

What makes a college?

Is it the golden stone, the sober grace,
the hall's high roof, the old carved oak,
the stern moustachioed portraits;
melon starters, shot in the guinea fowl
– no smoking please – and once a year,
Watkin Williams Wynn's peculiar pudding?

Is it the still, musty chapel,
with its candlelight and litanies?
Or the rush to print on time,
an essay crisis looming;
sleepy afternoons in the Habakkuk or Wilson;
the stained seldom-worn formal clothes,
or never ever stepping on the grass,
even when you come back in your mind?
The books unread, the lanes unexplored...

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It is all that, of course, but it's also
something narrower, longer:
a window, a strip of sky past gables –
just enough to know how broad it really is;
or a sense, as you ascend the spiral staircase
that someone has gone up before you:
it is an archway opening up to splendour.

It's the wisteria, with all its stories
of mortar boards, trashings, old rowing glories;
It's a distant organ chord, the muffle of voices
going about late Thursday's rehearsal...
Tea in the tute amidst the books
and the busts, and the dust:
late lunch, the boathouse before dawn
or brunch in the MCR,
the cold mornings made martyr
to late evenings.

It's the little Wales beyond England
that welcomes you back each time in a different language

And this is all because
stone can't remember;
but the fresher sometimes can.

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We have to leave, but we overlap
like the pages in the library.

We send letters across decades to the plodge,
chalk up our Eights and Torpids, but still see
older colours blazing through the stone.

We matriculate to the rest of our lives,
give up our rooms, our seat at formal,
the desk in the library we've claimed for ourselves;
leave them empty for others to fill.
Yet we overlap in the light of this place,
collegiate, close.