

Winterfold Forest

Up from the Tillingbourne on Christmas day --
up the lanes and along the sandy, frosty paths

and from underneath the pines we come to the edge --
where the soil falls away below our feet, disappearing

beneath farmland and towns, and miles to the south
surfaces again, topping the downs like a skin

stretched across a carcass of stone. We listen.
The silence goes back hundreds of years.

Here, the weather is not kind, it erodes the walls
of the iron age fort, the water in the chalk pan is frozen

an inch thick. Here, heather, bramble and pine survive
within a narrow range of probabilities, their leaves

are edged with ice, and new snow dusts the backs
of the muntjac deer. We breathe the silence

and it comes out hanging in the air -- we become aware
the light is failing and begin our descent, our backs

whitening. And I know that even though the frost
defines the form of the leaves, it does not define

the form of your hand, that the shape it makes
with mine is more substantial than chalk and skin.

The Tillingbourne rises in the Surrey hills nine miles east of Guildford.