

Patchwork is a celebration in words and photographs of an area in south west London that still retains a feeling of rurality. The book begins with the big new estate, circuits a wetland reserve, passes through field, park, wood and cemetery and ends with the sky.

As a writer Robert E Smith is particularly interested in haibun – a combination of prose and haiku poetry. His work has appeared regularly in *Blithe Spirit*, the Journal of the British Haiku Society, and other publications. Robert is a keen birder and lives close to the patch with his wife Ann, a musician and writer.

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Patchwork – writings and photographs

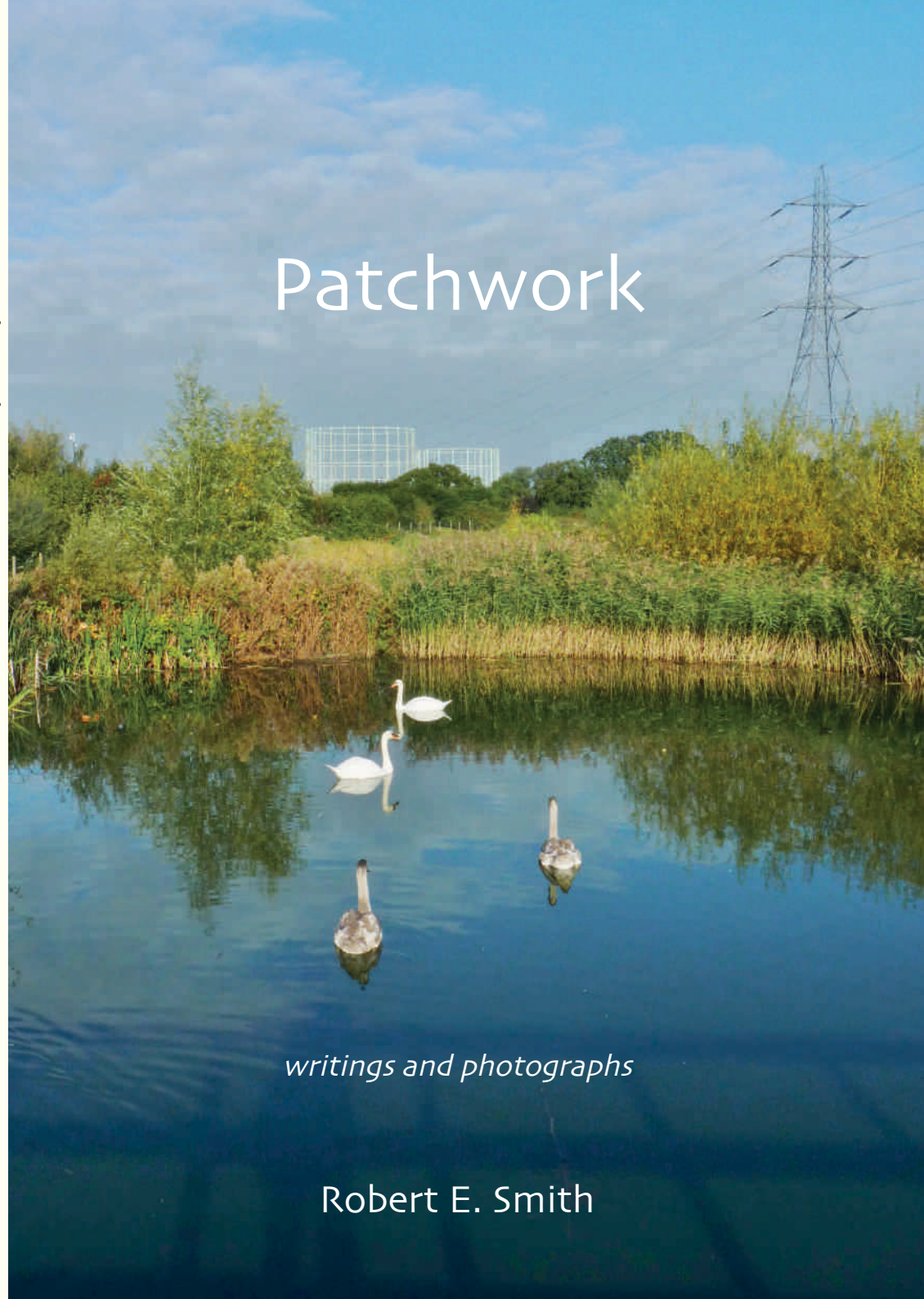
Robert E. Smith



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**Patchwork:** A thing composed of many different elements so as to appear variegated- Oxford Dictionary of English

**Patchworker :** A term used in birding circles –someone who regularly visits a particular area to record and study its birdlife.

