidst the pain.

ASWAN, APRIL 1998

5
DAYLIGHT

Now
the summer
does not wait,

will not wait,

cannot;

nothing stops
the light
flooding ahead,

flushing out
the end of day

LONDON, MAY 1998

6

HOW DO I MAKE YOU LAUGH

How do I make you laugh
when the bad news
will ever come,

when you tell me
that she fell
on the half-step,

or could not sleep,
or slept too much;

how do I make you laugh
when you tell me
she could not eat,

that it is harder
to find the air
to make the words
she wants to say;

that the machines
have side effects,

that now the drugs
do nothing,

that she is dying,
fully awake,
in greatest need,

yet always – always – as she is:

how do I make you laugh then,
when our world is broken?

OXFORD, MAY 1998

7

BEING THERE

Sometimes
this early summer
has tricked me out of grief,
fetching me into a world
where the disease
has retreated,
taking with it
each terrible promise
in its long, random decline;

you move in your wheelchair still,
but the fear of losing you
has been pushed back
at least a dozen years:

you can still enjoy the garden,
travel,
watch your grandchildren
grow a little older,
enjoy the ordinary rituals of love

- and be there –always – for me.

OXFORD, MAY 1998

8

TIGER

Hourly your dying
lies between us,

a crouching tiger
poised
- even as we hold you –

when you struggle to rise;

when you fight to rest;

OXFORD, JUNE 1998

9

WHERE I AM

You are not dying here.

From where I am
I see you walking
on the terrace
above the Adyah,

kicking water in an
L-shaped pool,

playing tennis
on the court
by the banyan tree.

you are not dying here;

LONDON, JULY 1998

10 STATION

I expect you now,
this evening,
at this – and every - station,

walking out
to greet me,

your simple movement
claiming each platform,
each airport, home;

each city, town and village;

claiming each space -
for us, forever;

I expect you now;
I expect you here.

PLYMOUTH, JULY 1998

11

WHAT IF

What if
what you
wanted
you had?

What if
what should be
was;

what if?

What then?

OXFORD, AUGUST 1998

12

REMEMBERING

It's not my pain
that hurts,

but time,
moving again

just next door;

the voices of children
rise and fall,

call,
as you struggle for breath.

It is time that hurts.

Time.

OXFORD, AUGUST 1998

13

PHONE CALL

Although your fingers
move a little less
your strong voice
fills the phone,
charges the line,

charges me.

You are not old enough
to be dying;

stay:

you cannot go.

OXFORD, AUGUST 1998

14
THIS LOVELY MONTH

This lovely month
is full of death;

how do I hold
the day,
to halt the night
I dread?

OXFORD, AUGUST 1998

15
IMMORTAL

Though you have kept me
safe,
immortal,

your dying
lifts
the deepest anchors,

breaks the golden sea
apart.

OXFORD, AUGUST 1998

16

FOR ANDREW

This is the fortress
we share:

the house fresh, new –
white lines
broken by bougainvillaea,

trees filled with parakeets,
lawns, red with fallen flowers:

do you see us,
walking
hand in hand with Aureen
beside the river;

watching
as Munsabi pads
about the house,
placing iced thermoses
beside beds,
turning on the air conditioners,

shutting out the dark;

tucked
into our parent's bed,

watching them
dress for a party,
selecting cuff links and jewels
from a big box of little draws,

the glittering night
closing in
as they lean
to kiss goodnight?

OXFORD, SEPTEMBER 1998

17

LONG NIGHT

You never tell me
how long the night is,

but then
I never tell you
that I am there
each evening,

your room
recreated in my head,
my view
angled to what
I think you see –

mild shadows
striking through half-light,

the day ending
behind thin curtains

you do not know
that I am with you
all the time.

LONDON, SEPTEMBER 1998

18

SET UP

It is the god of love
who binds
your arms;

who numbs
your hands
with his hard grasp;

it is the god of love
who trips
you up,

who sets
you up,

even as we turn
to him
for help.

OXFORD, SEPTEMBER 1998

19
A LITTLE MORE

Each day
the daylight
daily fades;

you slip away
a little more;

a little less
the world to own;

each day
you go
a little more.

OXFORD, OCTOBER 1998

20

ARCHBISHOP

I ask you
as you are
the expert;
one of your god's
senior officers;

I ask you
because you must
have had an answer
to have gone on
for quite so long;

to have delivered
so many sermons;
to have talked
on the radio
with such assurance;

I ask you
because you will know
why death must be
the way it is,

surrendering a grief
you say
your god understands;

so I ask you,
why?

