

Stephen Robertson

Ninety-six and counting

How little I really know of your life!
From the moment almost a half-century ago
when I first met your daughter
I have known fragments, snatches—
some now half-remembered, some long since forgotten—
but nothing that resembles a narrative.

Born nineteen-seventeen (dark days of the first world war)
in Sheffield, steel town.
Mother once ran a fish-and-chip shop.
A young rambler, you take part
in the mass trespass on Kinderscout.

Meet a dashing young fellow rambler.
Marry, find a home
on the very edge of Sheffield
facing the Derbyshire moors.
But the next war comes, and D is now called up.
First to Hunmanby on the north-east Yorkshire coast
for the requisite square-bashing. And then when he ships out,
back to mother, in a two-up-two-down
full of family and lodgers. Daughter born
at the height of the Luftwaffe's
blitz on Sheffield.
In north Africa, D is killed.

Later, one of the lodgers—
Polish serviceman and refugee—
is worth another try. A son.

Council house the other side of Sheffield.
Polish husband transforms into
Yorkshire male, expecting
tea on the table when he returns from work
in a Sheffield steel mill.
Daughter moves away to teach, and then
to marry me. Son develops
schizophrenia.

After G's death, a chance
for something new: migrate south
to London, two grandchildren,
and a world to explore.
But within a few years, both son and daughter
are dead too. Back to Sheffield again.

How many friends have you outlived? Eventually
the Sheffield ties become more tenuous,
legs weaken, and isolation palls.
One more great change, one more new beginning:
a different kind of home
here on the north Norfolk coast.

The wonder is that you can still laugh.