

Lars Gustafsson

Variations on
a theme
by Silfverstolpe

POEMS

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End of the summer holidays

This was the time our pockets all hung low
with fall-clipped fruit now smeared with streaks of clay.
This was the time the garden candles' glow
lit up the crayfish dish with quivering ray.
It almost felt too cold to take a swim,
and cobwebs draped themselves round scrub and fern.
When too the last hay had been taken in,
the sky was chill and clear, the wind quite stern.

These were the days when grudgingly one weighed
each hour till summer's quota had been filled.
This was the time when every hour displayed
an inner force that was to be distilled.
And yet at times one left all play behind
sought out a hill where it was good to lie
and with a ten-year-old's dark-musing mind
observe the swallows' flight and clouds file by.

One evening, with the wooden houses burnished
a glowing crimson by the sun, one left -
holding the farewell gift that summer furnished,
a bag of Astrakhans, clasped to one's chest.
One rode off to the station, tearful-eyed,
while crickets, drunk with joy, still chirped and squealed
their final summer notes on every side
from what were empty, cattle-trampled fields.

(From 'Everyday Life' by Gunnar Mascoll Silfverstolpe)

(Aria)

'This was the time when every hour displayed
an inner force that was to be distilled.'

(From 'End of the summer holidays', *Everyday Life*, 1926)

I

THE BROTHERHOOD
OF THE HOUR

No, not hours.
Not days either:

No, not hours.
Days. Years.

No, none of these.
But the fear of what remains.

Hours, what were you? Eye-witnesses?

Shift your bits of meccano from the kitchen table
so we can finally get some food on the table!

Stacks of firewood. A feeling of a low sky
that lies like lead over ugly three-storey buildings.

Deep down there in childhood
such a grey and disconsolate

winter afternoon is taking place
(the lamps recently lit)

that in reality it can never end.

April, not the cruellest
no, the wisest of the months.

With this dry brown of the fields,
like a piece by Alban Berg

pulsatilla vulgaris a sole flower
in all the dryness,

and precisely so of course was my childhood:
a brown forest with this sole flower.

Hours, what were you?
Visitors that never wished to stay.
Eye-witnesses
that kept silent.

Hours, once glass-clear vessels
left to be filled with
strange liquids
and dust.

5

*(The brotherhood of the hour:
Japanese samurai armour at an exhibition)*

Yes, you were precisely this:
armour abandoned by its warriors.

Yes, these warriors were moments
that suddenly left their shape behind,

and let it, unguarded, be filled with emptiness.
And each and every one sat eyeless and empty

on its own black-lacquered box,
and waited for its own return.

The hour's brotherhood. Warriors.
And each and every one its hour's prisoner

from life. How strangely similar,
since all of them were waiting.

Waiting. A well-armed swordsman,
who in an instant will come to his feet.

6

Yes. Time passes. And makes no sound.

It has no need of clocks.
But clocks have need of time.

The brand-new car is
unexpectedly seven years old.

That boy that has just learnt to walk
is suddenly playing the cello

the sound of it filling the house.

That person who recently
was so important to you

could just as well never have existed.
And helpless one sees futility take place.

And I'd known her for ages

The wasp that flew into the mouth
among October's final
slowly decaying roses

and left no other trace
than a strange taste of sweetness and poison.
The plate that got broken
over the laid-out table.

All of it was
as I had expected.

And I'd known her for ages.

A tiny storm blew up.
Skin again skin seemed no longer sufficient.

The small eddies over the skin's surface
which is the soul's surface

started to sing with each other
like birds in a more original

Garden of Eden.

(As when a piano fleetingly answers
an unknown tone from outside.)

And the entire world suddenly sang
the tones from this Garden.

8

(The six witnesses)

You mild, you languorous summers,
what were you? Of what fabric

had you been woven?
The shuttlecock that got lost

in far too tall grass and for ever.
The raspberry which, far too ripe,

began to dissolve in the hand,
and whose taste was yet bitter.

(What does the mouth really *want*?)
The clatter of bike-wheel on gravel

at the point one enters a steep,
far too gravelling bend and one knows

the only thing I can do
is continue to steer

continue to steer till the end of the bend.

9

(Recitativo)

Under the waters
others hide themselves,

just approximate beings.
That are children of neither

the hours or the non-hours.

Only in the gliding uncertain shadow
do they reveal their freer species.

