

## *Journals*

**Also by R.F. Langley:**

*Hem* (infernial methods, 1978)

*Sidelong* (infernial methods, 1981)

*Twelve Poems* (infernial methods, 1994)

*Jack* (Equipage, 1998)

*Collected Poems* (Carcenet Press, and infernal methods, 2000)

*More or Less* (The Many Press, 2002)

*Twine* (Landfill, 2004)

**R. F. Langley**

**Journals**

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## Preface

These extracts are from a series of journals that I have been keeping since the 1970s. During the years they cover my parents have died, I have been divorced and remarried, our two children have been born and have grown up, found jobs, left home. None of this is mentioned in these pieces. This is not because I have chosen the extracts so as to avoid them, but because the journals are not the sort of journals that directly confront such things.

I was born in 1938, educated in Walsall and at Jesus College, Cambridge, and employed as a teacher, first at a grammar school at Shire Oak, in Walsall Wood, then at Wolverhampton Grammar School. The journals begin at this point. However I very seldom wrote about school life. There is only the occasional piece here which dips into it. People I met at school, particularly my wife, Barbara, and many of my pupils who remained my friends, do appear here, participating in the events and observations recorded.

After fifteen years in Wolverhampton I moved to a new school, Bishop Vesey's in Sutton Coldfield, teaching, as before, English and Art History, and from one village in South Staffordshire, Stonnall, to another, nearby one, Shenstone, settling there into my life with Barbara. Then, on my retirement from teaching in 1999, we moved to Suffolk, to Bramfield. We had been taking holidays nearby, mostly in Westleton and then in Wenhaston, for many years before we moved to live here, and I kept the journal continuously during those holidays. Other trips, to various places in France and Italy, in Wales and Scotland, and so on, make their contributions.

These journals have run alongside poetry that I have been publishing during the same period. This is not an accident. Sometimes the poems feed directly off the journals, but they have to do with experience in their own way, which is obviously not that of the journals. Nevertheless the specific detail of scene and event has been a necessary first consideration.

I could say that I thought of the journals as raw material, as description, to do with what Ruskin advocated as the prime necessity, that of *seeing*. Some poetics might scorn such business, some philosophy might decide it is a futile enterprise, but it lit up my life. Usually I would give myself a short time in the morning to write about the day before, if it seemed likely to be worth it, so the whole affair was necessarily impromptu. I did not often go and look something up. More recently I have allowed rather more ratiocination and reference into the observation, especially after having

stopped teaching the sixth form, my favourite occupation, where I felt that the analysis was part of the spoken commerce of daily life, often the fresher for my not writing about it.

So to me these entries are vivid, because I was there, and because they have often played a part in my further thinking. As Roy Fisher says, about what he has seen and supposed, these 'have the quality of truth that I require'.

I owe thanks to many people, but let me mention in particular Sue Gregory and Andy Brewerton, who read some of the pile of closely written, hard-backed exercise books that comprise the journals so far, and were pleased by them, Julia Blackburn and Herman Makkink who took steps to encourage me to think of publication, Michael Schmidt, who began publishing extracts, most of them reprinted here, in the PN Review in November 2002, and has continued to do so ever since, and Tony Frazer who suggested this book and made it happen. And my family, of course, Barbara, who has always been reading and encouraging, and Ruth, and Eric, who also did a lot of checking of my text.