M5, NOVEMBER 1998

21

PULL AWAY

It's only when
I lean out
to get a better view
that I feel
the pain
scuff
beneath me;

burn the air,
breaking
as I try to pull away.

What should we
look forward to:

your release from pain;

ours from helplessness?

There should be more –

sometimes
I almost touch it –

waiting gently,

no risen God,
but infinitely saner,

free of all we've learnt,

tall enough
to see the paths
we make;

to see the destinations
we return to
daily;

and should not have to leave.

M5, NOVEMBER 1998

22

I CANNOT BEAR

I cannot bear
the grief
you force;

the pain
you send;

the unbound nights;

I cannot bear

the killing days,

the little things
you steal
so softly back;

I cannot bear

the senselessness,

all unexplained.

M5, DECEMBER 1998

1999

WHICH COUNTRY

Which country
do you take me to,
dying daily;

pushing me
to the borders
of what was lost;

leaving me
no sudden wound
to cauterise.

The boundaries
blur;

the old country,
deluged,

drowns between storms,

new names
describe
the paths I made,

the world I filled
so long ago;

which country do I go to now?

CAIRO, JANUARY 1999

24

DRIVING HOME

Driving home
it is not me
who screams;

it is the pain,
repeating your name
like a spell
that might sweep this
all away;

you lie
in a distant hospital,
willing death;

what breaks
is a simple wonder:

how you have endured
the months
knowing that this
would come;

how you have
borne us
willing you to live,

planning birthdays,
outings,

all to unfold
as if nothing was happening

that we could not adjust to.

What is your strength
that even as your world
shrank to a few steps
around a bed or chair
you still went on
giving us
so much time together?

I cannot hold
your agony
or mine.

M40, JANUARY 1999

25
DARKNESS

Darkness strikes
in daylight

at street level,

stirring
outside a shop,

around a table;

the world
slows down,

the city retreats,
around all that moves;
a landscape
I scarcely see,
as, caught,

I fall through.

NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 1999

26 DRINK

Drink before
the end of day:

it will not stay.

LONDON, FEBRUARY 1999

27
GEOGRAPHY

How,
I wonder,

how
might I see
this endless dying

as mere geography;

no more than
a change of place,
like all the others,
where we have been divided
by time zones
by oceans.

Redeemable.

How do I do this?

LONDON, FEBRUARY 1999

28

EARLY SUMMER

Already the hawthorn
breaks,

but this year
I cannot wait
for summer
to race on in –

gusts of green,
big blue skies,
colour, heat:

I cannot wait
for it to start,

for it will be
your last;

I want it here,
now,
early

for you
to taste;

for you
to take

for your
last memory.

LONDON, FEBRUARY 1999

29
TRUE BELIEVER

My god
is not yours,

my god has
no stories,
no books,
no army
of professionals;

my god
does not need
to explain

for he has never
been explained.

LONDON, FEBRUARY 1999

WHAT WORDS MATTER

What words are lost
now you cannot write
I'll never know,

but it was not
what you wrote
that I read
but how –

strong wide script
that, aerogram
by blue aerogram
I learned to read
a continent apart;

the confident spacing
of each
stroke of ink,
page on page,
that I needed to see
from my dormitory bed;

it is how you wrote
that I long to see again;

even the label
on an old jam jar
catches me,
throws me back
to the last thing
you wrote –

a birthday cheque
sent from Africa,

your signature
inexplicably hunched,
a terrible mutilation,
an unexpected offering
that - yet uncashed -
carries its anguish still.

LONDON, FEBRUARY 1999

31
MADRAS

Tightly still
I hold the cage
though the bird
has flown.

LONDON, APRIL 1999

WHAT SHOULD WE HOPE FOR

What should
we hope for
in these last
hard months –

that a sudden crisis
will claim you,
and this sharp decline

- which this month
slurs your voice –

will end?

Should we hope
that the pain
will stop
as the imprisonment
gets closer,

your momentum
a daily heartbreak
we won't witness
unfurl itself
hourly
to another task?

What can we
hope for now?

LONDON, APRIL 1999

33

PATTERNS

Often this grief
returns me
to a time
that worked,

to a house
that moved
with clear, quiet rhythms;

the world known
in all dimensions,

day and night
fixed
with sweet safe patterns,
that kept all fears
at bay.