Four o'clock;
late night or early morning,
the wind grazes the house,
the door bangs,
in my arms there suddenly rests
a sweetheart long since dead.
With my mouth close to her neck
I feel the warmth of one of the living,
I feel the warmth that
now remains.

And for a moment it is I who am dead,
and she who's alive.

(Villanelle I)

The body remembers. Images were all the soul could see.
The desires of the flesh, the sharp pain of a nail.
What's cold and white-hot no soul keeps eternally.

Even types of pain can't be exchanged. A grazed knee
and the wasp in the grass. Likenesses will always fail.
The body remembers. Images were all the soul could see.

Each hour had something sharp and something soft that only
it was made for. Each love's scent is unique in type and scale.
What's cold and white-hot no soul keeps eternally.

Once we drank tea at this table, now all one can see
are mouldered bits of teak to tell the tale.
The body remembers. Images were all the soul could see.

Of these once warm days rotten bits of teak are all you see.
Predicting logic for desire and pain's to no avail.
What's cold and white-hot no soul keeps eternally.

Above a lose-path forest hosts of birds cry noisily.
Just birdsong did the body know, and without fail.
The body remembers. Images were all the soul could see.
What's far too cold and white-hot no soul keeps eternally.

12

(The card-players, eternally trapped on the verandah)

The playing-cards out there on the verandah
were exchanged between aunts and others.

The lamp must soon be lit.
But farthest out, out there in the misty stillness
from what already seems dark as an autumn day,

the quiet dipping of oars when Old Man Ramsberg,
nobody knows if he is dead,
or is still alive, rows his trolling-spoon

over dark waters.

13

(The well, well then and for ever)

For as a long as we had that summer house
in spring the cover of the well was repainted green.

The lid was always kept strictly locked
to prevent me from falling in.

And when it was opened and
the bucket splintered the perfection of the surface

‘a thousand glittering reflections’
could be seen against the cement of the walls.

Once we drew up a live roach,
which was maybe considered a symptom

the well was too close to the lake.
Where else were we to have dug it?

Einar and Uncle Knutte dug the well,
the mixture of well coolness and July heat

gave Einar a real bout of pneumonia,
rumour has it that he cured himself

by consuming a whole bottle of Grönstedt brandy
‘immediately and in a single context’.

I was very scared of falling down that well.
For decades I have been falling down that well

and am on my way to the surface, its darkness,
that is to be shattered

into ‘a thousand glittering reflections’.
But now I no longer know

from what direction I am approaching,

from daylight or dark bottom.

In the fly-ridden, sleepy late afternoon
a note of early autumn, and the dragonflies,

my dragonflies, are back one final time,
in the warm meadows safely inland,

where summer still reigns.

It is autumn once more. Surely it is:
my boats have already been taken up.

They no longer trouble the water.
This landscape is already unfamiliar.

Never have I lived here,
my land is a brighter land.

15

(A dwelling)

A dwelling where the objects
have long since taken over command
from the human beings

who are now
becoming ever more infrequent
visitors.

Small brittle things
from other years
that time passes by.

A last plate
from the Stockholm Exposition
(the old one, Djurgården 1897).

A small piece of turned wood
from a childhood in Småland
quite worthless, preserved and transported

as an item of the greatest value
all the long way
through a life completely empty of humans.

Soul and thing
have in some strange way
changed places with each other.

(Far down there on the horizon
some kinds of voices
must once have been heard.)

16

(Villanelle II: an old barometer)

Just what it measures nobody now knows.
The column of mercury stands resolutely still.
Who cares if an old barometer still goes?

An engraved plate lists weather's tos-and-fros.
From 'Very Dry' to what your fancy will.
Just what it measures nobody now knows.

Seven modalities the inventing optician chose.
The empty places other words could fill.
Who cares if an old barometer still goes?

The stave of mercury is broken into rows
that are air-bubbles, time-scrap, overspill.
Just what it measures nobody now knows.

What atmospheric quirks need one suppose?
Would *Earthquake* some new life perhaps instill?
Who cares if an old barometer still goes?

In instruments like this secrets repose,
some moment measured right when all stands still
Just *what* it measures nobody now knows.
Who cares if an old barometer still goes?

17

(People disappear slowly)

People disappear slowly
below the horizon.
For some it takes hours days months,
for others years.

Lively correspondence,
a few sparse letters
and the final exit:
the annual Christmas card.