January 2006



**17 October 1970**

The eleventh tree is the ivy, in its flowering season, September 30<sup>th</sup> to October 27<sup>th</sup>, then on down through the guelder into the elder, if Graves is at all to be trusted. Ivy this morning, in sunlight, at Footherley, umbels of pale green clubs. Slow wasps crawl there with folded wings. One falls backwards and drops onto a lower leaf, climbing up again, tired. Earlier, in the track, it is so cold that dew is like seawater and there is the chilly smell of sweet rotting. Only one white gnat floats under that wall, but here, later, on the hedge, are the wasps and blue flies. Most wasps sit still, pumping the sections of their abdomens slightly in and out. They fall hard and fly little. The stream surface by the bridge is as difficult to make sense of as it always is, so I am content with this: the emerald weed is stroked out straight, and over it there are two patterns of ripples, a still one of broad troughs, blue and brown, conforming to basic features of the bottom below, maybe, then, passing over this, smaller busy ripples of the same colours, like wrinkled skin shifting along over a rib-cage. In an enclosed place in the bank, wire thin ripples fidget up and down over each other, twitching like the gnats. The bank, beyond the barbed wire which is slung across the water, is the finest autumn wreckage of all, poddled and stamped by cows, and then dusted with fallen willow leaves, each small, and curved like a paring. The whole is a garnished pudding, poddell, pudd. There is mist in spite of the pervasive sun, so that shadows don't etch, but spottle, like drops with a blur round them, onto banks under trees and onto house walls and barn walls. Things, which are thus not clear-cut, seem free to tug contexts around themselves. A spray of oak hangs below the dark canopy into the sun by the trunk. A rose in Keeper's Cottage garden pulls the barn wall and the cottage and all of the garden round it, where it catches the angled light, pink. Bracken fingers come through a holly hedge and make textual play with it. Acorns are sometimes steel cores inside a loose, ribbed, brown leather, dry skin. They fall as you walk under the oaks. The dog in the stream makes huge cups of yellow light, which swell from his black body in the centre of them, growing off him like round petals. The green ivy flowers come out of small, heart-shaped, fleshy leaves and these leaves have their own particular light green and a single, accurate line of wine red along the thickness of their edges, which colour also suffuses their stems. There are nineteen or twenty little knobkerries to each umbel. A wasp, passing in the air, burns lemon.

The leaves are wet with cold water. A man passing on a bicycle peddles more professionally as he gets closer, and smiles, though he doesn't look up, he keeps his eyes fixed on the spot just in front of his front wheel.

There is no euphonious bawdry about these wasps, never a hum to notice. Your words ought to be pale green, unmelting, and tough, like the colours the insects crawl amongst, quiet as the beginning of winter deaths. No Bacchanalia, in spite of the ivy coming after the vine, and both implying resurrection, he supposes, by their spiral growth. *Hedera helix*. I suppose the agaric is under the birches on the Chase. Here there are crab apples though, white-green, one nip of which would put bitter fur on all the teeth in your head and raw spit on your tongue. A broad-leaved plant is in the foreground, dashed in with emphatic light and dark, then the roughened field of grass runs off to a horizon of thin, grey hedge, stopping and starting along the rim. Dock to mist. Wan green, wan wasps, 'worn out with toil'. Gwan, feeble, faint. Win. Gain by labour or contest. Now there is little more to win. Suffer. Strive. Pale, pallid, fallow, pale brownish. 'His hewe was falwe'. Fealu. Pale red. Yellowish red.

### **30 November 1970**

The dog's walk is in the dark now, darker tonight because of rain-cloud, though, of course, the sky is not at all black, but always blue, and whiter at the horizon, brightest towards Shenstone and over Spring Hill. The road surface is light, blueish I think, with trees standing up from the hedges and the dog melting into the bank, though clear enough in silhouette when on the open asphalt. Although things on the ground blur together, one is conscious that everywhere is a mess, after all the rain. Water is running full tilt somewhere in the wooded pits opposite New Barns Cottage, and again behind the hedge the other side of Primrose Cottage. Puddles widen from the verges and pool in the field gates. A stream comes down the left hand furrow of the track behind Stonnall House Farm, into the drain at the bottom. The air itself is thick and wet, so that there is steam coming out of your mouth when car headlights approach, although it is not at all cold.

Smells in the dark. Coming by Ivy Cottage there are first the lights in the windows illuminating the triangle of grass with the finger post on it, then

a slight hint of bacon, which turns quickly into a nasty taste of smoke as if rubber were burning. Then there comes the sewage stink from the ditch opposite, still and insidious. Passing on the way back you get the sewage first, then a sudden, full scent of bathwater with salts in it, and the sound of water in a drain, and the shouts, then, of children upstairs, where the lights are on and the curtains drawn. Further along the lane the emptiness felt like death, but here it is completely humanised. Small, white moths are about, in numbers. John Smith's courtyard is lit from someone working in the big barn, and from the lamp on the house wall. Damp air like smoke. Green doors of stables with their lower halves closed. A big dog, in the orchard, barks as we pass and moves behind the holly hedge to keep close to us.

