

LOUISA HOWEROWE
CONNECTIONS

—A cento using 21 lines from 21 poems by Tony Harrison

I walk along the street where he
dropped dead, his warped spine
straining for the sky. The disconnected
number inked inside his cap.
I don't believe in afterlife at all,
try to make connections where I can,
loosening ties to one tense grip.
There's still that dark, scorched circle
on the road, that burning rubber smell.
An old man, a uke he'll never play,
he hungered for release from mortal speech,
world of minimum iron and spin dry,
soots on washing, black on bone-ash white.
The broken lines go through me
speeding south, the ambulance, the hearse,
the auctioneers. All night I hear
a spade that scrapes on stones.
Graveyards, an airless place—
blocks with letters, lettered blocks of stone
—a shadow holding something to its eyes.

From: "v," "The Morning After," "The Effort," "Flood," "The Queen's English," "Ginger's Friday," "Thomas Campey and the Copernicus System," "Ghosts: Some Words Before Breakfast," "Next Door," "Long Distance," "Blocks," "Marked with D.," "Clearing," "Bringing Up," "Loving Memory," "Background Material," "Punchline," "Illuminations," "Lines to My Grandfathers," "An Old Score," and "Giving Thanks."

AFTER MY GRANDFATHER'S DEATH

I drive his shotguns and cartridges
to the police station, give away
his one good suit and leather boots,

his maps and gold-tipped pens,
divvy up his books among my sisters,
except the one I'll carry home,

the one thing that emigrated with him
in the summer of '44—a schoolbook
he found wrapped in what may have been

a coat, somewhere along a railway track.
A child, again, I rub my fingers over paper
more beige than white, over its embedded

bits of wood, stop to sound out the Cyrillic
labels on the line drawings, in the periodic table
whose elements reflect the age, the missing

99 and on to Unubium. He added marbled
end papers, his own, resewed, rebound the text,
not because he loved chemistry, but because

books were books, he told me once, and
that was that. On the shelf, the school text
came first, followed by the books he did read.