

'The Ship of the Fens'

Richard Knott

On the slow train from Cambridge
to Ely, I am sitting behind two Russians.
A couple, they are locked in conversation,
oblivious to the fenland steppe outside,
the rain-soaked, raven-black earth,
England in its midwinter shadow.

The diesel cars head north, transporting
my loquacious Russians further on
through Norfolk, the steel rails ruler-straight.
I like their migratory instincts, their
resilience. I walk uphill through Ely's puddles:
the cathedral's doors are open –
for an entrance fee – its towering
bulk a stony backdrop, a windbreak,
for a group of mothers, prams parked
in a semi-circle, like pioneers' wagons,
on a dark sea of autumn leaves.

Jegginged legs are flexed and stretched,
Halloween pumpkins held aloft as if
to pagan gods. The babies watch,
bemused. Above them, the cathedral,
the ancient ship of the fens,
that gaunt, brooding monument to a
darker time of chained recusants,
fires dying back in the dawn, martyrs'
bones cooling in the winter frost.
Timeless, placeless, isn't it, this urge
to burn, to expunge? I like my Russians –
Poles, Iraqis, Somalis too – even more,
their optimism, their hope, their
unquenched get-up-and-go.