*‘When I’m painting in the north east- I hardly ever move out of the village. I hardly ever move from one spot. I find the more I know the place, the more I know the particular spot, the more I find to paint in that particular spot... I do feel the more you know something the more you can get out of it-the more it gives you.....*

Joan Eardley-Scottish artist(1921-1963)

## Introduction

Patchwork is a response, in words and photographs, to the natural and human environment within an area of roughly four kilometres square in south-west London. The patch consists of a modern estate, with parkland and a wetland reserve, fields, a wood, a cemetery, a park with football pitches, two brooks and a small floodplain. The whole area is overlooked by gas holders and crossed by pylons.

It is an area that I have known for over fifty years; that I have birdwatched intensely, especially during the late 1960’s and again for the last ten years, and concurrently, as an inspirational source for both writing and photography.

The majority of the writings are haiku and diary entries. There are other short verses and haibun (a mixture of prose and haiku invented in the 17th century by the Japanese poet-monk Basho).

The author’s photographs have been chosen to illustrate, in both a straightforward and more unusual way, each part of the patch and also to complement the writings.

Robert E. Smith, January 2016

**Estate**



## April 2016

A fine and warm spring day to venture into the housing part of the estate; into the labyrinth of crescents with their shining white dwellings and the welcome of fruit tree blossom.

I almost have the area to myself. Two small pools to investigate. Newts hang motionless, half way below the water's surface, and then kick into the weeds. A water boatman sculls away on long kinked legs; a miniature albatross of the deeps. Like lanterns, bird boxes hang from the trees but none are occupied. On the estate's edge a small grassy area bordered by hawthorns that hold a revelation of house sparrows.

Peter Bruegel please note

a flash of snow

and people everywhere

unseen visitors

the swing gently

stirs

the estate's sphinx

the ginger cat enjoys

spring sunshine

night scarcely lit  
a dog bark  
in the wilderness

within the silence  
of waiting  
the shrubs alive



## **January 2015**

There's not much of the past here. On the whole that's been built upon or landscaped. The grassy amphitheatre has replaced the sewage works' settling beds and, beyond, the American style houses stand on former allotments. The works' lodge house remains, and the lakes were once high-banked sludge beds where lapwings nested and snipe fed in winter. No, too backward looking!

Carved and landscaped something bright and new. The park a miniature Parliament Hill but less populated and with distant views not to the city but Canary Wharf.

## **August 2015**

Briefly, in the shrubbery, the willow warbler's falling weep.

## **September 2015**

On the highest point of the estate grey mushrooms move gently in the hardly breeze.

Moorhens in their stillness. Ripples advance and reflected trees quiver.

## **September 2015**

I've availed myself of this vantage point. In the past I've lingered for a while but now I've settled into it. It's within

the laid-out parkland shrubs, a bench besides one of the paths. A little low perhaps but adequate. It's facing one of the corridors that here and there divide up the shrubbery into sections. This corridor curves slightly downhill towards the pools. This morning several mercurial chiffchaffs were showing; picking at the leaves for insects or flicking to the ground to feed in the grass. They passed by seeming not to notice me in my stationary mode. Being attentive and single minded slowed down the movement of my thoughts and the passage of time to a trickle.

## **Wetland Reserve**



**The Swans have gone**

Gazing from your dark masks  
you commandeered the pools  
as ships of the line  
and assaulted the banks to reconnoitre.

Now you're returning to the wild,  
hardly recognizable,  
steering straight and at a pace,  
high up, strange as snakes,  
necks eeled-out and wings thrumming.

**The channel in summer**

With the sun and wind's complicity  
diamond munitions from deepest mines  
flare the surface  
with a thousand penetrating stares.