### **1 December 1970**

An hour earlier today, thanks to a two period afternoon. Children in the garden at Ivy Cottage, hidden behind hedges, talking, the rank smoke from the chimney smelling like it did last night, fanning, turning down into the road, puffing through chinks below the chimney coping, pea-green against the blue sky from one side, grey from the other. The chimney is a leaking, gimcrack thing on one end of the house, the end where there are no curtains in the windows, as if one were to expect chickens inside on the windowsills, roosting, treading over each other, like there were in the house in Chesterfield which was once the Workhouse. What are they burning? Later, on the way back, there is a man painting the ceiling at the other, ivy-covered, domestic end of the house. Some late preparation for winter festivity. The sky is by Poussin in his most austere colours, pink cloud, slate blue in its crevices, on a duck-egg background. It is set over a light green field that looks as if it were spring. An old sort of fresh green. The soaking things have had has sopped them with one more richness. The verges are viridian, chrome yellow, though the roads between them are dry. That sort of balance. Pools are everywhere in the fields over the disused excavations that used to be brick-kilns, and big trees are toppling inside the swamped wood. A young man is walking slowly past the end of Hook Lane, wearing some blue coarse-cloth jacket. He is thoughtful. You could believe that he was still a countryman, despite the sulphur lights of the main road in the pearl grey bed of distance behind the near fields.

*The Manor of Shenstone, four miles from Tamworth, containing ten carucates of land, enclosed park three miles in circuit, other woods without number, with we know not how many tenants, freehold and bond . . . a mill that goes by water and which could be leased for ten pounds, rights of free harvesting, several rivers full of fish flowing among the lands and amounting in all to six miles and more . . . (petition of Robert de Grendon to the King, 1333-5, for restitution of the enumerated lands which had been owned by his father Rauf de Grendon).*

## **11 December 1970**

Friday. Detention duty. Late back. All the walk in the dark, and, when I was crossing the field past Grove Hill, I turned up the side of the hedge, through the cabbages, out on to the small knoll itself. The place is exposed on all sides from below. It is the navel of the area. East is the black clump of trees in Thornes churchyard, one field away. North, the whole sweep of Stonnall, a bed of lights, clear away to Lynn and, on the horizon, Wall, at least. West, the hill slopes more savagely than I expected, down to the Chester Road, which is full of heavy traffic, with the garage to the left making the brightest glare. Opposite, over the road, the bulk of Castle Hill, with the lights poured round its base, and, more thinly, up its side. The Chester Road is hidden there by Fishpond Woods. The living places are more or less where they would have been in the Iron Age, I guess, under the hill fort with the main North-South track-way along the valley, avoiding the higher, clayey, wooded slopes over there, along the edge of the Bunter formations stretching south to Birmingham. The tree on the top of this knoll is . . . what? Stunted, anyway. There is a sort of bunker round it, as if someone had attempted some perfunctory excavation. Looking for evidence of a sacred place. Looking for the grave of the White Knight. There must have been an Iron Age post here, fronting Castle Old Fort across the road. The bunker could be a World War Two affair? Did the Home Guard ever use such places, to command the road in the ancient way? I brought a handful of dead leaves out of the depression to identify them, and the tree is a beech.

