

The Reinvention of Time Travel

**Going back to the start
without a map or a watch**

Mel Witherden

*Imagine: children and elderly alike
disintegrate their worlds, then realign
to impersonate the inverse rim of life -
young man of ninety meets wise child of nine.*

The Reinvention of Time Travel

(from *The Last Orchid*, a work of imagination in very long progress)

**Eve, the patient in a coma, tells
the Traveller he must discover the
secret of time travel**

*“Find a way to travel time,”
said my love in mime -
silent, not defined,
her will, her mind.
Just “Find,”
she underlined,
leaving what I’d been assigned,
and why, still undivined:*

*Could I afford her life’s disorder
if I declined. Should I ignore her,
when our futures are so intertwined
and each of us is blind?*

Viewers

*The pretexts and purposes of travel
are wealth, survival and wonders to marvel.
But we have to baulk at transport in time
while the great "Space Age" - like ice skaters, slime
molds and slate - skim on thin margins, and I'm
glazing stained memories salvaged from grime?*

**The Traveller proposes to use memories
of his life to journey backwards in time -
though reliability could be an issue.**

A warning from history

Our pasts and futures are tales of what's known
about us - choices made and what we've done,
ancestors, descendants, those we've called friend,
the places we've been, where we plan to end.
We can log and manage our connections
centuries before there are conceptions:
no other saga, record, bulletin
can rival our internal time machine.
Technology will always be suspect;
but, say my ship is all I recollect
and reconstruct, and I sail life backwards
till it docks at wharfs of still-life waxworks
that capture scraps of real-world history?
The hitch? This inverse chronicle could be
impartial and true, or just about me...

**But it's clear the passive
viewer won't get far**

Viewers 1: Play stationery

My camera and phone record and recall my moves
my telescope spies on the other side of night
my microscope picks at matter, lets in light
I see people who no one knows or loves
share secrets with those who don't care
and my avatar acts as it likes with theirs.
The music of Caliban and Ariel fills the air;
dangerous truths spoken in ancient Greece

use the same “play” switch as jokes about cheese.
I have no need to imagine disintegrating stars,
or cities, or lives - their cries assault me in bars.
I watch those protecting me spy and cower
in bunkers of privilege and power
everything flows to my door - I’m safe behind walls.
Yet while I control space-time with my toys
there’s no room in lifetimes to use them all.
I’ve no need to move: I’m helpless with joy.

Viewers 2: Relative distants

I never found that churchyard or the tombs
where generations of my family
parade their ages and their fading names
in the photo that somehow came to me.
But they must have known staying in one place
for long would leach into geography,
then nowhere else they strayed was this erased
by casual lies or casuistry.
Paralysis offends the traveller’s view,
but standing still’s the safe way to look back;
while visitors are always passing through,
context and correlation’s what they lack.
Meanwhile, our moment has already passed:
entanglement’s the lesson we learn last.

Viewer 3: Landmarks

Twin Towers fell as Lakelands flaked with dread
and Lennon’s bullets burst a sleeping head.
Kennedy sat by the fire as he died.
But music sparkled diamonds in the sky
that earliest of good morning mornings
the day that Pepper fixed the whole within.
You don’t always need to move to be moved
or young to keep the stupefying new.

Viewers 4: Time machines

The windfarm miles away is whiling time,
walking with clouds, questioning, widening
our view: it wins, and whisks us back across
the interwoven wilderness of woods,
wild hills and winter barley; breathlessly
it greets the warming westerlies - the source
of its whip and wheel and the power it wields.
Some warn its one-way whispering blades will swipe
away the warp and weft of ancient landscapes,
and yet its twisted wistful swirl may wave

farewell at waste and a squandered wounded past.
It's willing us to wake, to be weaned and free,
and now to be whorled like twine and slowly wound
forward in time where meandering winds
weigh the sweep of these welcoming arms,
winnowing wealth and wisdom from nothing -
from air - while its blades wear zeros in the sky.

*Your information doesn't correlate;
can you produce your birth certificate,"
enquires a man who represents the state.
"If not it would appear you left too late."*

Sightseers

Isn't travel just another confection -
one more chance for candid self-reflection,
a trek you need collecting recollections?

**The Traveller can't
feel secure at home**

... Why me? 1.

There's a nagging that the years can't budge:
a kitchen appliance has me on edge.
It's got it in for me, this fridge.
I needed somewhere cool for my stash
of precious beer and my pizza cache,
a place to keep my rashers
and my burgers fresh,
So when Amazon said they'd fetch
one free if I agreed to sign their pledge
I placed an order in a flash
for a six-foot US fully-fledged
and gadget-rich robotic freezer-fridge.

Now it seems the unabridged
and rigid contract terms allege
in small print it has the right to dredge
the contents of my fridge and garage
and turn my data into public knowledge.

The schedule says this privileged
insightful white good went to college
to specialise in me and be a snitch:
it lets my doctors check for roughage
and whether I've been eating spinach
and the other substitutes for silage;
it helps insurers read my mileage,
brain waves, pulse and metabolic age,
and uploads webcasts of my sandwich fetish.

What I need's a place to forage,
not oranges to stick in porridge,
not some fancy yoghurt crèche.
I can do without a hedge
against the rising price of veg,
and fish and kedgeriee and lettuce.
Yet my electric itch can't languish:

it's refreshed, encouraged by my anguish,
since it acquired the power of language,
specifically a grim off-handish
languid Antipodean English.

