In my dreams past and present were co-existent,
and I lived in the past with a knowledge of the future...
(Alison Uttley, A Traveller in Time, 1939.)
It is a mast year, the second in a row. Abundance of berries, nuts, and seeds. As I walk from Piccadilly Station to Oxford Road I notice a ladybird has landed on my sleeve.

My plan is to visit Sackville Gardens and sit a moment to reflect beside Alan Turing, who waits on his bench, apple in hand, when (forgive the cliché but also: fact) a cloudburst quite sudden. Rainwater driven up from flagstones floods my shoes. Water-blind and soaked I splash to an open coffeeshop, order a cheese and kimchi toastie, and wait for the rain to pass.

Opposite, the old UMIST building shoulders through clouds. Red-brick, terracotta scrolls and mascaron faces; a padlocked door, and the Godlee Observatory’s seamed papier mâché dome.

There, if you could walk across the tiled entrance hall and up a flight of spiral, wrought-iron stairs, you’d find the door to a room where the roof’s two halves turn the city to a glimpse of stars.
Returning to Manchester, mid-September, 7:26pm. My flight comes in from the west, over the Irish Sea: Mersey and Ribble estuaries, shorelines, dunes and beach visible from my window seat, even the faint squiggle of waves encroaching on the grey sand. And at the end of this long-haul flight I ask myself if the time has come to address what we are good for, not just good at?

As now above the Cheshire Plain I look down and see Lovell’s telescope gleaming amidst late summer green like a giant pearl casting its long evening shadow and the shadow of trees stretched across the fields at Jodrell Bank. And as we pass overhead a flock of starlings lift from an oak and swirl around the telescope’s pearl-white ear, which tilts skyward listening for the hubbub and oscillation of distant stars.
Minutes of the Manchester Mechanic’s Institution (founded April 1824)

…to instruct the working classes in the principles of the Arts they practise and in other branches of useful knowledge…

The old reports are handwritten, and I search their variations in quality of ink from glossed lamp-black to faded brown-leaf.

On page 38, a smudged thumbprint.

Lists of new appointments and dismissals; lists of the lectures—two centuries of them to come—Zoology, Mechanics, Geography and Geology, Chemistry, Music, Arithmetic, Landscape and Figure Drawing, Botany, and History...

On page 79:

Numbers and Classification of Subscribers:

2 Brushmakers, 1 Civil Engineer, 58 Clerks, 4 Hatters, 1 Labourer, 6 Ladies, 5 Letterpress Printers, 4 Machinemakers, 26 Mechanics, 1 Piecer, 1 Pipemaker, 4 Surgeons, 2 Silkmen, 4 Tailors...

Not listed are the slaves on American plantations whose forced labour ensured a plentiful supply of cotton to Manchester’s mills, providing raw materials for wealth unpayable debt¹ which begs Robert Hayland’s question…

why should we sanction / old hypocrisies² ...

On page 21 written:

in this part of our subject
the attention was strongly called to the evidence which this science afforded of design and contrivance having been employed in adapting the structure and strata of the Earth to the benefit of man…

On page 101 a nib that leaves a flurry of blots and splashes.

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Results

And by the stroke of a pen an endowment can fund, build and incorporate a university’s sprawl from Quay Street to Oxford Road: Owens College, a Medical School, Rylands and Jodrell, the Gallery, and Waterhouse’s Whitworth Hall— in such crucibles our future is forged.
Waking after a night of 3D printed dreams in which I manifested a building vast as an aircraft hangar and filled it with lasers, microscopes, lathes, and lightning conductors; 25 Nobel Laureates and six thousand people from across the globe come to learn and discover, and a room with a loom, and a flight simulator, and racks of steel-cap boots, and on a bench a small threaded screw which I turn and it spins sweet as you like and the printers chatter to each other all the night through.

And yes, we walk here knowing that to look back is not easy.

Serendipity—the island of my father’s birth, the trade winds and wars that swept him up and led me to this place shaking out my umbrella to disperse a constellation of silver raindrops on the tiled floor. And now, at the end of another long day and leaving the lecture theatre in Sam Alex I pause to rub the lion’s lustrous polished nose before I unlock my bike and wheel it out onto Oxford Road.
Minutes of the Manchester Mechanic’s Institution:

Cleaning—the walls of the classroom have been swept and the floor washed. The committee have made an arrangement with a charwoman to sweep out once a week at the rate of 4/6 and recommend to the attention of the Board the propriety of making a permanent arrangement respecting the cleaning of this and other parts of the Institution.
Coupland Street. Hurrying from lecture to library, I stop a moment. Catch my breath. In the cracks between kerb and road a patch of green. I crouch to look. Growing: hairy bittercress or cardamine hirsuta, a weed native to Europe, Asia, parts of Africa. Most commonly found in recently disturbed areas it uses a form of rapid movement for seed dispersal, where ripe seeds burst from the pod and land far from the parent plant. Growing out of a basal rosette and with delicate, white flowers, it is edible as a bitter herb. 

The plant is small; its reach vast. We contemplate each other. I, with my hand lens and books. Thou, easing fibrous roots into this sandy, unpromising soil. We both bank on a future we can’t yet imagine. I reach down to touch the dust on green palmate leaves; rub the sand and grit between my fingertips.

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Manchester is no longer a city of rain, but of enchantment.\textsuperscript{4}

It is a mast year, the second in a row. Abundance of nuts, seeds and berries. The purple here is buddleia, or butterfly bush, sprouting from drainpipes and reaching swift roots into the crevices between wall and paving stone.

A gust of wind brings down a flurry of gold and crimson wings, swirling maple leaves and sycamore keys—voices past, present and still to come—that shiver and whisper as I walk on.

\textsuperscript{4} Uttley, Alison. Letter to Dr Frederick Ratcliffe. 14 May 1970.
Walking when I first arrived in the city I saw all the bees—on the bollards, rubbish bins, benches, the town hall’s mosaic floor, even a bee hive on the roof of the Manchester Museum. And I thought, yes, I’m meant to be here. The bees felt like a sign.

References cited

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From a conversation with University alumna Fatema Abdoolcarim.