**25 December 1970**

Yesterday was frozen all day. There was the sound of heavy traffic far off on the Chester Road, hollow, like the noise bouncing inside hard, inflated tyres. Snow began in the afternoon, in small bit pills, then mingled into softer lace flakes putting the sugar on the fields. Today, the snow re-began early, cunningly. Not much traffic, only two cars along Gravelly Lane. No sound of the snow except when you stand by bits of the hedge where oak leaves are thick, golden fawn, dry as chapattis, and broken like them, rather than torn, at their edges. Here the flakes rattle slightly. This quiet. The wide fields in the Boshes, beyond Cock Heath, have the finest gradations of colour, from white, through pea-green, very light, under the fringe of the wood. The trees fade as if in deepening mist, each keeping a clear fan shape, however. The hedge swerves and writhes away. All blues are killed, even in the asphalt where they are replaced in the bays, shelters, coves, where the road is bare because it is under some cover, by charcoals. The rose-reds and quiet oranges lose nothing and, in fact, take on more, by the removal of the blues. Shapes of houses are more cubed now that horizontals are carrying snow. The sun is white, like a moon, with no glare, round, and astonishingly crossed fast by a skelter of broken puffs of cloud like snow, in waves, high up. It is like a porthole into a storm, or the moon in a tempest, oddly at variance with the absolute impassivity of the wide landscape below. Birds are walking, or standing, waiting for something, in groups in low places. Rooks or starlings. The Grove Hill field is full of tall sprouts, with big heads as umbrellas piled with snow, but each sprout with a necklace of yellow leaves hanging sheltered beneath, wilting down round the stalk, which is knobbed with tight sprout balls. So the white field has a universal undertow of yellow, hidden, till you look for it, by the shining white tops. The underwings of a moth.

And yesterday, as I passed Fotherley Hall, Christ the King's Home for Ladies, where normally one sees nobody, and it is just a country house with stables, water meadows, rows of poplars, a fine beech plantation, all rather lonely, there were, as dusk came, families visiting for Christmas. The front door was open, and two nuns were shouting cheerfully to a boy. They wrestled a little with him, as he was leaving with his parents down the front path, one nun bouncing him up and down, holding him under his armpits. The nuns,

black and white, in the snow. Then, framed in the door, a sister all in white, speaking. And one more nun, away to the right of the lawn, her headgear tied up, rather like a towel or a cook's hat, a mixture of church and kitchen. She was pulling at the twigs on a holly bush and calling back excitedly, head tilted up, to the others. Not in English. In Spanish I suppose. Fetched from Spain to look after the old ladies who were hidden inside now they had been visited. In Christmas Eve snow. In this far-away place.

## **20 January 1971**

Back home at 6.45 after rehearsal from 3. Darkening fast. No stars. Featureless, opalescent sky, warming a little to the north and with a white, static blaze over Shenstone. Only three cars pass me in the lanes during the whole walk, which takes an hour and a quarter. Not much wind, but the corrugated roof of the shed outside John Smith's creaks uneasily in groups of three sounds, two or three times as I pass. Lights in windows cast shadows and New Barns Farm sends the hedge across the road so that the dog flickers through. Away from the lights, in the even gloom, he worms along as a thick clot in the centre of a sleek, rippling penumbra, the metal on his collar sounding strangely harsh out of the liquid impression, and, when he ducks suddenly up out of a dark crotch in the verge, where a ditch rises, out onto the plain grass, your eye both stays with the blot he comes out of, and goes with his shape, which is now smoother, wiped cleaner like after a plunge, so that he seems for a second to have walked out of himself, and there is a stutter as he catches up. The visual field is seeded all over with small, pale grit, so that, as you look at the road close ahead, you see that the pebbling is not on its surface but above it, between it and your eye. Then you find the same texturing over the verges, hedges and all darker forms. So one is looking through a medium, at objects which lose the denseness of themselves as a consequence, and an unlocated floating results. If you stare hard at the side of a telegraph pole its boundary is not there, even as a gradation from light to dark. There is no such steady, observable thing. Rather there is a line which you assume beneath a sequence of nibbling light blots, which move up and down as the eye moves, and a stalk of thick dark up the centre of the pole, which can send bulges and constrictions up and down its length, like a throat swallowing. Or the edges double themselves, the outer one a

paler ghost, and, when this is so, the light patches pour in and fill between the two edges, as water, if you poured it on a polished tabletop with two scratches, close alongside each other, running across it, would run between the scratches, ending square at the top and the bottom. Back towards the streetlamps, there are two faint shadows of you, facing you on the glowing tangle of a bush. Next to them is the road-sign, LYNN, black on white metal, so bright that the sky behind it is darkened, and blotches of light drift over the black letters. A pad of privet stands up behind the sign, so multiple with tight shadowed leaves, so thickly detailed like this, that it feels heavy to the eye, and surprises it as a lump of lead would surprise the muscles of your arm if you took it up expecting steel or aluminium.

