In such cavernous public spaces as the Pantheon
and St. Paul’s, citizens of the world have congregated
And cut deals, passed grimy, imperial coins, dope,
envelopes, poems of blackmail and seduction,
And love of course. Behind a column in a corner
slipped a stiff penis in a dress.
Here a gentleman came to find an easy
stroller, of one sex or another, the sacred
Notwithstanding: marble gods in gilded niches,
 gaudily painted, a martyr on a cross,
High arched windows shooting ruby and blue.
Here all hours of the day a market of exchanges,
Whisperings and muffled laughter, good gossip,
good jokes, good business too sometimes, sometimes
A stolen prayer going up in choking smoke.
I think of the traffic of such places as we cross the Thames
in light winter rain, tilting our colored umbrellas
Over our ignoble desires. We want our glut
of art raw, expressive, massive, modern.
The Tate. This cold box of glass, concrete,
steel, an empty turbine hall so big
It could hold—how many, did they say?—
double-decker London buses stacked
Seven high. Inside the gutted power plant,
we’re ingested by a flower, as if by Georgia
O’Keeffe, though large, elongated, trumpet-headed,
red bell of the flute Athena cast aside:
It made her ugly when she puffed her cheeks and blew.

“I want to turn earth into sky,”
the metaphysician proposed grandiosely
To some committee and won the prize. Sculptor,
turned geometrician, he calculated, and so
Flesh flies, industrialized, the wine-red
PVC membrane stitched and stretched
From ring to ring to ring. We feel, just walking in, devoured. Do Not Touch, says the sign, But we want to, this flesh, too tender. It pulls one apart from another. When you walk away and say nothing, I want to know what you mean, your head drawn back like Eurydice, both of us wanting to touch, to see The skin of Marsyas. You don’t. And neither do I.

Clearly we have to keep moving to locate meaning. We climb to the middle of the bridge under another Red round mouth of the flower which blooms yet again at the far east end of the hall. We can’t see What it is all at once, but can see what it is at last:

In a cave near Calaenae in Phrygia, Apollo flayed
The skin of Marsyas, who’d dared the pitiless god
with the pretty music of his flute and lost unfairly.
Later, in grief, Apollo cut strings from his lyre,
the satyr’s blood became the river Marsyas.

His bleeding here, though large, is under control.

I’m thinking of war, how this too was one of the bombed-out places, how it begins every time Innocently enough with a contest; how even the gods and angels do it to themselves—the bigger, the better, The more beautiful—a victor every time and the death of one. Engines without pity gone now, a residual roaring, Voices of aficionados indistinguishable from our own voices, from the cries of babies and the whines of tourists.

A lull of peace, intimations of a war to come— I’ve seen the headlines on the newsstands
In the underground: we cannot escape the world.

Whatever we mean, make, or are is abstract, abstracted—yanked out of myth or history,
Out of Plato’s cave or Titian’s vision of Marsyas. Later, on the other side of the river, I saw again
The anxious ghost in that portrait of Iris Murdoch, a piece of Titian’s painting painted behind
Her matter-of-fact, unstylish, banged, frank face.
What had she lived through that she would know
A language for all our little immoralities?
A smear of blood. A flap of skin that wouldn’t
heal on my mother’s leg. A red hole to
White bone. Now in old age she remembers
the man who left her in the time of war,
And not because he was a hero. He wasn’t.
In the battle of the Bulge he was, that flood of blood,
And came back, all right, but not to her. How naïve
she was, my sweet mother, tiny and beautiful,
And too much in love even then not to trust.
And this is the way I am trying to understand
The exuberance of Marsyas, his infatuation
with music and the consequence of passion.
How naïve he was, we all are, when we’re
in love and choose the life we enter, as we must,
As I do here with you, examining his skin.
Now by the Thames in a gloom of late light,
by the barges and the bridges and the empty offices,
The glittering, misty lights come on the muddy tidal river.
We walk, we talk, we haven’t much to say, except—
The dome of St. Paul’s, you notice, is softly lit,
and to the east, I see, the orange metal crisscross
Of a crane perfectly vertical on the black sky.
Marsyas, I’m thinking, Marsyas—what instruments we use
To cut out a space for ourselves in a difficult world.
Some terrors we’ve heard and can predict,
Some magic in the music and the shapes we still must make.