The Elusive Ache of Things

(1)

What would you give to be listening
in the transit lounge before
your first flight across ancient oceans?

What would you give to feel the tremor
as the machine’s muted howl taxies
towards glass through familiar air?

Oh, what would you give to plunge again
into a smoky landscape, push open doors
of stone buildings seen in a different light?

What would you give for your dream
to be as dear as it was back there
in the dark bars at those old scarred tables?

(2)

Do you remember cycling from Kirkwall
to Stromness, North Sea wind bending us
sideways, the cold, that sunless spring,
challenging us? An archeological dig

has since exposed an early Orkneys
village on that spray-lashed island beyond
the last outpost where Britrail tickets
carry optimists. Did those villagers
trek that far coast with hope burning their
bright young hearts before their blood
thinned, fog and rain descending, after
enduring Viking battles? Another time, hot,

a large dog bars our way in New England.
I choose a stout stick from Hiawatha’s
silver-dappled woods, tell you to pump your
tanned legs close behind when I charge, a

medieval jouster, pedalling faster in excited
chivalry than Paul Revere galloped, gripping
handlebars, laughing as though we might
freewheel downhill together for ever.

Transnational Literature Vol. 3 no. 1, November 2010.
Holiday traffic beneath an exuberant sky
can still quieten me for long moments
as I struggle with the map of my mind
covering old territory.

We moved on, stopped, moved on
lighting occasional fires
waited on a weathered wharf
straining to see the looming ferry
impale the soft mist.

My lone shore is littered with departure
the chiaroscuro of a storm building
the memory of cycling through spray
that journey to Scotland long ago.

Past events jostle for attention
panic, foreign languages, a broken heart
your young eyes soft as dew
the line of hills blurring to violet
a distant train tracking far down the line.

Some legacies linger like sea fog
that has me staring out the window
smoke undecided over an ashtray
seeing those hills dark with rain.

I think through beloved cities of our past
hear young voices crying out
the murmur of lost years
unnerving this stranded survivor
to witnessed moments, the elusive ache of things.

Ian C Smith