## **26 January 1971**

Tuesday. Did not notice the volume of the rain until I arrived home. Then, into the dark, with an umbrella. The dome of sound this makes hooding the head, all the time the rain is on it, importunately, and under trees so heavy that the fabric bounces and the handle responds springily. Sounds are rising from your body, the hiss of your plastic coat, like a warning, difficult to localise because it circulates around under the canopy, mixing with sounds from outside. And smells, wood-smoke from Laurel Farm, where there is flickering firelight in a front room, traces of wood-smoke hanging here and there in the road. Bright white drops are on the ends of the spokes of the umbrella, and on its toggle. You see them ignite when the rim dips below the horizon. Then the spikes look clean and black when the rim tilts up against the sky. Car headlights approaching you make the blank road suddenly glitter with a crop of dashes and spikelets. There are fungoid blooms on walls. The different textures show more dramatically a bricked up door in a barn. Seaweed shapes reach up walls from their bases. There is some sort of lichen, matt now against the shiny skin of blue brick. In the track the running water is so fast that bits of froth almost keep pace with you, bucking over the hatched grooves of the mud.

**August 1975**

Between the houses and on up White's Lane, out towards the pale cornfields. Over beyond the darker cabbages there is a most bright window, low and unmoving. It comes closer as you move on, then it is a fire, left unattended. It is the butt of an old oak, roots frizzed, smothered with white powdered ashes, heaped in churned, soft earth. There is not much free flame, but short flips of lime and cobalt at the roots of the orange-white. The bellies of the logs have been converted to cells of burning, without losing their shape. Sprinklings of sparks puff. There is a tapping, like a finger on a drum-skin, or snaps, like bones giving way under thick flesh. The heat and the wood-smoke make a home under the hedge. Nobody comes, though this is a bigger bonfire than most could make for a celebration. A trunk, abruptly, rolls and it is a shock. You expect only men to make such decisive moves. A large can is positioned under the hawthorn, where, obviously, somebody was sitting. There are hours of burning left yet. There are voices from fields away, back in the village, and subdued traffic occasionally from the Blythburgh road.

At midnight, on the beach, there is again lime green, flickers of it, in the waves as they break. The green spurts lift in, or fall sideways, and repeat in the same places, so they may be jellyfish. No noise away from the shore, on the Green, after we come back and I sit on the front wall.

In the morning, the front tyre is flat, so into Halesworth, where the Market Square Garage turns out to be interested and fast, so that a new tyre is fitted within minutes. The others have gone for a walk and I have not brought a door-key with me. So I turn off, up lanes, to Bramfield. Now the skies thicken in muffles of grey and floating, fine white mizzle. But, inside the church, Nicolas Stone's statue of Lady Elizabeth seems content. The lips smile after a tyre well fixed. Alabaster clears to nearly glass. A thin oil seems to sparkle on her skin and clothes. There are bits of hard plaster fallen into the crooks of her elbows. Maybe I can smell bat droppings. The reflection of the coloured east window takes up changing shapes, slides and fixes over her surfaces. On the back of her hand it is white, picked out with red and blue, and again on the scoop down from her lower lip to her chin. A mullion splits the highlight on her cheek. On the polished pillow, a leaf of petrol spreads. She lies in a bed of crystal spikes, while the rest of the