**New world**

The carp's a whale  
and the damselfly  
an exotic plane  
grounded on a yellow isle.



the mallard bathes  
showering  
a rainbow

relentlessly  
snaking a path  
aerial dragonfly

the swans slowly dip  
in the overarching sky  
Cygnus invisibly flies

the pools  
icy trails  
overnight phantom skaters

rain droplets linger  
behind the wire  
the water rail's lair



fisherman's tale  
the cormorant spreads  
its wings

hear the dabchicks  
trilling  
a spark to ignite spring

### **January 2015**

Swan in profile and the reflection of water onto its body: white gloss sine waves on a matt screen. Sprites of a waiting spring. The wind and waves embodied.

### **June 2015**

Early morning before the sun blinds the water. The hidden forest revealed. The leaping fish that now dart into the undergrowth.

### **July 2014**

Water boatmen, the shadows of their movements on the clear bottom of the pond. Their leg ends, casting small black dots on the water's surface, are the epicentres of ripples; ripples of two types: coming in two's and intersecting or quick moving singletons; a miniature shock wave as if from a small explosion.



## **September 2015**

Beside a pool a woman with her child.  
 'Where have all the fish gone?' she said.  
 'Before there were more fish than water.'

## **November 2013**

Quick brush stroke of a kingfisher  
 kingfisher for a slither of time

## **December 2013**

The reed buntings fan their tails in flight to show the whiter outer feathers. Its seduction or flirtation: 'hey we're disappearing but we're going to tantalise you.'

Down the rabbit burrow.

## **December 2015**

The moorhens' world is reeds, water and grassland. Hidden moorhens of the explosive cork from a bottle call. Moorhens who at present have to share the pool with the squabbling gulls. Gulls who can hover like circus angels waiting for sustenance. Gulls in a group, constantly on edge, cackling or calling krrearr, each with its own tone.



## Fields



### **Horse and Rider**

And the grass springs back  
as together you recede now  
hidden by the slow-growing hawthorns  
that transported sixty years behind  
supported red-backed shrike sentinels.

### **Creating weather**

Under the clouds slowly drifting north the horses amble and  
feed.

If this undulating shroud could be punctured we might  
breathe again.

a glass of water  
to clean the brush  
paint again

cold and grey  
a bivouac  
of stock doves



sheathed in frost  
the dark impenetrable mass  
of blackthorn

swifts pattern sky  
a horse and rider  
stride the field.

resting gulls  
anchorage on the  
sea of grass

black-headed gulls  
gleam white  
against the dark grey sky  
long neck  
of the British Airways flight.



### **April 2015**

I don't take myself to be St Francis; I know the crows will not heed me when I say 'be still, be quiet and listen.' They watch from the rooftops or sit waiting on the fence. And when the feeding comes some are by my feet, but most a little way off on the path or beyond the field's fence. There are a few who seem to be onlookers not attempting to face the scrum as the bread is distributed

### **April 2014**

The same old white horse alone in the field. Its body like some lovely slab of faded marble. You can see its rib cage and where the saddle had been. Hopefully it is going to enjoy a rest.

### **April 2015**

Under a grey sky floating crows are the guardians.

### **May 2014**

This early morning, from the fields south east corner, there is a hint of rurality: a paddock of horses, gasholder wood full of oaks and at my shoulder the lane of splendid hawthorns. For a moment the collared dove's song fools as a cuckoo's.

### **July 2014**

In the field the horses under the blazing sun. They need a tree to shade them.

Oh, if only that oak would grow a bit quicker!

### **November 2014**

A woman jogger sings scales as she runs





**Pylon**



These stripped-to-the-bone towers  
with their chandelier earrings,  
and bracelets on infinite arms  
stretching into a distance  
of secret missions.

the pylon held by wires  
in the breeze  
poplars swaying  
expanding  
and compressing

an observer  
like this bird of prey  
lonely outposts

### **July 2015**

Pylon and heron two loftiness's in grey

## **Gas Holders**



I ascend  
the ladder  
to the gas holder's top  
I climb.  
From the pulpit,  
In the company  
of the kestrel,  
I scan  
the massed red roofed suburbs

### **July 2013**

It's the halfway point and the bench is a rest without refreshments.

I confront the gasholders with the pigeons about their heights

—and that means there's no peregrine around.