No dissension,
no slamming of doors
simply this:
no longer keeping contact.

*

One can see it in two ways:
that they are borne away as time passes

and leave us here. They let us down.
The other that we move away

and leave them in some nameless realm.
We let them down.

Both the one.
And the other.

*

Zwatt, Easter 1974,
in Tesebølle. She had with her

the old Volkswagen
and a new transistor radio

that she loved immensely.
A gentle sun shone down on Denmark

and we walked the entire way
out to Skagens Odde.

On Easter Monday she drove me
to Kastrup. In the old Volkswagen.

After Kastrup I saw her
only once more in my lifetime

(from a foreign rostrum).
She was one of the most important.

My mad twin-soul, with her scent of
rosemary, mint and hemlock.

Disappeared friends
are also our own death.

(Fuga canonica)

No, not hours. Moments.
 A smaller unit than clocks know of.
 The body remembers.
 Images were all the soul could see.
 The girl returns in a shower of dreams.
 Her hair has had time to grow
 and is longer now.
 She has been dead so many years.
 It must be almost
 daybreak, but no clock chimes,
 and here, *in this landscape*,
 you see, my son,
 how time turns into space.
 How odd, then, to believe
 that time can be portioned into hours!
 What do the swallow's hours resemble?
 And those of the vole, grass snake, or buzzard?
 What would it mean
 to day 'This day in the orbit of Venus'?
 When the girl returned,
 it was in a shower of dreams.
 The vole, buzzard, swallow,
 in the regular return of summer.
 The ancient black
 (Västmanland)
 waters
 over the stone, whose long green hair
 is stretched out by the current.
 Homeland? Yes, a kind of homeland.
 As much a homeland as it can be.
 My own homeland
 is not here,
 and is much brighter, -
 I glimpsed it once as a child,
 I lay on a sofa, (stomach ache)
 and saw shadows of leaves move
 against the wall and for an moment it was there,
 and was wide, immensely wide,
 and so much brighter.
 It was my real homeland.
 (And I was not there.
 I had never been there.)
 (It is poets who make landscape
 something intimate. A landscape
 without poets remains alien.)
 The newspaper. (A barn burnt down)

I remember the smell when we made the paper.

In the fifties.
The letters were hotter back then,
cast in lead.
And the fire could be seen!,
the fire that kept the lead liquid.
So it was then.
The stubborn afternoon fly
in the innermost part of the window.
The sound of a black-throated diver outside
in the morning mist.
The great call from No One's Land.
Which is my land.
From the radio an old Romance by Littmanson.
The alarm clock that faithfully waits
to sooner or later be given an assignment. Again.
For some early departure. What does our time want?
What does our wind want?
What does our life want?
To move on. And we want to remain.
Moments differ so much from each other.
Moments of desire, those of pain
and all the other moments.
And then, the others:
The Moments Without Properties.
Some, so strangely nameless,
*The World is an unlabelled Place,**
that it is hard to understand
why they remained.
(There is a kind of particularly grey day
that is completely characterless,
when strange memories rise up
from places one thought one had visited,
but naturally never visited.)
So many of them, these grey and faceless moments!
A kite that got stuck far too high in a tree.
(And which the child bitterly missed,
children now adults and long since gone.)
The pitch with football players
seen from the express train window.
Quick forwards in colourful shirts,
but the outcome for ever unknown.
Moments, what did you want?
And between the moments something
else is dimly seen: the frightening
great face of the right world,
empty like the moment after orgasm:
that future we never set foot in,
a strange door that recedes
at the same speed we approach it.
(A wall of rain that is the thunderstorm's curtain
was raised above the lake. And all phones fell silent.)
Out of reach, then.
Yes, out of reach everything
except the moment,

which endlessly tumbles
into itself,
the moment that we do not know.
But where then do we find ourselves?
*Du siehst, mein Sohn,
zum Raum wird hier die Zeit.***
The truth is that here
no permanent abode exists.
Observe, wanderer, these long-tailed duck
on the bird-mountain's narrow shelves
and only the roaring green of the sea
below. Poor fliers that learn
to plummet first and then to fly.
Mad birds that owned but this:
the shelf in the mountain and the sea below
and nothing in-between,
just like all those that move
quickly or slowly over the world's beds,
surfers on the surface of the genetic code
that turns towards the outer world
but nothing else.

