

material or philosophical –
nothing, that is, but the banishment
of guests whose lavish welcome had expired.
Slingsby was distantly intimate
with everyone, to all appearances
equally charmed by the lot of us
but just as equally indifferent.
Clad in the habits of privilege
he showed no sign of having had a past
other than that of his dynasty.
Convenient amnesia was the game.
Wielding the grip of Agrippa on
the Gauls, he shook my hand and turned away.
Such is the measure of courtesy
precisely rationed to departing guests.

Freed from his terse hospitality,
a bunch of us made good our liberty,
tight in the passing togetherness
of operational necessity.

Fragrant festoons of wisteria,
the Darcy-Bingley sisters clung to us,
seemingly fearful of bees they might
be forced to satisfy if left behind.

Crammed in the Rolls to the station we
complacently allowed ourselves a song
(Humpsalum, bumpsalum! Absalom,
my bonny boy!), although the chauffeur seemed
somewhat begrudging of compliments.
Perhaps he hadn't an aesthetic bent,
Spirit of Diesel, not Ecstasy.
So then we sang the Internationale!

Vauncey had settled his headache on
my shoulder, but was coming back to life,