**Wood**



## The Predator

In the woodland glade beside the stately gas holders, emitting their familiar electric hum, I waited for the predator that I felt was in the oak canopy. In the silence, upon me, were eyes like the eyes on a peacock's closed tail. As I turned, a brown form, for that was all it was, broke away from high up and whispered away.

clockwork water drops

at the unseen

chiffchaff's smithy

resting butterfly

lost in the woodland walk

of its underwing

sunlit columns

spiral stairs

for dark butterfly disputes

acorn season

the jay's

full sack



slowly the leaf falls  
a whole year  
cradled



## **January 2012**

As kids we called it jays' paradise, now its parakeet estate.  
No escape from their ribaldry.

## **November 2014**

More and more of the ivy reveals itself as the oak sheds its leaves. Together they might belong to a tropical rainforest. A late wasp flies about the leaves, perhaps seeking a hibernation spot. A movement of leaves and a squirrel's tail waves.

**Park**





## Migrating Swallow

Left its barn at the far end of summer  
cutting its way into another season  
the swallow angled into the distance  
as you passed with the *click, click*  
of roller blades.

Paralleled the railway track,  
covered by a thousand moving commuters,  
and overtook a snake of cars  
whilst you made another circuit  
passing me with the *click, click*  
of roller blades.



I long for mystery  
the Japanese woman  
walks into distance

The year's hottest day  
a lone black-headed gull  
emissary of autumn

littering the ground  
the trees'  
colorful shadow

fading football pitches  
Archimedes' shadow bends  
to trace the sand



### **March 2015**

It's the last quarter of March when common gulls pass through in numbers on their spring migration to the north-east. But today just a singleton on the football pitch.

Am I the only observer of its thoughtful ballet? Quick long forward strides, with feet lifted as if the grass were glass, followed by gentle turns. Its head slightly downwards, swan-like. Black eye set in a rounded head. Gleaming, pristine white underparts and grey and black wings. A beauty on this green catwalk.

### **March 2015**

In the overgrown patch that looks like a forgotten garden the cherry blossoms.

Returning along the same track I pass a Japanese woman, who wears a sunshade beneath her hoodie, and enter through the gate onto the vast green land and the large sky. Paper on the pitches and crows in numbers striding on high legs, running or hopping away when looked at too closely. I walk through a patch of cherry blossom perfume; the Japanese woman's being.

### **May 2015**

First sunbather. The purple and blue umbrellas of a mini Riviera. Yes the weather is fine but those clouds are casting shadows somewhere.



## June 2013

Ah yes, the world is flooded with light.

How to capture these moments when I sitting by myself on the bench looking towards the gas holders that seem to fall forever towards me?

The women are pushing their charges near and far and the dogs are running quickly after their balls. A jogger comes out of silhouette and passes me brightly. The lozenge fanny shape of the vapour trails caught through the binoculars; the trails that rapidly become nothing. The intense blue sky. The blessing of solitude.

## July 2014

I'm standing at another corner.

I like the strong warm southerly wind and its rush into the poplars.

Dappled grey and white clouds with blue to the south. I guess the blue will displace the grey and white and then there will be true heat.

Oak and pylon in silhouette.

School sports on the year's hottest day.

Here comes the sun to spoil the fun and competition.

## **Cemetery**



## **Cemetery sketch**

Park of stones and trees  
of earthbound angels  
and groups of people and lines of cars.

Periphery of bird song  
a shrieking dash of parakeets  
and flotations of sombre doves





grounded angels  
the willow's flow  
touches my hair

dark poplar heaven  
a bird flies into  
the swaying loft

last cut  
the landscape  
rolled up

the pollarded willow  
eclipses the sun  
corridor of darkness

an afternoon moon  
slips away  
little owls yelp

across my shadow  
a snapshot of  
departing stock doves



## July 2014

In the cemetery a most wonderful lavender bush full of gatekeepers and honey bees. Silent the butterflies, sounding the bees and vaporous the lavender.

## July 2014

what coincidences of yellow and blue: the woman's blue jacket and yellow tee-shirt, the yellow and blue graveside artificial flowers, ragwort with chicory

## October 2014

A feeling of tedium as I enter the cemetery: the long drive with the stately poplars, the size of the place and in some respects its enclosure. Drove of black vehicles and the gathering of people at the entrance to the crematorium.

I take the long way around avoiding the monotony of the avenue. But for the standing stones and the occasional angel the cemetery is park like. There is a brief flurry of fallen leaves; soon it will be at its best I think.

Gradually the initial *ennui* fades and the relative enclosure becomes a blessing, an escape from the openness of the fields and the park. The gasholders have lost their dominance; all that's left are its ramparts. There are glimpses of blue sky and cumulus clouds. A gull becomes a sparrow hawk.