You, Brotherhood of the Hour, what were you?
You had nothing to say.
And when the Girl returned,
it was in a shower of dreams.

* *The World is an unlabelled Place.*
(Gerald Edelman)

****You see, my son,
here time turns into space.'*
(Richard Wagner, Parsifal. Act 1, scene 2)

(Arioso)

The dream collapses
and we are taken back to former spaces.
Where we have been all the time.

The order of things remains.
It depicts nothing else than itself.
It is dumb.

And the balloonist's moment:
the truth that is flight's own.
To drift with the wind,
to drift deep inside on one's own wind.

Sooner or later the person will come
who brings our own death.
Rarely a murderer.
More often a loved someone,
but the knowledge that this is the final person,
this is the one who will shut my eyes,
this person and no one else
is the final person.
And after her no one else will come.

In the room the scent still lingers,
your scent that is like no other.

It simply slowly fades away,
during hours, years and days.

It is hard to say
when the final moment was.

And even longer the memory of
how everything in this room came alive.

How the lamp shone more warmly
over your soft hands.

The colours slinked more softly
round silently fluttering curtains.

And the sound of the old boxwood flute:
marsh tit and thrush both at once.

Your warm hands around
the old treble recorder.

And still,
somewhere in a distant room.

No, not hours.
Large empty surfaces
between the years.
No, not hours.
Perhaps dragonflies rather than hours.
Perhaps toads rather than stones.
Perhaps stones rather than years.
Perhaps geology rather than stones.

And the children catch the dragonflies
one after the other out in the meadow
and transfix them on pins.

(The front legs move slightly
long after death
whatever that might be
has occurred.)

What do the children catch
when they catch the dragonflies?

Origin, cause and future
(which is the extinction of the cause)
form many a cycle.

And the flock of crows screeched:
We don't know
We don't know what we are.
We don't know about
the present or what is to come.
Or what difference that makes.
A bird's cry is its own meaning.

(The sestina of the hour)

My path is still there but abandoned when
 November light reigns. Like a motionless heron waiting on its
 stone by the water, my heart now waits.
 How concealed and suppressed all you still own!
 How strange even so to reside in time.
 Is time, this *Other*, a foe or a friend?

Nobody's foe and nobody's friend.
 The past always fled away, and when
 our future's no longer our home, time becomes
 so large and so alien: the silently
 rising perception that all we own
 is a semblance. Where do you reside, now?

In school's winter light this now could be
 inexpressibly long. Was the hour really a friend?
 We are far too heavy birds that own nothing
 except these wing beats of light and dark. And when
 a day is over: how rarely do we feel the silent
 happiness that a moment has conquered time?

Oh, dream of floating free. And of standing in time
 like the herons in some grey and weightless now.
 Like the angels in lightning movement stand still
 A dream of turning flight itself into a friend.
 In Uppsala there was in the fifties a kind of morning
 when new snow in the light that winter days **had**

(a sort of greenish blue the hue it had)
 quite suddenly made all things calm; and time
 to me was a moment and solely for me, when the
 snow caught the street's footsteps. So was my now.
 The hour became familiar, turned into a friend.
 All else was commotion I could not appease.

There are so many seas! Some still,
 and others swirling hellishly that know no rest.
 And then some frozen inland sea that thawed! My friend,
 to see again, for one moment, all of this, makes time
 once more unreal: I am a stranger to my now
 who knows I've visited a place but knows not when.

And this 'still' kinship, between 'now' and 'when',
 gave 'time' the only meaning that it 'has'.
 Your name, my final friend's, nobody will find here.

II

INVENTIONS

(With my back to the east)

The thunderstorm moved off across the lake, muttering
ever more pointless and introspective reproaches,

and everything was suddenly clear and warm once more.
A surprising outbreak of normality

in a landscape which had been weird all morning.
The swallows seem to be gone now. The month of August

came, and we're a very long way indeed into the story.
How could we have got all the way here?

Did we skip a chapter perhaps?
Did we with impatient fingers take

too many pages at a time?
Somewhere in the middle, yes, if anywhere,

just there. In the middle.
And precisely in this book one can't

turn back the pages. A played card can't be retracted.
An unread chapter is and remains unread.

(Unread it forever shimmers
inside the world of the unread

that is grey like a sheet in a plant press,
or a Silver Bible,

according to our perception.
Life is my perception.)

