

Notes on the Use of the Austrian Scythe

You can no more lend a man your scythe
than you can lend him your false teeth,
so take my day instead, borrow this meadow.
I'll heap sheaves of hours inside your ward
then babble about what I've learnt of mowing:
nibs and tangs and snaths, heels and toes
and edges – esoteric glossaries
for parts of tools grown rusty through disuse;
the sharpening of blades; and principles
of movement, trimming techniques, windrows, spill.
I have a hunch all this might interest you –
who drove us at weekends to run round woods,
who pointed out sea-birds, steam trains, castles –
and knowing your appreciation of the technical,
if I can communicate how vital
it is to keep the hafting angle tight,
and how though the *neigung* doesn't simply
translate it can be altered with a shim
of plywood, it might transport you for an evening
from your fixed intravenous
existence where time is marked by the sickly
drip, drip, drip of antibiotics
disrupted only by the clatter of supper
sharp at six, the tea-girl's cheery 'Cuppa?
Orange squash? Hot chocolate? Champagne?'
I hesitate to dwell too long on sharpening
the blade . . . I'll paraphrase: with a quality
natural whetstone, never a *klumpat*,
make one complete pass from beard to point.
That's honing. Then there's peening:
to trick life from the scythe for years to come
tap the edge of the blade with a hammer,
tease it out like pastry . . . But time is getting tight
so what I want to finish on tonight
are those principles of movement: staying true,
the simple shift of weight from foot to foot,
keeping give in the knees and judging the lean,
meditating on how we breathe
so we avoid those unexpected blips,
the woody stumps that send our pulses skittish.
Let's focus now on minimising spill
as late sun curves around the outfield,
concentrate on holding a line,
get satisfaction from a job well done,
hope that we have learnt enough to guide us
through the mass of grass as yet uncut.