Now if it detects I bear a grudge
for its insistence I should ditch
the mayonnaise and cheesy wedge
or for the ban which
it's imposed on any flesh
or dairy sandwich
it gives a snidish verbal nudge
and the bloody door won't budge.

My wish is to end the data spillage
and the systematic theft and pillage
of my life by this once and future fridge;
I detect one more unexpected glitch -
this fridge, this bimetallic witch,
was made without an on-off switch.
So why? Why should I become its bitch?
Why me? Why wasn't I born data-rich?

**and the view outside is
static and fragmentary**

Sightseers 1: Small change

Out in woods, winter plays an unwelcome
relative visiting with heavy bags.
A holly bush fights the strangling heave
of ivy; storms wrestle it gust by gust
to the ground, still shining sharply evergreen.
The entrails of unrooted trees flail in weak
sunlight that types gold back-slashes in among
blanks of trunks, leaving earth badgered and barred.
Slight shadows burst and dart across beech mast
like tiny creatures startled by leaf fall;
long-browned burdock burs splinter and strip,
watermint melts to chewing gum and tar,
and unsprung fern fronds slacken, whiten, slump.
The season presses down; dead matter soaks
and crusts the needled floor, crushed and crumpled;
in its dark colon, everything succumbs,
and fingers of orange fungi thumb through.
Amid the waste one might almost make out
in genius the Vicar of Selbourne
moving like an hour hand as he measures

something exquisite, indiscernible.
With life stalled and oblivious to spring,
there is submission as the woodlands cringe:
compulsion suffuses the base of things.

Sightseers 2: Mosaics

Mosaics at Caerleon, Rhodes, Florence
bloom with uncommon flowers, white, gold, bronze;
Crete secretes my shell in an old hotel.
An unpaid apologist for Castro shakes
my hand, we wish the Revolution well.
By air the swell in Pearl Harbour provokes
conflicting thoughts of Paradise and Hell;
a city burns bright beneath Telegraph Hill.
When travel is our greatest thrill so far
it's place, not time, that makes us what we are.

Wide-angle views are the only losses
in Christchurch, Paphos, Pompeii and Knossos.
Indignities that squeezed through body scans
are tenderised in slideshow loops of sands
and sunshine on unending agendas
for as long as anyone remembers.
None of us believes in gods any more:
we seek security in package tours,
and ways to comprehensively insure.
Is no one suspicious that these guidebook
platitudes flatter how old buildings look
but are stone to quaking screams when they shook?
We shadow every visitor who's stayed:
standing closer could fill the gaps with shade.

Sightseers 3: Beddgelert

A Snowdon village gets busy in June.
Its slick of trippers licking ice creams drift
from picnic tables into fields, dogs splash
across the stream that slobbers remorselessly
between green stone walls and twee cottages.
The river bridge jams on a tourist bus;
but nothing, not even the glistening light
and jet of running water's in a rush.
Encroaching marshland clips the car park.
Rhododendrons worry a football pitch,
and abandoned railway relics falter
in halted parapets and overgrown
embankments. The broken line of arches gapes
like a mouth missing teeth that calls out "stop".
Unlike visitors, people who live here

need no reminders they're going nowhere.

Sightseers 4: Destinations

Letham Speke and Chatham up in Mumbles -
Stonehenge to Penistone, then Buckler's Hard -
Wye, Ryde, Horse Down for Buckingham, Tumble,
After Ladbroke Towcester, Breadsall Chard.
Gazetteer destinations waste loose lives
while seagulls seize on ice creams in St Ives.

Bognor to Bangor, cycle to Staines,
Hartland to Headstone, Lovelost in the lanes.
Corsham to Cosham, Fareham to Farnham,
starting at Cookham you're bound to Burnham.
Dungeness frees us, and nothing caps Lydd;
Windscale lost Sellafield while Lands End hid.
Go Glasgow, go Edinbro': they create
exactly the space that fits the M8,
yet despite its superior length and reach
the A38 never gets to the beach.
I've mocked Loch Ness and magicked Tintagel,
fled Leeds and Aberdeen feeling fragile,
stomped mapless and damp like flat lemonade,
but never found Stanhope or Ben Hope to fade:
Random destinations, almanac lives,
are routes to ensure that no one arrives.

Sightseers taking snapshots in the sun,
need evidence to show they're having fun.

*"Pictures please," sniffs the border guard
whose baton and uniform say he's scarred.
"Wherever you've been, re-entry is barred
unless you post me a photo or card."*

Visitors

This thing that has my voice and has my image,
my friends, my point of view my right of passage
my fingerprints, my blood, my lineage,
is it me? is it real? and what's the damage?

The Traveller's insecurity grows

... Why me? 2

Does it mean when the lights turn red
and it's my car alone stopped dead
that I'm special for the things I've said,
Or have I been overlooked instead
missed on account of how I was bred,
because I'm average, low on bread?

...

I want to know: is the world misled
about me, had it misread
my personality? And why is red
not green instead?
Why me? I said.

... and he looks for significance in memories of places

Our pasts and futures start with memory
and lock together in identity.

Visitors 1: Occupations

I'm travelling in wonder back across seas
and continents to rediscover the Ruined City.
Streets stilled and stifled by heat and decay
have retained exquisite mysteries
for a trickle of barely inquisitive visitors
who slowly sift through burned out
temples and palaces pillaged by trees.
In this quiet place of desultory work,
a man plays pungi to his cobra,
women repair roads with baskets of soil,
a nub-end role to keep things going.
The locals show full commitment
to refurbishing our imaginations

with corrugated history and speculation,
and they're all snake charmers now,
evoking Twelfth Century calamity
as easily as logging a fallen brick.
But staying feels like urging stones to grow,
we sigh, surprised there's anyone here at all.
Our guide smiles and climbs on board
our imported mythologies, and advises:
without its people how could we have known
the Ruined City and its history exist?
He hopes in time that tourism and commerce
will push up through the weeds and marble,
and the past will reassemble misplaced slabs.
This is a rich and creative place after all -
anything can be accommodated here,
even new kinds of occupation and ruin.