The east wall of Sörby Härbre, still warm from the sun,^{*}
is the narrow dividing line of the world,

the dusk, the fastest,
most agile of all boundaries

but a real boundary for all that
flies over the forests, and here the tea stands,

still warm on the garden table.

A cracked tea-cup and an old novel
to leaf through in this twilight hour,

the worn binoculars for bird-watching,
nature morte with its deepening shadows.

This yellowed book has stood waiting
for so many winters on its cold shelf

that it no longer insists
all that loudly to leave a trace

in anyone's world picture.

And here they spread themselves out,

in the slanting light of sunset, Linnaeus'
Prati Westmanniae. Indestructible

in the summer light, the mild meadows of the
eighteenth century. And a tiny species of toad

leaps merrily among the goosefoot.
We used to catch them when we were boys.

As one catches very small truths.

East at my back and before me a west,
the evening light of which still warms.

In the west water, sun-warmed islands, the scent
of heated forests of spruce, cold currents

between old faces of rock, where
ancient kings had mooring rings

mounted of indestructible metal.

That are still there. The swell from a boat
that is putting out the night's crayfish-pots,

moves like a quiet rumour over the waters.

And in a moment of geographic hubris
I imagine I know the entire way westwards:

Bodarne and Vretarne's low villages out in the heat-haze,
the dark forest beyond and all the ravaged

Värmland forests westwards right until it grows lighter
far away at lake Mjøsa in Gudbrandsdalen.

No, this evening has no boundary for hubris:
and this flight of fancy continues,

out over the cold expanses of the Norwegian sea. And
puts a mythological monster here and there in places

I am a bit uncertain of. Once there existed
a mythical West, a golden land of the setting sun.

Now I know better. Faithfully
Iceland, Greenland, Labrador make their appearance.

The mosquito-infested land of the St Lawrence river
gleams with a thousand lakes deep down there

businessmen turn over papers,

yes, knowledge of this west
ends first in dried-up river ravines

in Davis Mountains and Big Bend,
Among century cactuses and canyon swallows.

And only the thud of the water-bottle against the saddle.
And the smell of saddle-oil, dust and sweating horse,

which are the last of the west's many scents.

The back's east is so different. The east is a wall.
Impenetrable as the bare wall

of a synagogue. Throughout my youth east was a wall
in which a tiny hatch would sometimes be opened.

By some faceless and key-rattling guard
who with reptile eyes leafed through one's passport.

Yes, this Friedrichstrasse existed solely for me.

The smell of fear and bad scouring powder
hung for a long time in one's winter coat.

Long electric trams, grey concrete houses
that simply radiated power: stupid, brute power,

immensely wide streets, yes, broad as great rivers,
where there was no room for a single human being.

(In spring 1968 I visited a writers' convention in Poland
where quite literally **not** a single author was to be found,

only guards and a few old ladies
who'd written books about birds. Zbigniew Herbert

they had never heard of, nor Gombrowicz
and Bruno Schultz 'wasn't a Polish author'.)

In some strange way everyone took this
to be a completely natural phenomenon,

roughly like meeting someone with a withered arm
and trying all the time to talk about something else.

The rivers of Siberia slowly
excavate the utopians' mass graves.

Was this east?
Not, not only. There is another east.

An increasingly twisting road,
through Kyrkskogen up towards Hörende lake,

and the dream of the great white lake Ladoga
in Karelia, and the monks in Valamo monastery;

the gentle sound of bells from an invisible island,
that passes through the white dusk of the east.

East then becomes the great empty whiteness,
and a sound of bells above. Not more.

There is an experiment: one inserts a
wall of glass that divides an aquarium into two.

What else was there? The battleship*
under way, under its black pit-coal fumes

and the face of Ivan the Terrible,
unnaturally lit from a high window.

*Moscow is burning!**

There is an experiment: one inserts a
wall of glass that divides an aquarium into two.

At first the fish bumps its nose roughly against this wall,
but quickly learns to avoid it, almost invisible.

I am such a fish.
Throughout my life I have stubbornly turned westwards,

and now that the shadows start to lengthen
east tends to condense and become a wall.

A wall of milky-white glass where
shadows play,

but this wall does not genuinely
belong to reality.

A wall between this world and
all possible worlds.

And their pain is great.

**Moscow is burning! Scene from Sergej Eisenstein's film
Ivan the Terrible, part I 1944.*

26

(Arithmetic)

It was the spring of 1991: the war in the Persian Gulf is raging, and indignant voices on the radio are calling for ever more gruesome punishments for the tyrant.

