

The Peppered Moth, Among Other Things

(i)

I have not forgotten that day when we walked
the Freeman's Meadow with Bessie chasing
the long wooden stick-bone as we went through our old paces,
out on the Sudbury water meadows –
and over us the heavens were slow-raining ash and
smouldering smudges of charcoal, while the breeze
pushed at accumulations of dirty-silver cloud over the town,
not unlike the aftermath clouds of devastation
you'd think might blow over
when a war has passed already across a landscape.
Here and there on rising ground the fields flared up, as bright as
patches of rape flowering through smoke.

Practical men, farmers. They could spend a day or two in those times
burning off the stubble, and they'd have no reason to imagine
what all that drifting ash might make others think of, what kind
of 'second mowing' might come with the territory of *aftermath*.
New to these parts then, I wrote afterwards that these bodiless shards
of August were like 'those flakes memory planes free from shadow,
things I've read of further back than '76, ash-down risen from
distant chimneys where the fires did not smell of eucalypt or wheat'.

(ii)

Imagine, if you will, a white
moth, four little flakes of wing
so milky that you could conjure them to
a vanishing point on a porcelain plate, almost.

Now, taking the grinder with black pepper –
I won't, for obvious reasons, say 'black pepper pot'
because this one is a pretty phallic *Silverado Special* –
turn it upside down and let gravity and the battery-powered ceramic grinders
deliver a smattering of spicy grit over
the milky wings... and some more...

Eh voilà! The Peppered Moth. *Biston betularia*,

that is to say, if we are dining with entomologists.
Now imagine that you keep swivelling your wrist
as if trying again, without demanding exertion,
the handle of a locked door (perhaps into
a room where dreams are incarcerated
without your being sure of bliss or nightmare).
Before long the falling pepper will have obscured
all that was white on the wings.

And now imagine that the pepper pot is not
for pepper, forget the silver -- it's really a model chimney,
the industrial kind you could have seen in Manchester about 1850
when Manchester was called 'the chimney of the world',
and what you are depositing on the moth is not pepper
but soot, making, as it were, a carbon copy.
This is still a Peppered Moth, but now it's *Biston carbonaria*,
the melanic version, dark as the underside of a peacock butterfly.

You were just imagining the pepper pot, after all: what created
the black Peppered Moth is called 'evolution' by everyone
except those who were born yesterday,
and believe the earth was born two or three days before yesterday.
(They belong to a group called the *Clouded Vapourers*
who fly straight from the dark into
the glare of misunderstanding, without passing through
an intervening stage of enlightenment.)

One last time: imagine the trees of Manchester
a hundred and more years ago,
dyed black as the sooty buildings --
no pale peppery-looking lichen
clings, unpoisoned there, to oak or beech.

And imagine the pale version of our moth
alighting on a grim crust of bark --
it might as well let its dotty wings go all fluttery
and call *Come and get me!* to the ravenous birds.

Generation after generation in the Black Countries
of Victorian England, this moth turned from speckled white to
its adaptive dark and, as if they'd learnt the concept
of belt and braces, or how to avoid the quick dash

from creation to cremation, both forms now fly
where no high chimneys obliterate the sky
for the time being.

(iii)

We, on the other hand, are much slower
to learn anything from making our skies grow
unnaturally dark over the shambles of other people's cities.
We're brilliant at inventing
lenses that switch from clear to dark in sunlight,
but we've forgotten the days when a war could last for Thirty Years.

And although it was just the day before yesterday when he made them
we have learnt nothing from Anselm Kiefer's burning books:
he wanted us to remember how easily the trees of the forest,
their branches and leaves, the beeches of Buchen, for example,
could be burnt to a cinder along with much else.
So more than forty years after the book-burning bonfires
that had once before enflamed the nightmares
of Heinrich Heine and in 1933 brought the smell
of smouldering Asch and Klee and Marx,
he made a book out of beechwood, whose pages, whose leaves,
were the leaves of beech trees,
and he burnt it till it was a cinder in the solid shape of a book.
He called it *Cauterisation of the Rural District of Buchen*.

(*Darkness Inside Out*; Carcanet)