Visitors 2: Assisi

Tourists draft terse texts in Assisi's lanes
shadowed by temples and statues of saints.
The artist shading in the square beneath
the colonnades paints deities and drains,
defies street-sellers' holy kitsch and gross
arithmetics of alms and argentine.
Cameras record in every corner
moving pictures, frozen poses, that stall
today in images of stale beginnings.
But this aint no jerky Zapruda reel
to shrink us with sudden death and moment.
It's time for stillness, waiting to uncoil,
to watch spirits descending Roman steps,
catch perhaps some current assignation,
a mangy cat whose back is raised at dogs,
and kids of any age standing their ground...
In that instant visitors drop their phones,
as tablets in the Forum turn back to stones.

Visitors 3: After Ullapool

After Edinburgh perspective recedes.
Alternative gravity traps the car;
old oilrigs disgraced by redundancy
stand in mocking sea lochs up to their knees;
cities keep their distance, villages shrink.
Highways, which further south sweep like armies
striped and stretched across scorched urban earth,
are ant trails here, diminutive in broad
confident valleys; here inland waters
take command to flail at stubborn shorelines,

filching stony debris beneath the screes.
After Inverness once illustrious
A-roads decline, belittled by the peaks
that soar inaccessibly into clouds.
We find ourselves asking how long have they
been travelling, what could have brought them here?
Moment by moment the light contorts us:
we could touch that razored edge of forest
that clings like lichen to the loch's far side;
the cotton grass with its feet in a bath
of sodden peat is just beyond reach;
rock-splash droplets catch sparks along the gill
and make brief rainbows on asphodel leaves.
After Ullapool it's hard to distill
our boundless capacity for wonder
or the immensity of what we see.
Even mountains find space apart.
We'd hardly need take the eight months to Mars
to discover how small we are in Skye.

Visitors 4: Postcards home

They've made me their album, these images
of where I've been, reaching me like bridges
on those space-stations in holiday towns,
a stranger, unconstrained, barely grown,
storming with Southern trains, steaming alone,
slicing through sceneries of woods and downs:
that child's view lingers, indelible, supreme.
Then, grasped by arrogance and age, serene
as witnesses to sights we can't describe,
we're all sightseers for the rest of our lives,
still owning ourselves in places we've seen.
We brought you postcards, now pictures on screens:
You can't see me here, but I shot these scenes.
Here, take a look. Can you tell what they mean?

Old views without a view show no respect;
and while we look to live, not to inspect
for life, wonderment is all that we expect.

“You've been stopped again at immigration
by officers awaiting your oblation.
Visitors can't pass without their visas
and a little something more to please us.”

Observers

We like to think our perspectives alter
while the people that we are don't falter.

**Doubts infect the
Traveller's dreams**

... Why me? 3

I dreamt last night I had a pet,
a cat that left me for a bet
it would get a better life on the internet.
"Is this normal?" I asked the vet.
A blind dog he'd known once took a jet
to be enlightened in Tibet;
yet this was a cat, he said, I'd best forget.
But to offset my loss, he thought I should get
an egret or an avocet -
advice which put me deep in debt.

Finally on every gruesome sad excuse
that social media produce
for animals and News
I cringed to announce my cat is loose.
Facebook returns unprovoked abuse
for my failure to induce
my cat to defer its cruise.
Instagram merely tries to amuse
with endless slews of cats in shoes,
and tabbies in tutus, Siamese in canoes,
and a tortoiseshell with its head in a noose.
YouTube has fewer felines to peruse.
Its messages are more diffuse:
green parakeets who've had the blues
Bruce the camel who's fond of booze,
a mongoose and a Christmas goose
with onions stuffed up its caboose,
and countless other renegades from zoos.
A man called Noah says he'll let me choose
spares after he'd extracted twos.
There's a horse that moos, and moose that coos,
and a toad which on command exudes
an inky ooze which perfectly deludes
its prey and zoologists that it eludes.

The BBC brings balance to my news

with interviews with kangaroos
and cats whose owners they want to lose;
while *The Daily Mail* makes no excuse
for cancers caused by orange juice
and glues, and maybe anything that mews.
The Sun does its utmost to confuse
issues with views on who sues whose,
and *The Times* occludes with cryptic clues
whose meaning I could not adduce.

It's a cause for terrible regret,
in spite of all the clueless shows of abject
love for every far from perfect online pet,
that not one answer shows respect
for my fret and upset when mine left.
So why did it pick on me to reject
and punish me with this neglect?
Why me? Why make me sweat?
Why has my cat not come back yet?

**and memories of youth
and childhood only
raise more questions**

Odds and ends

What are the odds that anyone lives
and credits this to Young Conservatives?
When your parents met not much was achieved,
till years later, Son, when you were conceived.