church lulls, moodily. Suddenly, all the strips of lace about her catch my attention. Thick lace, cut with bold, packed patterns. Her double frill of collar, both layers trimmed in a seam of wheels and bars and flower-suns. Long cuffs, filled to their double rim with buckles and flowers, punched into the glassiness. Pipped and seeded shapes are strapped together, and the gaps between them tight with pellets or rays. Oppositions in sequences, and order picked out. Something that the mind can cope with on its own terms, like numbers stamped over the carved clothes, over the drapery which was cut while nobody counted anything, by hands and skill, straight from the eyes and touch and the grain of the stone and the temper of Caroline England, impossible to explain or even describe. Adjectives flutter. Broad strips of lace edge the robe, strong running curlicues of leaf, diamonds and squares running alongside. Down her body the bedspread is striped, once or twice, with the simplest, most open and satisfying pattern of all: flat basic shapes, stars crookedly set, split seed pods radiating unevenly from between petals or out of the ends of them, the chinks between the discs filled with waves and the waves joined by a thread or two, slight variety in the simplest systems. These inroads open up the stone like grills. They let shadow into the surface as they let mathematics into the sculpture. Rest in the tracks. Elsewhere the brilliant surface comes clear of everything you can say. The curdled matrix has the brown tint of dried oranges, or, softer than that, of caramel, or creamed coffee. That analogy makes its tour of the whole event showing some more of it. A spoon went through firm gelatine to make these creases. The nails on her squared fingertips are worn smooth, and the finger ends are peppered with glints as if they were sugared. The stone becomes food. Along the end of her pillow is one clear, thin zig. She smiles. You can count parts of the pattern on her lace. You can take such facts away with you easily. The car stands under the crinkle-crinkle wall. Water falls filmily. Lunchtime on a Tuesday. Words will be left to make where you are now, and what you have seen. Stone kept account books and was almost illiterate, though his manual on fortification is stylish, and contains, I have heard, jokes. A single zig between ruled lines across the end of her pillow. The pillow is polished alabaster. Stained glass reflects on it, shaping up from where you stand, dodging about. It all has to do with the Lord Chief Justice, with his son, with Theophilia, Elizabeth, Winifred and their mother and father. You can remember names. White marble and black touch, imported across the North Sea. Facts. But how are the statues, and how is the invisible woman?

April 1977

So many dapper, smiling fears come pretending to be only entertainment. Ducking down and tilting their heads to get their faces closer to the children, or running nimbly after the girls, clattering a lower jaw. Which could be snapping or laughing. It could be applause at their own performance, recommending itself as all part of the dance, circling amongst the bystanders, sweeping up the shy and the poor, even an unsmiling girl dressed in black who was trying to walk past. It has no hands so it cannot accept any money that might have bought it off. So what can you say to its wooden, polished face? Ruth screams. It is a tall goat. You can see its painted white eyes and neat black horns. The only soft thing on it is a grey, cotton-wool goatee, glued to its chin. How loud and how dead a jaw it runs around with! The legs are those of a cricketer from the knees down, stitched with bells and wearing black shoes. It is taller than a man should be, and it looks across at you over the heads of the spectators and the stick dancers. For a moment or two there was an equally tall lion, with a shredded, golden mane. He did not look in this direction. Often the goat did, in his royal blue and gold coat. He stooped, to get down near the back of your neck, and danced only with his legs. He could see you clearly enough for his purposes, through his throat, and doubtless, since he was trained in Gloucestershire, and has come here along Will Kempe's route from London to, now, Attleborough, doubtless he knows what sort of smiling to expect.

What am I expecting to see at dusk, out past where the houses stop, where the human goat might walk? New categories. Sudden understandings, over the verge and under the scrub oak. So much of a fright that you resent the morris men. Listen to the steady, quiet quacking of the pairs of duck as they firmly cross the sky, mapping out their course. As they come down on water they are immediately so noisy that it is an outrage to the silent evening and your gentled blood, and I think your eyes widen. Certainly the concussion of flapping wings is an assault on the sides of your head. Where are north and south? The coast is miles away and the stars are hidden by branches. Hawthorn. The stream looks icy and immobile. White mercury. But it makes random, disjointed, urinous sounds. As the light goes there is an interim period when the pheasants, more of them than you could imagine, thrash their way out of trees. Moorhens, with voices too big for

them, comment and walk into ditches. There is a network of water, down low, slipping everywhere. One thrush sings coherently, sure and composed, and one or two owls search and hoot in a dry, restrained manner, as if they were not using all of their breath. These are sweet violets in the orchard, wide in the dark. Celandine everywhere, wet yellow wax. Mats of purple dead nettle. Clear water, come here in winter and not yet churned by men's feet. Smell the garlic.