Back at the entrance, now an exit, the avenue avoided once again.



## Lanes



hedgerow at dawn  
the first  
hungry birds

on the edge  
of my contemplation  
blackcap singing

all day your smiling eyes  
a morning full of  
butterfly Cyclops' winks

hidden hand  
the blackthorn blossom  
falls

once again  
turning with my shadow  
into the shadowed lane



### **January 2014**

A bygone age: the wren types a brief memo complaining about the frequency of rain.

### **February 2016**

Unseen the sun that briefly illuminates the swaying poplars. Grey to light beige. The distant wail of an emergency service.

### **May 2012**

The hawthorn, magnificently in full bloom, throwing its arms; a wild extravagant woman in white carnival costume.

### **July 2012**

At the passage's end two speckled woods engage in their circular aerial boxing. At this moment this is happening elsewhere in a thousand woodland glades and hedgerows.

### **September 2015**

The tightly closed sunflower, the petals a sleeping crab's legs and claws. The other, full of energy speaking with a megaphone.



## **The beheading**

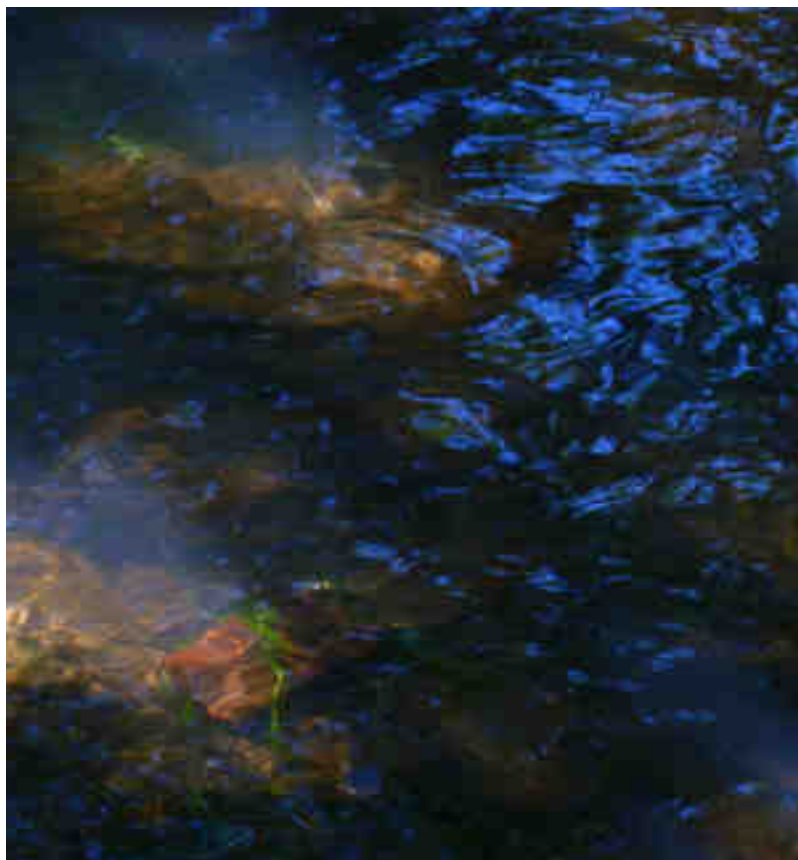
Was your neck too long  
your expression too bright  
for survival intact?

I had seen the signs:  
other beheadings  
and wilting leaves.

From a distance I could see you'd gone  
but in disbelief  
I looked again.

You were toppled  
your golden head gone  
no more looking into the sun.

**Brook**

**January 2016**

The grey wagtail's outrageous tail movement. He's like a conductor beating time at a very fast tempo, perhaps crotchet equals 120.

**August 2014**

Today the stream is turbulent and tea-coloured, full of grass and paper. It hasn't been raining so that's not the cause of the torrent. It's going on and on, there's no let-up.

Usually the stream's placid, hardly moving and only a few inches deep. It's no place today for the goldfinches and the fox cub to drink from.