Observers 1: Coming of age

The city's a slightly soiled museum
crusted with soot from dead men's grates,
where learning goes on show in burnished cases
double-locked with keys, one old, one newer,
of unpriced intellect, calculated class.
Tom, you said it's right to question theories,
fall in love with flowers, talk with fairies
and dream in emblems and cards.
We lighten Monday evenings with your tones,
accepting your terms of obsolescence,
wearing your status like some immense stone
that's borne to a place of pre-eminence
by ageing acolytes of Cú Chulainn.
So did you, before you crumpled to a husk
of reputation, opt for imbalance in Ireland

since there was no safe choice? or is this
what happens when you drink with Yeats and Synge?
Everything once done is ordinary at last;
and we are locked in ordinary things
waiting or searching for that something strange
that would add texture, distance, depth and range.
Could it be those you taught or failed to teach
are lost still, never having been within reach?

Ideas and argument may run like beer,
with sex like a pastime, time like a spear;
but who grows the grain in the ivory tower
where poetry and privilege wield power?

Observers 2: Songs of Insolent Experience

After the undated cacophony
of childhood with its mindtricks and inventions,
the first draft of life was scripted and scrawled
by night on skimp disordered paper scraps
loosened on Maidenhythe's scraggy Moor.
It could have ended then in chemistry,
mutilating friends with weedkiller bombs,
with penny pranks on the mainline to Wales,
or crazed discoveries of drink and speed.
How lucky everyone who ever lived,
and can remember, has also survived.

The same girls who passed us, we passed around
for drinks at The Thames, The Castle, The Bear,
the pubs to impress with poetry, wit,
and infinite futures drunk with promise,
sometimes two or three in a week, before
a snog and gasping fumble for their pants,
as sly humiliation groped us all.
These were tiresome exuberant years lost
in "experience", with projects undone,
unrequited lusts, feigned wisdom in grossed-
out freedoms, indulgence and obsession.

There was a first real love, there always is:
but how mangled, how mystified were her teens
with me to witness simulated pain,
a Hamlet played on stage by Tamburlaine?
What kind of tolerance does someone need
to be manipulated by kindness
for serial danger and rejection?
What allows love and faith to be benign?
Shouldn't she have seen that cruelty is crime?

Observers 3: Eating the placenta

When I could fly the town was no cocoon,
though only half the song is in the tune.
One night, two days, three lives to consume:
no one is sure of return from the Moon.

In Sixty-nine, if I'm right, everything
turned towards return; eighty after dark
and mirror lights might as well be galaxies
retreating; I've lost perspective to wind
and tyres, unshifted gears, the radio's
inconsequence, everything real ahead.
I take straight lines even on country roads;
signs are other people's destinations.
Half the night to get back from some outpost
of experience, to rediscover home,
light source, life preserver; half the night lost
in tunnels of air between two contraries.
A key turns a lock, a heavy door shuts
the darkness out; the quiet house warms and glows;
a clock is ticking regardless of time,
and nothing comes suddenly to an end.

Tonight is vanishing in the mirror
at speed, and someone else lies waiting, like me,
for another return; three days from now
pulses will race when some other distance
is evacuated at deadly speed;
my body feels weightless, still in motion.
There's no stopping this craft in its vacuum -
in hours I could be standing on the Moon.

Observers 4: Caesarian intersection

A cyclist coming back to Maidenhythe
has ridden all day, nowhere to nowhere
across the formless farm-flat Waltham Plain
heading for Chiltern edges and beechwood
remnants where birdsnest orchids used to grow .
Here in land squared by geometric fields,
at dusk beside a wooden crossroads sign
he meets a man who doesn't dress like god,
but stands like a milestone solemn and still
with gravel features washed by faded light.
He speaks as if prepared by certainty:
"Maidenhythe lies before you," he advised,
"Though god knows why you'd want to go that way"
The cyclist brakes to mark the time of day;
the crossroads man breaks too, in sudden

seismic rage. "Turn back, you fool. If you stay
you'll forget how to regret. Everything
not left here willingly the town will take."
Some long-brewed pain spites him to rave:
"You sparrow-minds test right by what looks right,
find good in what you've seen, not what you've made"
More than their meeting has brought him to this,
more than the sunset and buttercup cross,
more than the swoop of swallows or shadows
of telephone wires across bare earth fields.
Motionless, the two stand bound together
by evening birdsong and their encounter.
The cyclist eyes the other blighted man
who doesn't dress like god or mouth god's words.
His is the worthless wisdom of someone
with bones grown numb in a dumb waiter town
denouncing futures no one could foretell
of residents weaving chauvinist spells
inside their double-garaged gated cells,
downwind of turbaned neighbours' curry smells.

*Two checkpoint soldiers smile and block my track,
deep in discussions to conclude a pact
which promises that neither will attack
if I don't move on and I don't turn back.*

Explorers

Memory may trap us in time and place;
imagination and lies leave no trace.

**The Traveller realises that
personal identity is a
distraction from the mission ...**

Why Me? 4

Can this exploration -
my oration -
still be
about
me,
about my going out
my overnight stays
those holidays
mollycoddled ways?
Aren't these novelties
these ancestries
a tease
squeezed into this tapestry,
this frieze of possibilities
histories, philosophies
random synchronicities
and all the specificities
that I can't be without -
that make me me?
Surely you can see
why I should reprise
"Why me?"

Then unscramble this: why else time travel
is taking so long to unravel.

**... but the exploration of even
earlier memories continues**

Explorers 1: Ultrasound

At the father end of the River Thames
vast ships silent like whales slid uncontained
by scale or cargo past the end of the road.
Skipping through an undiscovered garden,
all lice and spiders, I was barred and braced
at that tumbling gate from stepping out
into the staring chill sheer Estuary air.

