

Martin Walls

The Badger

Now for this poem we must remember that European badgers (*Meles meles*) have a ferocity
 belying the obvious charm of their plump hirsuteness & the
 cuteness of those concordant
 snout-stripes, its *badge*, which is, after all, meant as warning.
 That in order to dig their *sets* into the bone-hard chalk of the Sussex
 Downs they're endowed
 with formidable, pneumatic forelegs; claws like six iron grapple-
 hooks; & a blunt bloody-mindedness able to crush stumps.
 Remember also they're night-loving, copse-dwelling, so the suburban
 incandescence of Engineerium Hill, where I straddled my bike that
 night, must have had the same effect on the badger that dark's
 strange drug had on me.
 It stared wildly; its eyes the twin hubs of that boozy night; stars were
 spinning round them, the constellations of cow parsnip. A batter
 drop of soda light defined a kind of no-man's land between us.
 I'd like to say the badger flinched first, its snout flared, canines
 clearly bared. I'd even stage a fight; have man outwit instinctive
 rage, emerging scathed yet triumphant. But that's not how it went.
 Something pulled the human in. I took one clumsy step, & the bike
 clattered to the pavement. The badger bolted, vaulting a low
 garden wall. Did it matter I froze moon-stiff? A privet bush bent
 with its shuffling weight, its gravity.