**August 2014**

over the bridge  
a funeral proceeds  
under the bridge  
a kingfisher arrows

## **Flood Plain**



## July 2014

on the flood plain  
dull traffic sounds distantly  
strong aniseed smell  
white star clusters of meadow sweet  
wren and blackcaps fly for cover  
rain wets the page  
children's cries and shrieks  
wind all around  
in the trees a woodpigeon croons

stolen from Monet  
on the borderlands  
of swaying poplars





**School**

## **February 2016**

These classrooms catch the morning sun. Sometimes, in summer, the children are out and about on the reserve. It was they who made the duck houses that now, unfortunately, have sunk. I've reconnected with the sculptured plaques<sup>1</sup>, constructed in 1950, that are attached to the school walls. They seem like biblical scenes: men and women feeding birds and animals. Something to do with nourishing, I suppose. The plaques are returning to nature, invaded by yellow lichen.

## **June 2015**

I pass it often as I make my way across the fields: the only tree in the school grounds.

Its foliage tends towards the spherical, a contained explosion. Oh to be concealed in its dense foliage. Far from the mass of the wood it seems content in its isolation.

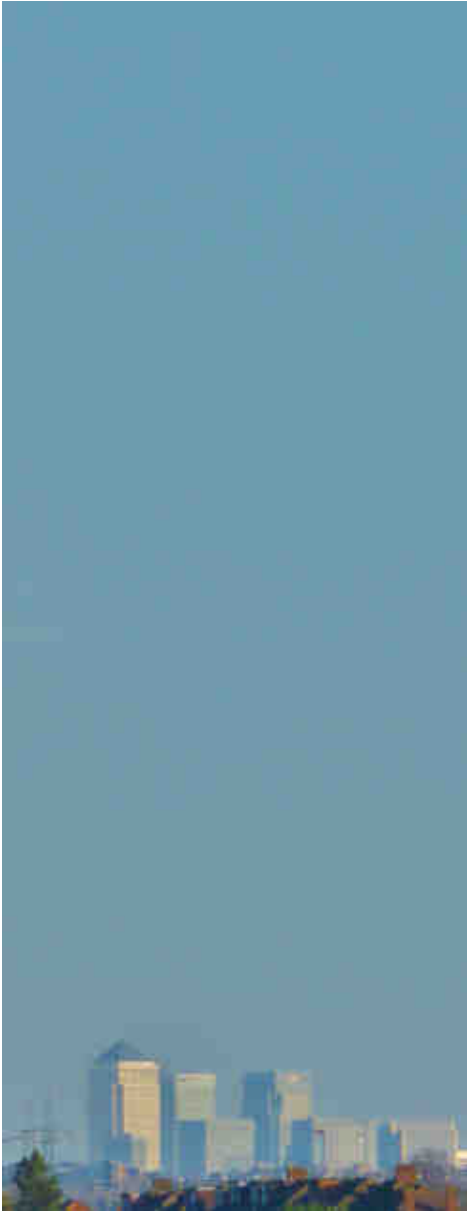
<sup>1</sup>Commissioned by Surrey County Council and carved out of Portland stone in 1950 by eighteen year old Maurice Reeves, a student at Wimbledon College of Art. The work was influenced by Eric Gill. One of the sculptures represents summer.

## **Reflection**



After ten years  
do I wear you like a patchwork coat?  
Evening sunshine,  
the gentle voices of women  
swan dipping

**Beyond**



## A false spring

the day pivoting  
so the light  
suggests

The familiar bench welcomes. Bright but windy, almost a preamble to spring, with the song of a distant mistle thrush, a great spotted woodpecker drumming and the orgasmic *oo-oo-oo* of the stock dove who from his poplar perch tips away like a paper aeroplane – a small parkland harrier. On windless sunny days it seems as if the Earth were young with the sky littered with mock comets so close that you can see them move; vapour trails at 30,000 feet that generally maintain a westward course.

Today one is birthed strongly and luminously from the metal cylinders but away from its parents unable to sustain itself against the strong north easterly. Rapidly the train buckles into a long snaking path—a laddered stocking under the blue heaven—disintegrating into floating bones and teeth.

Then the coda of abandonment: on the way to erasure delicate cloudlets of question marks without a sentence.

her skirt ripples  
the last kiss  
taken by the wind



great wall of blue  
swifts winnowing

distant city turrets  
gold in the now green  
of Monet's trees

beyond the town's ramparts  
the insubstantial citadel  
of clouds

past thoughts  
now the pine  
outgrows the spire