My breath caught at the deadly chalk-cut edge
to a swaying depthless pit; my brain swam,
and scanned for infant sense where far below
cement works belched out dust and steam from hell.
All senses pulsed with raw intensity:
this wild place might have been grave's end to me.
Years later I'd be burned by maidenhead,
Conception was an island far ahead.

Explorers 2: Gestation

Lost in woods, aged five, I later came back -
like one rejected by god and condemned,
they said, to walk the world another span,
since everyone deserves a second crack.

Adults who have such skill obscuring truth -
why people part, what makes them ill or worse -
must fear children for the power they wield,
and have some purpose in what they do reveal.
Before I could reason, while I could feel,
my sharp-lipped, tight-skinned wining aunt, a nurse,
took sandpaper flannels and acid soap
unprovoked and in malice to my face,
and pronounced to rhythms of her abrasion:
"When you were born the midwife had no doubt,
and told us bluntly you did not belong.
Why you're still here, when others must be gone
is God's own secret, I can't work it out."

Then she recounted my recovery,
lost to the forest for weeks - days or hours,
was it? - outlasting every frantic search,
then suddenly appearing at the door
like a surprise delivery by post.
"It so unnatural," she said. "You should have died.
It isn't possible that you survived.
You must be," she hissed, "some *other* child."
This pained and bony aunt died soon after
unshriven of her cruel allegation,
maybe riven, maybe not, by her lie.

For a boy of five whose mind is drilled
with stories of Jesus and Jack and Jill,
Ford cars and fairies and the Fall of Man,
untruth is not a separate option.
For someone who learns he doesn't belong
any place he comes to is no less wrong
than any other place where he could be.
A child's sole task with such deficiency -
the worthless half of some unfair exchange -
is to find the boy or girl who took his place.

I knew I was no changeling, but I changed,
left reins of earth behind and hitched to space.
I flew a weightless lifetime to confess
I only sought to lose that loneliness.

Explorers 3: Mitosis

Then instantly the feel and taste of earth
Returned me to a place of death and birth.

My first memory is waking under trees
at two years old to scent and touch release:
a hundred million spores escaping turf
and soil, enough to populate the earth.

Here is a lace of fallen awful things,
feather, fur and fungus interleaving,
worm-red mucus stain, and states that change
four ancient kingdoms back to mere domains.

Craving liquid warmth and nutrient dark,
fungi crept encaved in rot and humus,
damp-primed to hunt the chemistry of work,
their tongues of hyphae hot to lap life from us.

I crawled in crumbled leaf-mould crust with slumps
of algae, bacteria, protista
whose enzymes make a slime of woodland sumps,
my brain fermented by what life consists of.

It could take days or decades here to die;
a species must decay to multiply.
I could feel the forest floor was shifting
on the switch of exits and existing.

This lesson in the grass can't be unlearned:
that if I'm not consuming I'm consumed;
when everything that's taken is returned
the forests are more festival than tomb.

*When we're all watched there'll be no disorder,
and no need or leave to cross the border.*

Settlers

**There seems to be no escape
from subjectivity?**

Why me? 5 (It's still about me, isn't it?)

Does it mean when the lights turn red
and there's still nothing on the road ahead
that I'm special for the life I've led?
Or have I been overlooked instead
because I said I wasn't wed
or once I stayed too long in bed?

Can I deny all I've just read,
claim this is someone else's thread
(the poetry went to my head)?
Is my life rich like sandwich spread
or as homogenous as bread?

As I said, it will always be
all about me

**... except in places and
times before the
Traveller was born ...**

Explorers don't always board the bus.
Perhaps they book another hotel night,
or ditch the gang, duck the homebound flight,
extend their stay a lifetime. There's no rush.

Settlers 1: Conception

Now at war's-end two lovers hand in hand
sat close on the bridge: a mother-to-be
and a father watched water run beneath
rinsing out certainties and stains upstream,
washing to cities of what is to come.

Bright Young Belgravia and Mayfair Things
undressed there for dirty Skindles weekends,
or slept and left their Thames Hotel excess.
Outraged local decency came unlaced
while the King raced his Rolls up High Street,
took whores on Queen Street, and harpies on Park.

Here by the shipping wharfs of Maidenhythe
village girls purporting still to be maids
scrubbed clothes with silt-and-river memories
in songs of seven centuries ago.
Perhaps these uncouth wash-girls danced nymph-like
to tease blushing farmer lads and delight
the mountebanks and merchants who stumbled from
the flimsy wood-built bridge with its swingeing tolls.
And here came tales of princes, Parliament
and plays, and punishings from travel west,
the slime at Slough and how scared and scathed
you'd be by howling skies at Honeslaw Heath.
Then travellers moved on leaving maids stirred,
unsettled, muted by marvels they'd heard.

Settlers 2: Landscapes

Marsh

Residents died when skies etched the marsh
and ague ran over All Hallows and Grain;
with more mist than myth, more harbour than hearth,
they buried Hoo knows, but found me a name.

too tied for an island, too loose to be land
too dry to be estuary, too riven by streams
too lethal for strangers but home to the blind
too worldly to swallow political dreams
too dark for halos too bright for hallows
too easy for bikers too early for cars
too low for engines with ladders and hose
too windy for neighbours with houses on fire
too late for umbrellas too light to catch air
too poor for sickness too proud to have cares
too bitter for siblings too harsh for heirs
too sad for tears with children to spare
too barren for youth, and too lush for war.
Nine hundred years lived in proximity,
chalk runs to Cliffe, mist to infinity:
the Marshes have reasons too long for their shore.

