Becoming the Bodleian

Everyone arrives a supplicant. 
Tourists chip away at you in smiles. 
They steal your gargoyles for their insta-skies 
and backpacked students arrive, 
yesterday’s bottles brim-full in their eyes. 

I walk Broad Street knowing 
your stones as your books, they 
carry my step and morning searches 
your walls, and strikes my cheek. 

Soon I will sit beside a window 
in your Upper Reading Room, old thoughts 
against new breath. The broad forehead 
of the Clarendon rests against the glass. 
Of nine roof-muses, two have fallen. 
Your pleated tomes cast their 
columned shadows across the hours. 

Melpomene heralds a world bricked in 
by readers’ shoulders. I am blind 
as the battlements, foolish 
as a marble bust, to think 
if we thought alike, 
every mind I meet 
would be as the day, sculpted, known 
and unknown through stained glass.
Homesick Gardener

Who would have thought
trees on a cross-grid, equidistant,
would make a garden—cypress trunks in grids;
another plot, behind the wall, of beech;
crowned florets, marching apart.

I garden in this imperial plantation,
the lord’s house is a timbre schooner,
bronzed decks at dusk,
while beyond the English jungle rolls.

My duties are simple: engrave
scientific names into saplings,
cut from the wild. I stake them
in foreign soil, crossing and re-crossing
the rise of the land. I measure
the distance between these trees
by how longingly their low-swing branches
will dance, before they are cut.

At the scale of years, I sleep,
dreaming of roots in
vast subterranean warrens,
before I go home.
To Have a Cup of Coffee

To have a cup of coffee
wide-hipped with milk
is to have the sky and grass
and hard labour on hillsides
for dark-seeded cherries.
A brim by your palm
is beheld in the cup of your hand.
What have you done, to linger
over this cuppa? As it cools,
sans-sugar, kopi-O-kosong, ristretto,
qahwah sadah, the first sip on your lips
is a petaled mouth in a day-lit dream,
opening to a liquid body burnished
with oboe notes of gold.
Who were you, when procuring
this caffè? What olfactory arabesque,
what aromatic capillaries did you trace,
at once the addict and the automaton?
You are the nobly-savage half-thought
beckoned when caffeine snaps its veined fingers.

Thus you have mastered time.
This brew is savoured in you sitting,
coffee a tent for you and your fellows,
furred amber light to lasso minutes
away from the work-day.
Touch the glass with your spoon,
and this is the kopitiam, the sarabat evening.
Set the espresso cup on its saucer, loudly;
this is the bar and the piazza, your palazzo.
You ride upon Kaldi’s carpet,
your eye gleams, your words
wilder and wider to sing blackberry cocoa,
brown-spice anise or testify
vegetal and phenolic.
All you cooffeenatics, weigh and measure,
raise the swan-neck kettle, waltz with
just-boiled water, porlex these beans
seconds before you siphon that cup,
that rounds out this bell-tongued hour,
in which terroir and trade and you
are wet dust.