In the mornings there are pied wagtails, clean birds, with bills full of nesting material. They search the flint wall behind the curtains of ivy, and the barn roof, in the fresh sunlight. They stand for absolute certainty, with every feather a signature and each movement predictable. The purpose of them has been decided already. You can make a memorandum of it, as the White King said. The ivy has been scrupulously polished, every stem and leaf. Make a note of it so you cannot forget. Like this. Look. Viewed and valued and priced, by Edward Bedingfield, Gent, Thomas and Francis and Daniell, 17<sup>th</sup> February, 1629. In the parlor. Item. 'The picture of an Moore on horseback in a large Table the picture of Saint Jerome the picture of Mr. Coke his mother'. What are you looking at? A black man or Anne? There was an Anne here, says a footnote, the daughter of Richard of Stansted who married William Baker of Bury in 1561. So she was not far away. But there were also Saint Jerome and Bridget Paston. The two of these define your choice about what might be on the large Table. It was a list made to settle what was there. But it is a puzzle. Since he had the picture of a saint, he could have had a picture of 'an Moor' next to it. If he had a portrait of his wife, probably he had, next to it, one of 'Anne Moore'. Invent your punctuation and spelling. 'The Prologue is address'd. Let him approach'. Quince is doing it all the time.

At Gislingham church the plastic was blocking the middle light of the south aisle west window, where the flycatchers and blue tits came in two years ago, is loose and lifts, and cracks down again with a quiver of metal and glass, at unpredictable intervals. The sound is hard and decisive, even bitter, in the quiet. In the Columbine Window I look also at the meadow saffron, which is white, with petals which could be just petals in general? The columbines, thunder-blue, are certainly columbines, however. You could list that. Some flowers are shown from above, excellent. Ah, but, other bits of the same

blue are not flowers at all, but fragments fetched from somewhere else to make up the pattern.

The three-clawed, black cats' feet in the shield are unexpectedly grim. The outer pair of kings, headless, have robes so calm a green that they could be called jade, or celadon, like grass under an overcast sky. They promise peace and release and open weather later in the day. The royal blue cloth, Kate says, is cheap. But it is gorgeous in effect. The shed, erected at the back of the nave, at the tower end, is actually old, an elaborate gallery, varnished a raw, matt brown, and rotten. Nigel lifts the door away from its stairs, and climbs in to appear half way up in space, in the tower arch, wearing a filthy ARP warden's helmet. Dan takes him for a bogle. Which is funny. The children play with the hourglass dry depths of sandy dust under the floor of the back pews. The pulpit is a space ship, as last year. This year they talk to each other a lot. Dry as talcum. Rot has done its uttermost. It trickles. The ARP helmet floated ashore here somehow, from the war, which nobody here except myself lived in. Now we are in another cross-section of time. See them in their strange costumes, with long, untidy hair, Nigel unshaven and with round lensed spectacles. See how they let the children play in here. Listen as Dan asks what else happened to Christ, and Nigel suggests that they read the book when they get back. Brambles pile over the lower panes. Slow worms slide into motion. A sound from a mouth is as much an archaeological feature as the Jacobean altar rails, dried or drenched, as it comes out in the space under the roof beams. Touches will be left unwiped. Gestures of children must stay. How strong is stillness?

### **August 1979**

Solus to the track at King's Farm. Looking for owls, but also looking for the way things handle, and, for this, it is necessary first to simply stand still, which is at once to sidestep the roles. Full light still. Pink cumulous heads look over flint-blue, low strata round the horizon. Rain over. Smells in suspension, solid and sweet. Along the edge of the field, where stubble has been ploughed in, a drift of smoke-blue mist. Patches of froth in the puddles in the track. Small flints crunch. The field is edged with hedge and bracken, under which is a hidden warren, obviously, as rabbits are out over

