

At twelve years old, I roamed through history  
Headed with my brother for Ambersbury  
Iron Age Hill Fort. We scuffed our sandals  
As monks had, scouring a rut along the Green Ride  
To Golding's Hill in Epping Forest, Essex, England.

We skirted furze, Thomas Hardy's reddleman fuel,  
On Coply Plain and jam-jarred tapioca frog's spawn  
From Jack's Hill Bog. I straddled Tippa Burn's banks  
To aid brother across the brook. All for the unmitigated joy  
Of stepping on the dapple-lit softness of Cushion Moss.

White-spotted, tawny fallow deer, their palmate antlers erect,  
Morphed into bracken-shadow silence. Mouths agape,  
We gawked through light-stippled hornbeam leaves  
To glimpse a tuft-eared, acorn-pouched red squirrel  
Cede tree-top drey sites to its American grey cousin.

By family tradition, we replaced a copper penny  
Buried in the bole-well of a coppiced beech.  
We grappled gnarled branches where, half a thousand  
Years earlier, peasants lopped their firewood  
Above the heads of lowing, cud-chewing kine.

A pollard among the coppards held the talisman  
Rendered smooth and shiny by rain and deadwood  
In its humic acid basin. Old coin odor burned  
Metallic in my nose, an acrid, foreboding augury.  
Cleaned, the token smelt of rotting leaves and punk.

We lay side by side, as brothers will, and heard a wren scold  
A viper for stealing eggs, incessant as a harridan shrew,  
Like mother berating father for insufficient funds  
To shelter, clothe and feed a four-childrenerd family.  
They only argued about money; about farthings,

Halfpennies, threepences, tanners, shillings and florins.  
We agreed, my brother and I, that as first-born son  
I must find a job. So, at twelve, I became a printer's devil  
And drifted away from ghosts of Waltham Abbey monks  
And specters of toiling serfs, through history into commerce.