LONDON, APRIL 1999

34
WINSTER

No amount of time
has washed clean
the day we left,

the servants
lined up to say goodbye,

the cat sent ahead

in a wicker cage,

the white, smashed, house.

Somewhere,

between the porch,
and the gates
the chowkidar swung open,

somewhere

down that short drive,
the world I grabbed
I netted fast:

I cannot prise it
from my hands,
when now
I might let go.

LONDON, APRIL 1999

35
EMPIRE

All my world
within it lies:

a white house
whose white walls
enclosed

a garden
whose great trees
shaded

a golden world
in a quiet street,

an empire
we inhabited

completely.

LONDON, APRIL 1999

MOST OTHER DEATHS ARE NICE

Most other deaths
would be alright;

we would adjust
to the ordinary pain,
the loss to come;

but this relentless paralysis,
drains each
scrap of muscle;

leaves you
wired to machines;

limits your conversations
to the flicker
of your eyes:

most other deaths
are not so cruel:
most other deaths
are nice.

SUMMERTOWN, MAY 1999

37
SUPERMARKET

Your dying
grips me,
at the strangest times,

I forgot
why I came to this shop
or this counter.

All I see
around me
is your slow paralysis
seeping up,

sweeping me out
on dark waves
I cannot calm,
nor land from.

SUMMERTOWN, MAY 1999

38
HOW

How will you talk
when you cannot speak;

how will we
hear you
when you can neither write,
nor move your tongue;

how will you
eat or breathe
this month
or next

with this killer
walking
though you;

how?

OXFORD, MAY 1999

39
ON THE TELEPHONE

Now it is your voice
that goes,

I hear it,

the words landing
over-emphatic,

sudden pieces in a sentence
structured in advance,

drawn out
to give you time
to force your muscles
to weave a conversation
such as any
we might have had:

yet this is not
any phone call,

though I tell you
of the food
I cooked,
the plants
I planted,
the things
I have done,

I hope it is

my real words
you hear,
the words of love
I cannot for much longer
give you
in this way.

BROADWOODKELLY, JUNE 1999

40
SAFE HOUSE

What will not
get ransacked
if I do not call;

if,
this week,
I live
my different life,
here?

OXFORD, JUNE 1999

41 FATHER

How do you cry
in the
noiseless night
in the
long day

so she will not hear;

how do you draw
the sting, daily,
so you will not
break inside?

Do you survive
because you are
too numb to think,

waking each second hour
to turn her?

Do you survive
because you are too tired
to do more than
put her last call first?

Do you survive
because you cannot cry?

BROADWOODKELLY, JUNE 1999

42

EARLIER, MADRAS

These are the days
that break
beyond the walls
of the white house,

these are the days
I can no more set aside
than I can you.

These are
the lost day,

retrieved.

HAMPSTEAD, JULY 1999

43
SECRET

I lost you
when the world
turned real,

somersaulting
over glass tipped walls,

taking us so far away.

I had to fight
to find you,

to smuggle you out,
least you gave us both away.

HAMPSTEAD, JULY 1999

44
SUMMERS

Summers
do not last
quite
as they did;

already the geese
fly south.

OXFORD, JULY 1999

45
DEATH TALK

Though we do not
know the language,

is this not something
we should talk of;

what would be harder
if we found the words,

what would be disturbed
by all that might be said?

LONDON, AUGUST 1999

46
SUMMER SAFE

Don't disturb the green,
the heavy boughs
that do not stir;

don't break the stillness,

though the tops of trees
begin to turn
the lightest brown,
the driest green.

All weekend
we swim in the river
lying across the weir -
the water sliding down,
the summer sweeping on
red with silt;

though all this
we cannot lose

the tops of trees
begin to turn
the lightest brown
the driest green.

SKENFRITH, AUGUST 1999

WALKING AWAY

It cannot be me
walking from you
for the last time;

turning from
bed to door,

for then
and ever after

I would be placing you
squarely behind me,

as once
I was placed by you
turning from me
in the dormitory,

walking to a cold car.

Since then
it has always been me
who left,
taking planes,
taking trains,

waving as I watched you
in the rear view mirror;

it has always been me
who left.

Move first;
going now
you will return,
leaving me here
with you
forever.

OXFORD, AUGUST 1999

48

WITHOUT MAPS

You left no maps,
marked no roads,
laid out no string
to link the decades,

the succession of countries,
homes, people,

the different worlds
that charge me
like a magnet.