the broken soil, lolloping. Binoculars see the ginger patch on the back of the head, behind the ears. The ears translucent like the corn stubble. The high eyes, big and set in bone. Tranquilly the dusk comes, soothing the air. Two blackbirds quibble and cluck. A robin sings. Grasshoppers begin, and keep it up, two of them, to my right, louder and closer. Bats twist. Pigeons make their moves. The sky yellows. The pink heads whiten. More silence. I am under an oak, and the leaves hang round, each curled, faded. Some eaten to the veins. Others just pierced. The doing of this is something over, and knowing how it was done, by . . . maybe, caterpillars, is like knowing a story. If I saw it being done . . . it would be like listening to a story, surprisingly pleasing to be being shown it, as it is now to watch a fly, in silhouette, moving round a twig. So separate and far a little event, I am only hearing about it. The trunk of the tree glows as it blurs in the darkness, so that, though it is close, it looks impossibly far. Just glimpsed, although the signs are I am looking steadily at something two feet away. Its base descends into bracken, which, I take it, shadows the trunk down there, a long way down, by my feet. Very, very gentle shadows. Amazingly unemphatic and gradual, and the bracken so still it must be behind glass. All this is indoors, to judge by the feel of it, and the smell, too, seems to have accumulated in a room. When wind comes, slightly, the curved twigs give a single jig, each its own way, perfunctorily—a gesture to show that they move like that, that twigs move like that, the account of how a wind might move them. Instead of coming closer to objects and events, I feel them move off further into fiction. Their establishment is due to a grip I have on them which comes, as I think this out, from a sense of sinus pressure at the inside of my eyebrows, either side of the root of my nose, and, if I push out my lower lip, from the tucked muscle under that. A warm control, which keeps anything chilly and immediately real away. The bent leaves are a sight I see. The furry ‘trunk’. The white plates of water in ‘puddles’. The spectral rabbits melting, repeating their excursions and retreats. My head has to be turned to see the different corners of the scene, which come in turn, then, not as if they were all there, all round, all the time. I scan all round, with the binoculars or without. The field of vision. Things behind the head are not there while they are not being recounted, but are recovered each time I look. Strictly memories. How briefly the sounds come above silence. In the leaves, a tapping, as of hard moths on dry paper. Sometimes in a run, like a single pebble. Reality is not possible, because immediately the noise is in the past, and one of a pair

or more of fictions. A decisively heavy blow in the thicket, not followed by any consequence. Is there fruit to fall, or feet? Only possibilities are made by these sounds. I shift. A response of some sort, on the path, about five paces away. I need the binoculars to collect light enough to see even that far, and it is a . . . now I come to it . . . in bits . . . yes, a rabbit, rigid, looking, sitting, tense, quite clear. It relaxes, hops away slowly round the curve, past a puddle. The response, I work back to it, was its sudden jerk as I moved. Did I make it a rabbit by expecting it? Not so. I was not so primed. By now I don't even expect to walk back to the village. The world does continue to produce rabbits. They are features of something I am not making. But no more full of impact than events in a story, products of that decorum. To die would not be to see the world stripped of glosses then, however terrible or exhilarating that might be. It would be to read it from behind this block, this thick, warm, spectatorship, from this warm audience seat. Opening to the world . . . there is no such possibility. It would be easy to tell other stories about it, so that a demon appeared as objectively as the rabbit did—but pointless, since that fiction too would be a tale. My head would turn, and either side of the look would be the silence, and immediately before and after the sight, it would, as now, not be there. Walking through sentences. I hear this bit, then that. Already the rabbit is résumé. And, when I move, my heavy shoes will crunch. Others will hear and see. I shall knot and shrink, a snail clenching, and stop watching, and be a role, which, in another way, is a system of parts—feet walking down there, shoulders hung out at the sides, hunching, a collection with no discernible centre to consider and contact it from, know it from. Indeed the release will come when I just let myself out into it again, and, giving up knowing, just do it all again. Once again the absolute sighting of me, or of the rest, was not there, and, as Nigel reminds me, back in the sitting room, just as well, since that sort of given solves everything, and at once takes away the process in which we live and find any sort of responsibility, over 'seventy thousand fathoms of water'.