Two for Lunch

Sheila Smith

Gull mobiles turn
above the station road.
It runs full tilt to your door.

Rows of artisan houses –
yours untouched, original –
where railwaymen lived.

Through downstairs windows
harvest of books, each sheathed
in brown paper, title precisely inked.

Notices against the glass:
socialist meetings, exhibitions,
charred by time. The bell is silent.

But you appear, arms wide
like a welcome chair.
'It doesn't work in wet weather.'

I follow your emerald shirt
up, up the clattering stair
to your seasoned table. Salmon,

wine you're not supposed to drink.
It could be a love-feast,
presided over by paintings, pots,

glass, prints. Gifts from so many friends.
Hand-milled paper you like to touch.
You know so much, so much,

where Turner travelled,
how Morris learnt to print.
Ford Madox Brown's murals and canvases.

Rage against Roger Fry,
'That old cawing crow'
deserting English painters
making fashionable the French.
Head on hand, you quote Dickens,
Barnes. A Victorian sage at ease.

I drift into the picture, losing time,
trying to fix it sharp, clear,
knowing the colours will run.

Strong shoulders still; bear hug,
though I can’t get close.
You keep your secrets well.

Eye to eye with a patrician gull
you tow your years, a sturdy tug,
knowing this shifting coast.

From Chalk and Cheese (Shoestring Press, 2001)