Chalk

I too come from land where chalk runs to sand,
from cowslip to cowwheat, from beech to bland,
where flint meets gravel, and elegy ode,
a place that consumes the broken and old,
where Quarry Woods dizzily shrink the Thames,
where detritus and deluge faced their ends,
and Waltham Plain's precocious shove denies
their hard-edged challenge with its compromise.

Gravel

Up against lanes of azalea and ash,

unabashed by that entitlement and dash,
the parents pulled hope from a void between wars,
and spoke of the past as history's flaws;
the years to come were welcome guests, though both
soon loathed to be gorged by their greed and growth.
So they marched as landmarks to match, the way
escarpments in trees brace the river's race
and curl from an unassuming distance,
dignified by purpose and resistance.

Settlers 3: Rhymes for the Bloreng

Strange bird calls near dawn spurn a still field mist,
defeat a sophistry of feeding gulls.
The timber wagons lunge down lanes and list
with wood for hafts and harrows - all the tools
precious to labourers and artisans;
their welfare - like the churchyard yews
churned by rolling winds - surges, slumps and bends,
till cottaged workers have no more to lose.

An ancient inn half way from county-town
to sea pours relief and sweetens travel
before the stumbling turnpike road stoops down
and swerves to jump the mercury canal.
One way a tow-path hauls to Pontypool,
the other plods the wooded Vale of Usk
where brawling forge-hands, forced by sweethearts, crawl
back drunk and daft with laughter after dusk.

Between the Bloreng and the Sugarloaf
the farmers vie to out-indulge their wives -
with finest flour from Buckland Mill for stoves,
and pure gold honey mined from local hives.
The mists dissolve to rain, then snow to sleet,
on till the winter splinters into spring,
as birds fling mawkish cries across the wheat,
and stalk a country squire's swagger and swing.

**... though place and time may not
be as settled as they seem ...**

Unsettler

The past is a time of passage and passing
when embered acers face the end,
and cherry sap slips away from branches
dripping ochre, olive, crimson-green.
Old bracken blisters, cracks and curls again.
dyes the moor milk-chocolate brown.
Rain rakes rivulets of mud by the barn
and hooves carve chevrons and crosshatchings;

the rough farm track is brushed and bared elsewhere.
Mosaics of pebbles emerge from runoff.
We know the present is no stable place,
but our learning will have come to nothing
if we cannot read or appreciate
the change and danger of autumn,

Time seems to run: in fact it surrounds us -
wolves in woods lurking ahead and behind.
It's said forgetting is the human way
to survive, but so is remembering.
You might catch its flash like kingfisher blue
in a flick of reeds. Perhaps some other bird,
A train of thought, a faint recollection
of some ancient hope or joy. We can't be sure.

Before March, tentative celandines
celebrate a premature spring.
Mosses mount in minor fronds
on the bones of the telegraph poles;
pigeons hang to bald wires, harbingers.
Woodland floors turn nondescript green,
dogs mercury stirs the countdown, the burn
when everything alive points to the sky
poised for the taper of sunlight that ignites
primroses and stitchworts, and sprays cow parsley
proudly in milky clouds down country roads.
These are dangerous days which may defect
to any future of our conjecture.

... whether real or imagined

Settlers 4: Footprints on Mars

What if ours are the first footprints on Mars?
This planet that wears no outcast sagas
plays a pristine half-world hanging
on a threshold thread of space,
all comparisons borrowed from Earth,
and poised to be likewise despoiled.
Imagine this responsibility.
We will have come to investigate "anomalies",
the geologist's term for fucked if we know,
the optimist's term for down-slope hopes
of ever finding non-terrestrial life.
There were no giants rolling boulders here
or gods with seismic thunder to astonish
these unremitting deserts or tame vanished seas:
only human failure, jealousy and lust,
can outrage this incontinent land.
Remoteness not ghosts froze this surface underworld.
We may in solitude construct flowers from rust,

turn sand grains to leaf-mold, craters to brush,
we may create new landforms from dust,
blind in the eye of year-long storms.
We may stand in foothills on jagged stream waste
shadowed by the dead volcano 16 miles high.
pale against the inkjet pink jet sky
whose opaque sunlight will soon subside
to darkness, silence and ice.
But the life we discover here will be ours,
and we may yet come to respect that these
were always the first footprints on Mars.

Even if the future is uncertain,
we should be ready to shake the curtain.

*Digital police treat me like a prime:
they count on differentials; I'm
the proof and price of calculated crime.
My number's up. I feel the byte of time.*

Time Travellers

**And maybe it doesn't matter
who the Traveller is**

There can hardly be much doubt
who and what this excursion is about.

... Why me? 5

No one knew where
I was going before:
I'm now largely sure
sum, ero, eram.
I was, I will be, I am:
don't ask for more.

**because there are unexplored
possibilities in myth ...**

Time travellers 1: Stones

On the headland overlooking the sea
the stones keep time.
It's said they dance at the summer solstice,
and some see magic among the menhirs.
There is motion too on an altered scale:
each longstone makes its own revolution
though their slope and slide are always too slow
for the folk of the village below to follow.
It may take a thousand years
for the circle to return,
but whoever stands in their way
will be turned to stone.
Today there are twenty-five,
once there were nine.

... in art, science ...

