The Gladstone Link

You took us to a secret tunnel dug beneath a cobbled square –
A rain-proof, thief-proof passage for the books
Moving between the library's oldest buildings – and there,
With a childlike eagerness which well became those silver tresses, you explained
The bits which stayed the same:
How the conveyor belt, with its boxes full of writing,
Creaked today just as it had when Gladstone ruled the roost;
How the hint of damp (a cellar smell I always loved)
Rubbed noses during the Jazz Age,
World War Two, your childhood. Things had

Changed, as well, of course:
The vacuum tubes which ran above our heads,
Designed to send requests down to the stacks,
Were relics now. Computers did the work.
But in your student days, you said,
With dimples which had dimples of their own,
You'd sit where we now stood, and hear them *thwum*,
Passing overhead – *thwum*, *thwum* –
Each sound not just the heartbeat of a vasty beast
Sailing through the ages, but testament that
Somewhere up above, somebody *wanted to know*,
Had things to find, was on fire with curiosity.
In the heat of their flames, you hinted,
You kindled something of your own:
Two postgrad students learning how to love,
And always up above, *thwum*, *thwum*,
Arhythmic monotone, timeless seconds streaming past.
Reader requests.

We, your newest pupils, open-mouthed at the thrill of this confidence,
Drew together. One of the others – an American raised on the scents
Of carnivals and ageing paper – brushed against me gently.
I later learned that this was when I first looked good to her: before you,
Proud atop your crutches, glowing with history as an athlete after sprinting,
The creaks of the conveyor reverberating in your triumphant half-light,
Pregnant, now, with silence from above.

Four years – only four – went by.
The sixteenth-century cornices upstairs
Barely twitched in the varying light.

And they dismantled the conveyor,
Resurfaced the floor, panelled stone walls
With a species of plastic, and, cellar-smell banished,
Opened the passage – secret no more –
As a corridor for anyone to use.
And so I come to stand here once again:
Alone this time. There's no reason you'd
Remember me, another awed face.
I graduated, and my American re-crossed the ocean
Into someone else's arms. Four years.
The empty, useless, vacuum tubes have gone,
And life goes on.

But, pricking up my ears,
Putting the side of my head to the polished wall
Gently at first, but with pressure increasing,
Splayed fingers straining over the shining tiles,
Not caring if I'm seen doing all this,
Pushing what you taught me to the edge,
I hear the sound I've never heard myself:
A crescendo of dampness in the halogen silence,
Thundering words, borne through a vacuum,
Fired through the ceiling, sailing through the ages –
Thwum, *thwum*, four little years.
Thwum, books in boxes,
Thwum, bright-eyed over your crutches,
Thwum, across the Western ocean,
Thwum.

Thwum.