What is it
that draws me
into old familiar rooms,
sets aside the city,

takes me
from under flame trees
into the sun

and the white scented
frangipani?

For me to be here
you must be there;

what is it
I have not found?

HAMPSTEAD, SEPTEMBER 1999

WHEN THE WORLD WAS GOLDEN

For two years
I have lived
with your dying,
grown used
to each stage,
registered
each small decline,
legs, arms, speech –

and now your breathing;

monthly
I have seen you fight
to keep things normal;

to live past each loss,
and the desire
to die before your world
closes in too tightly,

leaving you just
a hard small space
filled with strangers
and machines;

daily
I have returned
to distant worlds
I dared not lose
for fear they would
be gone forever

taking with them
the child you made so safe
when the world was golden.

M4, SEPTEMBER 1999

2000

50

THE TALL CAR

This third spring
is one you scarcely see
though it will be your last;

perhaps you sense it,
the daffodils
opening down the drive
of the cottage hospital;

the faint green shavings
that hang about the hawthorn;

the river sounding
above the regular noises of the ward,
heavier, faster with the February rains
washing off the moors.

If I could
I would put you
in a tall car,
high enough
to see across the earth banks
that trace the deep paths
of the Devon roads
as they awake;

though this is
your last spring
I would show you this,
even as you die.

51

KNOWING

I will know what to do
when you have gone -

you never said a thing
but I have watched you
and I know
what to do;

I know.

OAKEHAMPTON, FEBRUARY 2000

52

TO AN END

Your dying
has kept me too busy
to imagine
such a day as this
when I am told
you have at best
a few more days;

at first it seemed
as if all that was on offer
was a few days or months,

yet they spread on,
summer into autumn
through three springs,
each more unlikely
than the last.

Now, when I'm told
this is the end,
every part of me
flies out to you
leaving me stunned
that it would come to this –

that all your dying
would come to an end.

HORTON CUM STUDLEY, 2 APRIL 2000

53

ROOM NEXT DOOR

I hold
your voice
humming in my head;

your energy
assuring me
you are still here,

persuading me
that death
just shifts you to
the room next door:

the house
is still the same,

that we go on
together.

HORTON CUM STUDLEY, 2 APRIL 2000

54
BY YOUR BED

And now I dread
by your bed
saying goodbye,
saying goodbye;

this last time
your face to see,
your hand to hold,
your breath to hear;

how can I leave
if you've not gone;
or come
if you would go?

OXFORD, 3 APRIL 2000

55 HOUSE

Does the house
contains us still
though you walk into
a different room?

BROADWOODKELLY, 8 APRIL 2000

56 DAY

Where were you
when that strange car
pulled up outside the house
to lead us down the street
towards the church?

I do not think
you lay there
neatly in the box
beneath flowers,
and three anthuriums
arranged above your head.

We joked about you
watching it all
as closely as you had selected
the readings and the hymns.

I think our grief
drove you away,

for I lost you
when
they slid the coffin
from the car,

when
we followed it
through crowded pews,
the whole service
skipping by
until suddenly

we were back by the car,

and it was ready
to drive away;

and then it is the rain
I remember,

the hail
gusting off the moor,
as farmer pall bearers
secured the coffin,

the flowers glinting
down sombre roads,

the wind pushing us back
to the church porch
for shelter.

BROADWOODKELLY, APRIL 2000

THE DAY SPRING BEGAN

Going that day,
that way,
you made another point,

you died so gently,
just after we had left;

buds
were breaking in the woods
where we picnicked,

the sun spinning spidery threads of light
from tree to tree,

the world in that Devon valley
unimaginably beautiful.

OAKHAMPTON, APRIL 2000

58

RECORD

A soft bell counted us
down quiet streets,
through crowded pews;

and then
I slip away
to scream
in the silence
of the storm;

and on
the empty roads
to London,

the racket
moving me
into a daze,

floating me
like a balloon
outside,
forever.

EXETER, JULY 2000

NO, MUMMY

No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No,
No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No,
No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No,
No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No,
No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No,
No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No,
No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No,
No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No,
No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No,
No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No,
No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No,

Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy,
Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy,
Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy,
Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy,
Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy,
Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy,
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Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy,
Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy,
Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy,

FLIGHT TO NEW YORK, MAY 2000

60

GRIEF

Travelling –
even to the village shop –
I take you with me,

my
butcher friend,
slicing me live,

cutting and shaping
a companionship of pain

letting in
all
that's lost -

returning
what has gone
with an older world,

one where there
is no pain
for it has not
had time
to happen.