I recall the summer of 1943,
the playing-cards on the summer verandah,
thwacked with some emphasis onto the table.

The sawmill foreman, Uncle Knutte and my dad
are calling between the deals and the tricks
for ever more gruesome punishments for the tyrant.

Average people. Forty-eight years
and an ocean are what separate them.
Turn the page! And now it's 2039.

My eldest son will then be seventy-six,
and my youngest fifty-three.
I imagine the old man

and the somewhat younger in a lilac bower,
drinking coffee from a modernist blue pot,
discussing ever more gruesome punishments for
the as yet unborn tyrant.

(Molyneux's wife)

She sits pale and somehow abandoned
 as close to the fire and she can come.
 It is still the seventeenth century.
 And the scales fell from her eyes.
 The great Molyneux, optician and philosopher,
 had a wife who, born blind,
 regained her sight.
 What is it like suddenly
 to have access to a completely new world?
 Or to see that the old one
 was so much more than one had believed?
 These strange flecks
 that move in front of us
 evidently keeping time
 with those speaking and their words.

Can it really be,
 ask the two gentlemen Berkeley and Locke,
 who have devotedly followed the phenomenon,
 can this Mrs Molyneux, blind from birth,
 who was given such an amazing gift,
*also see that what
 feels like velvet is that
 which is seen as velvet?*
 That what feels round is seen to be round?
 (What about sound and smell:
 It sounds round?
 It smells round?)

Or is all this simply *learnt habits*?
 The gentlemen decide in favour of habits.
 I imagine Mrs Molyneux
 in a simple silk dress,
 sitting in front of the fire
 (never sitting in front of the mirror).
 Why did she have to sit?
 I see her so: sitting.
 It is still the seventeenth century.
 She sees the flames, in the fire,
 without properly understanding what she sees.
 Disturbing purple, yellow and pink
 move along with the background sound
 not unlike that of water.
 What was opened was not a window,
 it was a floodgate.
 Like all those whose world has become far too big
 Mrs Molyneux has
 many a moment when she would rather
 close her delightful eye-lids.

And see the world return
to what it once was.
Where everything consists of scents,
the finger that scratches sackcloth and silk,
the sharp tip of the needle and the thimble's
silver surface. The apricot's soft skin.

*(Real things, Goethe was to say
considerably later, in his Theory of Colours,
have no colours. It would also be
wrong to call them black-and-white or grey.
They are in a state prior to colours,
which is neither colour nor non-colour.
What do real things look like?
Like something one does not see:
Like a very soft silver,
perhaps, in a room where the dimmest moonlight
seeps in between chinks in the curtain.)*

When Molyneux's wife saw the moon
for the first time, she stretched
out a beautiful, white and hesitant hand
so as to feel its silvery
strangely rough surface.
Distances are first born in the world of the eye
and with them the innocence
of the very small child disappears.
Molyneux's wife lived long enough,
I hope, to regain her composure.

28

(Chorale)

You great solitude of Västmanland,
whose sting the heart does not vanquish,
you heavy soughing in tops of trees.

You great summer day of Västmanland,
whose stillness the child did not fathom
and whose wide expanses did not frighten the child,
you were there before me
and you will be there longer
than the ebb and flow of these lungs

while time now swiftly runs out.

The wave's short beat and the sound of the wind
and those shoals of small and darting fishes
that vanished when **the shadow** fell.

Of this dust was the world made,
my first world of short wave beats
over very old stones.

That great solitude of Västmanland
where lakes lay like large mournful eyes,

what did it want
beneath thin scudding clouds?

(Coda: GMS dedicates the statue of Finn Malmgren)

And one winter day the friend once more stands
in the park, but this time as a statue.

He is and he is not Finn Malmgren.
Returned and not returned.

*'Maybe you're too shy to be a statue
in this city of critical youth*

and shy when you're now forced to speak.'

All around students in white caps,
standard bearers, honoratiorees in doctor's hats.

And then this statue. Which is completely out of place.
How was it to be *forced* to speak?

Finn Malmgren, lost in the Arctic Ocean,
has come back again as a Stone Guest.

How does one address a statue?
One does not speak to statues.

How does one force a statue to speak?
Statues are regularly far too shy.

One can speak in their stead,
and then must pay careful attention

that the one whom one imitates
is the person, not the statue.