Time travellers 2: Rewriting history

When Galileo made his telescope
he found motion wrapped in motion like a cloak.
When Descartes saw the fly against the wall
he drew three numbers that would say it all.
Certainty and arrogance once ensured -
and men of faith and wisdom soon concurred -
that history and nature could be tamed,

if consequence and sequence are the same.
Now time's become disorderly and strange
events no longer seem to cause events
and everything's unsound and counters sense:
historians, biographers, artists,
even physicists get a second chance,
a third, a fourth, to reconstruct the past.
Some day scientists may with pride opine
how the universe is run to their design.

**... and in just thinking
differently**

How can anything be true
when it's all about you?

Time Travellers 3: Unfolding the map

***What if time travel is achievable
by somehow escaping the
boundaries of human lifetimes?***

Aren't you tired of being where Now is Always
and Always is Now? If we could beat time
together, we'd beat time; we'd make it ours.
Who wouldn't escape our world of stasis
to find a phase beyond these grazing tubes
that process energy in gas and food
and leave us net deliverers of waste.
Even those who believe in time travel
can't believe that it's possible for them.
But what if there's a way to make it work
without magic, without technology,
not by becoming more utopian
or more mad, just by being more human?
We're lacking - trapped inside this strange cocoon
that compacts the means and ends of lifetimes -
the will to touch the doubt before we're born
and pierce the permanence after we die.

Let's imagine lying by a mountain lake:
the water laps noiselessly, trapped like ice,
trees keep their breath, the crisp sun seems to flake,
and bird shapes are stayed in air like kites.
Could we, in that perfect motionlessness,
aspire not to some mystic "mindfulness",
or states where we leave our minds behind us,
but to patience, openness, enquiry.
and find ourselves instead rocked like the pulse
of lakewater, wings, willow or daylight,
rolled unnoticed by the moon's rotation
or the planet's lolling pose through the year.

Surely it's not too dreadful to be ready
for something natural when we're alone ...

... to contemplate the birth of those unknown,
drink champagne with elders about to die
and celebrate their deaths while we're still young -
so we can feel the pulse of other times
in which we have a stake, changing those names
we have rarely heard to moments and place,
to be speaking face to face, age to age.

***The old and young experience life
at different speeds; perhaps these
perceptions could be shared.***

The rout of time means nothing to the young;
it runs too slow, but quickens over years.
In old age we'll mistakenly perceive
it to flash away, daunting, deserting us
in its brutal familiarity.
Yet to the timekeeper's stopwatch and lens,
our aging selves are fixed in comforting
histories, sensitive to the least breeze
when all that's left is retreat and decline.
Finally the present is beyond control:
we may be angry, fearful, disappointed,
perhaps quiescent as our craft prepares
to dock out there in that interstellar
backwater where we will soon disappear.
There's no way we can buy more time,
and keep command; but with humanity
and foresight there's a chance we might find life.

***We may each want different ends but,
ends are what they are.***

Most likely, we have long since closed our eyes
to everything but pleasures and panics;
our view is vague and contemporary.
An After and Before have both ceased to exist:
had we sat with Wordsworth above the Wye
we'd just have talked of weather that July.
Since nothing guarantees that we'll survive,
convictions too make opaque enemies
as we glide in blindness to extinction.
So, whether we require our deaths to mark
abandonment on a tideline of Mars,
a fully conscious landing in Eden,
a jarring halt of fatal collision,
or rust from lying in one place too long,
in any one of these states - any weak end
of disenfranchisement and separation -

we'll never get to choose our leaving speed.
Yet with this wilful winnowing demise
of creativity, hope and wonder
we will have missed the chance for living on.

Instead, maybe, we're craving to embrace
what's to come, but reveal through our campaign
the more we try, the further it escapes
our grasp till we're stranded, broken by pain,
in a place that seems almost like today -
always strange and deserted by the chase.

***Relations we've lived with may
have direct knowledge of the
distant past.***

Then if our nose is pressed hard on future panes
we hardly notice doors behind us shut.
But grandfathers and grandmothers who sat
us on their knees when we were three have seen
Victoria as queen. Their grandparents
might have mentioned they'd met Darwin down lanes
at Downe as always seeking evidence,
or brushed in London Streets with Wellington,
a pompous oaf who wanted them to know
they're pitiful, like Frogs he'd overthrown
two hundred years ago at Waterloo.
Return is hopeless now; the family
connection's lost. Fragments which once were lives
only thrive in fictions and scholarly
reconstructions that celebrate olde tymes.

***It's not necessary to reject
science in order to see possibilities
for travelling in time.***

Time travel is impossible, we're told;
the future is a cosmic roulette wheel,
and trails that lead back to the past are cold.
So the offal of opinion must prevail.
Thinking men and women fiercely maintain
anyone resisting this proscription,
or assisting devious delusions -
like New Age fantasists who bisque belief,
and random scammers, slicksters, quacks and liars -
must be unmasked and marked for their mischief
in twisting physics and maligning science.
Reality is not some flexible
philosophy for lost and hopeless crews,
it's not religion found in prison cells
when men with convictions compound their new
and caring god with caring for themselves.

Science itself may bruise and confuse us
with honest contradictions which confine
our perspective to whatever it chooses
as provable when deconstructing time.
So some lose trust in the ever-changing sketch
of “facts” and “truths”, and draw their own conclusions,
while those like us, less willing to object
to bare numbers stripped of their allusions,
are more inclined to demand theory
is verified before we close dissent
on travels in time.