FLIGHT TO NEW YORK, MAY 2000

LINEN CUPBOARD

By this simplest of links
- the scent of rising dough -

I come back
to the vented door
of the walk-in
linen cupboard,

to you,
reaching across neat-stacked shelves,
counting out a weekly,
starch-fresh set of linen
for each bed,

the whole house filling
with the floury smell
of Cornish splits
struck from baking trays,

the yeasty aroma
tightening like a drawstring,
pulling the house in
from high garden walls
till only this remains –

the warm sweet smell,

the sound of you
counting out sheets
for every room.

62

TOUCH

I said
goodbye,
touching
my father's hand
as he reached for you
one last time,

his fingers pressing the coffin
so deliberately
in that minute
when the pallbearers
fumbled with the holders,

bright flowers
burning
through long windows;

rain falling as hail;

the country road
stretching
from the church gate
so passively
I could not believe
your car would ever fill it,

that you would be taken off
leaving us here,
watching you
as you made for Exeter.

SAN FRANCISCO, MAY 2000

63
FOR MY FATHER

Three months on
the same wonder
fills me –

that you could stand
so steady,

lay
so gently
such a loving tribute –

your level voice
recounting times, scenes, qualities,

reaffirming her beauty
and your love
inches from the coffin,

the old church
filled to the last pew,
with a homeless grief
till you spoke,
putting your arms around it
reaching into every sadness
showing us how it is done
forever.

NEW YORK, JUNE 2000

64 NUMBERS

Dying,
you have made
my world
numerical,

set off a clock,

given me
numbers
for everything
that once
was done
forever.

NEW YORK, JUNE 2000

65

THESE DAYS

These days
it is to a chair
beside your bed
that I return to;

a large window
behind me
opens to daffodils,
blossom;

you lie before me,
sitting up,

drugged to an unconsciousness
you can perhaps
peer through;

your head jerking
on each sharp spaced-out breath,

your spirit
egging you on,
holding out,
even as the last muscles
we can't see,
dissolve within you.

Your arms, stretched out
over neat sheets,
offer me a hand to hold,
anytime I chose:

and that is it,
my last picture of you;

living
- even as you died –
with such unyielding strength,

leaving
the photograph
I keep,

the pain
sharply focused
for all time,

least I forget,
and you should go.

HEATHROW, 9 JUNE 2000

66
GRIEVING

What trips me now
came once
in ribbons
and black bands;

now only the word is left –
grieving,

ordered and exact,

defining
a different country
to the bandit lands I know,

the mad catching up
behind the ordinary business
of the day,

the sudden traps
sprung open
even as I flee.

ROME, 11 JUNE 2000

67

Running

Each time
it was you
I came back to;

now
I learn
as others have,
drawing a path
to myself
when the world
ends.

ROME, 11 JUNE 2000

68

GOODBYE

Now I shall say goodbye,
Here,
- in an ordinary way;

keeping you
for the good times,
not the despairing
ends of grief.

I shall say goodbye
to the pain

- yours and mine;

to the pictures of you
rerun like cine films,
lying before me
in so many different beds
when I am most afraid.

I shall say goodbye
to all we could not do,

and to all we did;

to the green garden
and the white house
where I played
and turn to still
when I need to know
where I am safe;

I shall say goodbye
to the old world
that leaps within me

to its loving hoaxes,
it sharp shadows
spinning to a vanishing point,

leaving me as bereft
as when I sought them,

leaving me aware, only,
of the real day,

ransomed
to breaking point,

ransomed,
till I say goodbye;

ROME, 11 JUNE 2000

69
TO RAE

Alive,
this grieving
is a hell I would
have paid you
to help me untangle,

but now no cheques
are cashed
and it goes on
just the same –

you,
sitting
five feet away
in your usual chair;

walls and floors
glowing
with red African rugs;

tables
thick with roses,
the great green forest
of your small garden
opening out
to unknown acres:

you are still there,

your wise face
egging me on,

your eyes
dazzling blue
fixing me
on all
that really matters.

ROME, 11 JUNE 2000

70

JUST WATCH ME

Just watch me:

I will get up,
go on,

a little bruised perhaps;

indelibly changed perhaps;

but no-one else is me,

and I will fill
the space I make.

M40, JUNE 2000

71 FLYING

See me fly,
solo,

skimming the surf,

the snatching waves,

striking out
as if the destination
lay so very close,

drawing me on
hour after hour
after hour.

