

CHARLES TOMLINSON

THE WAY IN

The needle-point's swaying reminder
Teeters at thirty, and the flexed foot
Keeps it there. Kerb-side signs
For demolitions and new detours,
A propped pub, a corner lopped, all
Bridle the pressures that guide the needle.

I thought I knew this place, this face
A little worn, a little homely.
But the look that shadows softened
And the light could grace, keeps flowing away from me
In daily change; its features, rendered down,
Collapse expressionless, and the entire town

Sways in the fume of the pyre. Even the new
And mannerless high risers tilt and wobble
Behind the deformations of acrid heat—
A century's lath and rafters. Bulldozers
Gobble a street up, but already a future seethes
As if it had waited in the crevices:

A race in transit, a nomad hierarchy:
Cargoes of debris out of these ruins fill
Their buckled prams; their trucks and hand-carts wait
To claim the dismantlings of a neighbourhood—
All that a grimy care from wastage gleans,
From scrap-iron down to heaps of magazines.

Slowing, I see the faces of a pair
Behind their load: he shoves and she
Trails after him, a sexagenarian Eve,
Their punishment to number every hair
Of what remains. Their clothes come of their trade—
They wear the cast-offs of a lost decade.

The place had failed them anyhow, and their pale
Absorption staring past this time
And dusty space we occupy together,
Gazes the new blocks down—not built for them;
But what they are looking at they do not see.
No Eve, but mindless Mnemosyne,