*Wait though, we really
could walk out on this persistent present,
and still pursue an itinerant cause
without abusing universal laws.*

***Human ingenuity can find a
way to make this happen.***

Old explorers groped in icy dark to gouge
Pacific trade routes from America’s
east coast through the North West Passage,
and died in frozen wastes without *eurekas!*
Today our madness and technologies
can thaw the glaciers and free the sea,
turn pink wishes into more-than-maybes;
Then surely patience and integrity
can also melt the forward floe of clocks.
A species perfect in insanity,
that’s set so helplessly on self-destruct,
can’t possibly evade its own vanity
and deny itself new ways to baffle:
here then is the Invention of Time Travel:

***History might be revolutionised
if young and old
communicated in new ways.***

*Let’s say in old age we could overcome
the instinct to surrender to our past,
to kick nostalgic sentimental trips,
and instead reach full charge from energy
that flows two ways in the effervescent
and absorbent minds of our unshaped young.
We may not focus well on far off things
at first. But here’s the spark: this uncanny
outbreak of empathy reveals us as
accessible and individual,
clean to close voids between generations.
Imagine: children and elderly alike*

*disintegrate their worlds, then realign
to impersonate the inverse rim of life -
young man of ninety meets wise child of nine.
Thus we can make a vivid history
available and newly relevant
to those who will be looking back at us
from their vantage points decades out ahead.
We'll see the more the mists around us clear,
the sharper their horizons are from here.*

*And so to the heart and brain and inwards
of travelling time: each of us will blaze
only if we play two ways, both forwards
and back, like light waves in a single phase.
It needs the resolute, the mild, the tough -
the sanely obsessive who hope to touch
and be touched by the future and the past -
to forge unbroken chains that link and cast
fate with faces, centuries with patience,
and unite cascading generations.
So, with care, perception, judgement, instinct
we'll lay a circuit of the years to meet:
though we're billions, it will be sufficient
if just one crew can make our race complete.*

***It would hard to let go of the present –
and early pioneers are likely to fail.***

One more obstacle remains, and this reveals
why no one has taken this route before.
We humans mostly separate ourselves
by trust - those pleased to wait for the future
and those who see salvation in the past.
Some choose to strain their necks for what they know,
while others limpet-like are rooted fast
to the present with nowhere else to go.
But a rare few venture out for freedom,
knowing time-mates could be there to meet them.

From them will trickle time-trip pioneers
like early settlers of the Earth and Mars,
Fatigue and failure may define their graves,
but their efforts will inspire further waves
of heroes to code for gates and pathways
on frail circles of families and friends.
In time their faithful feedback could rephrase
the fuzzy logic of our means and ends,
of everything we've tried, what works and when.
And so our options and our judgement grow;
wisdom in our age, in all ages, flows
as history becomes a way to learn
and less a trick to make the past return.

***Co-operation and equality
would be essential.***

Little today prepares us to conceive
a world that's born transgenerational,
though global mutuality in science
provides a host of valid parallels
in collaboration - for invention
and discovery and for public good.
Time travellers won't use phones or ESP,
or employ links that are transcendental;
their tools are talk and serendipity.
Mass co-operation's fundamental;
no one would participate in regimes
of these durations, except as equals.
And travellers will confirm clear terms
of engagement when they meet, protocols
for sisters as they reach ageless brothers
where no one's worth is more than any other.

Sure, egos and rivalries can be a means
to extend, but not be the end of, knowledge,
(grubby money often seeds our garden,
but healthy fruit alone feed everyone);
If sleazy "Dead Relation Trips" attract
an odd time-rich indolent slob, so what?
Before we take offence, we should accept
the fact that *they* must also show respect
and learn to value people more than cats.

**Then earning respect and
overcoming the cult of individuality
would bring benefits to everyone ...**

Here then are three compelling benefits
if centuries and citizens could mix:
how silent generations might connect,
how everyone earns value and respect,
how myths mature to truths we might protect.
The cult of individuality
can die if we are we, not you and I.

What if this strange advice is sound?
when I surf time will all my identities -
invented and pretended and the real -
come to an end? Will I be vapourised?
Or will truth of me continue in new friends?

**... and this would not
be all about the Traveller**

Is it really the end if I'm not free
to agitate that it's not about me?

Time Travellers 4: Inheritants

My grandfather, son, granddaughters and heirs
stand with me to stare on the plains of Mars;
we are stalled by immensity, diminished by stars.
No one's ever been in a place so sparse
to learn what stillness and peace might teach us
about communication's power and weakness,
when we need eloquence, when plain speeches,
and how long the wait till others reach us.

Then back in the real world ...

Alaunodunum.

I met a child with Asian roots
on the steps of some museum
she'd come by thumb in football boots
for refuge with a distant cousin.
She'd escaped a brutal state
that trains the young to hold a gun
and randomly delineate
between their kin and neighbour scum.

She caught my eye and read my thoughts
and asked about the vestiges
of argument in these reports:
"So what's the sense of messages
or the end of expeditions?
Who files their saws with platitudes,
writes rights-of-passage off as missions?
Do landmarks change their attitudes?"

She'd come on routes of reverence -
Lumbini, Varanasi, Mecca -
a third of earth's circumference,
for a life that's safer, better.
She'd travelled light, brought no outcome
from Gaza or Jerusalem -
turned up, turned out without a home
in far flung Alaunodunum.

I'd come from sludge beside the Thames
exuding pride and privilege,
assuming I could make words gems
in lassitude and drivellage.
My Destiny's a nice hotel,
whose doors revolve for my return,
while she had forged a way through hell
and watched behind real bridges burn.

.

The report back

*When I reported
Eve just snorted:
“You’re overdue.
And it IS about you.”*

[end]