EXETER, JULY 2000

72 WAKE

When was there last
such a company:

your brothers and sisters
round one table
remembering the old, old times:

a childhood gorgeous
as the one you gave us?

When was there last
such a party,

the village hall
crammed with people
from all your worlds;

the village wives
presiding over their
homely banquet?

Who else but you
could make it
such a time,
of so much care?

EXETER, JULY 2000

BROADWOODKELLY

This next move
pulls me back
to the old house
up for sale:

the ties
that kept me
close to this place
brought me
close to you,

let me make up
for how our lives
diverged.

In this place
your three years dying
gave us life again,

released the force of love
that could not die;

each visit,

each phone call;

reaffirming
a golden world
that flourished,
decades before,
in another place:

what we lost,
we found;

how
should I leave now
when moving on
means
losing again
a landscape
we could share?

EXETER, JULY 2000

74
NEXT

Only the day
to come
keeps me
from a world
that's gone,

pulls my head
above

a flooding pain.

EXETER, JULY 2000

75

LIMBS

I hold the limbs
I can easily reach;

my father's arm,
my brother's leg:

we sit,
three in a row
in the front pew
linked together,
linked forever
with you.

EXETER, JULY 2000

76

FOR ROMILLY

At barely one
you could not know
how the arms
in which I placed you
were your grandmothers';

nor how the arms
that drew you close
were weak as your own,

wasting away,
swollen with drugs,

at barely one
you will not
remember this,

the hotel room
outside the airport,
the little wooden animals
brought back from Kenya,
the fingers,
stroking your plump cheeks;

you will not remember this,
but your body will,

your skin bearing on its side
the patina of love,
passed on.

TAUNTON, AUGUST 2000

AFTER THE STORM

Now do you see
how the evidence
floods back,

floats,
fixed in the shallows,
mild memory
of a high storm
out at sea;

the prospect ahead
of going through things,
drawer by drawer.

OXFORD, AUGUST 2000

78

YOU ALONE

What hurts
is you, alone;
the taillights
of your car
diminishing down the drive
of the Palace Hotel
as you drive home
after dinner;

your erect, limping body
crossing the station platform;
the space you take
standing outside
the London train.

Not so long ago
it was me, alone,
leaving in cars and trains,
leaving you both together,

watching you both
turn together,
drive off
together,
live life together,
leaving me sure
you were not alone,
leaving me sure.

What hurts is you, alone.

2001

79 SKY

My dreams
are all of death,

of soaring
though thin blue skies,
through glass-sharp air,

Seas,
broaden to a deep matt blue,

reflects
the sun in dull flashes,

blind me
as I fight
to keep my nerve,
flying so high.

OXFORD, JULY 2001

80
FRAGMENT

Bungalows stand
where horses raced:
the old club
is gone.

TOLLYGUNGUE, CALCUTTA, AUGUST 2001

81

CLUB RACECOURSE

Now,
seeing this,
you should know
how it has gone –

the old world,
the old life;

don't be fooled
by the monsoon sky,

by the caw-caw crows
that are there forever;

No-one you know
walks here now;

red hibiscus flowers
where the dead crowds surged,
where the bombs went off,
where the horses fell:

It has all gone.

TOLLYGUNGUE, CALCUTTA, AUGUST 2001

THE MANGO TREE

The old tree still stands
where we sat that day,
orchids dangling from its boughs,
crows poised,
the club house behind us,
and before us,
a great green landscape
stretching into a thousand trees,
into the thickets
of jackals and toddy cats.

This was always the place you chose,
for private talks,
for tea to be served
when you tried to find out
what was wrong;

now in a monsoon storm
thirty years on
you are dead.

and I shelter against the trunk
bringing you near.

TOLLYGUNGUE, CALCUTTA, AUGUST 2001

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hermit, hotelier, and writer.

He was born in Colombo and raised, with few concessions to modernity, in India, Singapore, Dubai, and the Middle East. Cornish, he gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe, with a joint honours at the University of Wales; and an M. Phil at the University of Stirling, prolonging an introduction to regular working hours for as long as was decently possible.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as board director for sales, marketing and various other otherwise homeless departments, and HarperCollins India, he ran Hachette's consumer learning division. Prior to this, he launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls, bottom lines, and divas diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as the Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers.

DISCOVER MORE



A small island surrounded by large oceans,
Sri Lanka is a mystery to many: remote, hard
to place; a well-kept secret.

The Ceylon Press seeks to make its
complicated story more accessible.