If statues could speak,
they would perhaps have

frighteningly deep voices,
or sound like the gnashing

one hears when an excavator
scoops deep in a quarry.

That is difficult, and hardly customary,
hardly even appropriate, to imitate.

So the speaker must
now imitate three voices:

The genuine voice of the deceased
fading fast away,

a voice from the Arctic Ocean
(‘in gasping wireless telegrams’),

another voice that is neither
that of Finn Malmgren nor the Statue

but *Finn Malmgren as Statue*
and that is probably quite difficult to imitate,

for Doctor Malmgren was, as far as is known,
never a statue.

And then finally, Gunnar Mascoll,
your own voice, boyish and friendly,

cultivated, slightly nasal,
a fine Englishman’s voice, but with

a slight touch of Södra Västmanland,
between Gisslarbo and Kungsör, approximately,

and with a weak melancholy fall
on the final syllable,

(but not so tired as to sound Mephistophelian),

Gunnar Mascoll,
who are you talking to?

Postscript

The collection is of course based on the musical theme and variations. I have used experimentation to find a way forward. I hope this doesn't sound pretentious, but I have actually modelled myself on Johann Sebastian Bach.

The idea of variations based on a short theme has been slightly influenced by the Goldberg Variations. The idea of moving from one key to another which is found in great masters such as Bach in his '48 Preludes and Fugues' does not, however, have any feasible counterpart in poetry. On the other hand, one can to a certain extent experiment with the emotional layers as if they were keys. The poems feel their way forwards through various emotional layers and gradually crystallise out in a fixed form - the Villanelle. This fixed form then has to give way to a new chaos and a new process of organisation, in a number of such cycles.

As theme, or 'aria', I make use of a couple of lines from a poem by Gunnar Mascoll Silfverstolpe 'The End of the Summer Holidays'. They have a powerful innate force. 'Why Silfverstolpe of all people?' my friends often ask me. I have always thought of him as a friend. Why should one not have friends among the dead? He was a fine poet who never got the chance to develop fully since he died so young.

Gunnar Mascoll Silfverstolpe (1893-1942) came from a Västmanland farming family that had many literary talents. His ancestor, Axel Gabriel (spelt without the 'f') is the best-known of these. He wrote, among other things, 'Skördarne' [The Harvests]** as well as an evening poem that is regarded as anticipating Bellman's, and his was the unusual lot to have the entire Swedish Academy suspended, as the result of an politically incorrect inaugural address in 1795, by Reuterholm for some considerable time. Gunnar Mascoll was also a member, though for much too short a period - only from 1941.

If one is able to disregard the characteristics typical of the age, he much resembles Tomas Tranströmer in his combination of a powerful articulatory capacity, anchorage in everyday life and a morally sensitive, nobly humanistic attitude. He develops, you could say, from a regionalist to a universalist. Manuals tend to characterise him as an 'intimate realist of the everyday', a designation that to a certain extent is based on a confusion between material and intention. In actual fact, Silfverstolpe's poetry has strong existentialist features and is not far removed from Pär Lagerkvist. The difference, however, is that Silfverstolpe often anchors his issues in a concrete landscape, that of the Västmanland lake-and-plain landscape around Lake Mälaren, which he portrays with meticulously sensitive, almost watercolour-like nuances. He has probably also been influenced by the contemporary English poets he diligently interpreted.

There is something unresolved, a never clearly formulated conflict in Silfverstolpe's poetry. He often writes, indirectly, of not really being the same as other people, of not being allowed to be involved in where the action is. This unresolved yearning for authenticity is evident in various forms in his poetry. There is a poem that has to do with an upper secondary school excursion on skates across the vast open expanses of Lake Mälaren, where the writer is suddenly placed together with a rheumatic classmate who cannot take part and who watches the departure from the quay. The same theme also permeates the extremely ambiguous and complex poem about the unveiling of the Finn Malmberg statue outside the Västmanland-Dala Students' Association in Uppsala in 1931. Both Silfverstolpe and Malmgren, who later perished in the fated polar expedition of General Umberto Nobile in 1928, were the association's first procurators. Once again, Silfverstolpe portrays himself as the one who did not have any destiny of his own, who was left sitting there as an onlooker. As part of this complex there is the intense longing back to his own boyhood and years at school, which become a kind of paradise lost in Silfverstolpe's world.