

ONE MORE CIVIL GESTURE

POETRY PAMPHLETS BY C. E. J. SIMONS

*Progress Bar* (wordwolf press, 2010)

*No Distinguishing Features* (wordwolf press, 2011)

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**C. E. J. Simons**

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#### COVER IMAGES

Sandro Botticelli, *Pallade e il Centauro* (detail), Uffizi Gallery, Florence, courtesy of the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities, and Tourism.  
Author photo by Tina Burrett.

for Tina

*For wonder is the child of rarity; and if a thing be rare, though in kind it be no way extraordinary, yet it is wondered at. While on the other hand things which really call for wonder... if we have them by us in common use, are but slightly noticed.... Now the singularities of art deserve to be noticed no less than those of nature.... And as among the singularities of nature I placed the sun, the moon, the magnet, and the like – things in fact most familiar, but in nature almost unique; so also must we do with the singularities of art.*

(Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, Book II, section xxxi)

*Chomei at Toyama, his blank-  
et hemp, his character a rank  
not-to-be-trusted river mist,  
events in Kyoto all grist  
to the mill of a harsh irony,  
since we are seen by what we see;  
Thoreau like ice among the trees;  
and Spenser, 'farre from enemyes'...*

Derek Mahon, 'Beyond Howth Head'

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TATAMI

*You'll go far my son*, she said among the cows –  
alfalfa in my hand and the smell of dung.

Not *One day all this will be yours* –  
they weren't our cows. What was mine was

an acre of buckwheat by a river-berm,  
the smell of hay bales after a storm.

Twenty years on, and still it's clung.  
Far gone is right. Hush-slide of a paper door.

Out of Shinjuku's hamstrung hearts  
I slip into my own home like a thief.

Manitoba from ten thousand miles away  
has miniaturized to a blind room:

a dozen interlocked *tatami* mats  
have brooded through a twelve-hour summer day

and breathed out acres of grassland  
from the grass that they'd once been –

this golden fleece was mown when it was green.  
Like mine. My mother taught civility and art

and a medicine I couldn't understand.  
Once more a child in the dark, I reach for her hand –

before the room airs, a lungful of open field:  
the gift box of meadow-grass

unribbons its treasure-seals  
and all for a time's alfalfa and manure.

But before I can let the old pasture go to seed  
the night-breeze stirs

and Manitoba follows my mother's ghost  
down the apartment stairs.

I loosen my tie as if eye to eye with a bull  
and one more civil gesture could cost me my life.

FLOTSAM

(twelve days after Cyclone Nargis, 2008)

He looked like a pensioner out and about  
on a Sunday morning, enjoying the sun.  
We were searching for wounded, idling the fanboat,  
and called out to him to join the evacuation.

The Irrawady Delta was a jumble sale  
in a flooded car park, where all you could buy  
was corpses, unless you felt inclined to bail  
and bilge-pump your way down to a rotting paddy.

He stood on a patch of earth four metres square.  
On one half, he'd built himself a shelter  
from palm-fronds and sheet plastic.  
A few hundred metres behind him, the shipwreck

of his temple had run aground, its rooftop *zedi*  
a snapped mast. He raised his robes like Eliza D.'s  
petticoats to keep them dry. I eyed his inventory:  
a five-kilo bag of rice – a bag of dried chillies –

a week's worth of grey stubble on a teak pate.  
With a long stick, he stirred the flotsam, the way a barcarole  
eases his gondola down a quiet canal –  
except that he stood still, while the city-state

reeled around him. We watched him salvage detritus –  
boards, bottles, tires – anything the cyclone  
had spun loose from the Great Wheel. But when we tried  
to dictate his survival – mosquito net, Malarone –

he told us the salvage wasn't scraps  
for his hovel. No. He was trying to rebuild the temple.  
I pointed to the floating corpses  
and asked him if God had made an example

to prove a point. He seemed unconcerned:  
'Some grains are for the wind and some for the quern –  
we do not grieve for the flower or the thorn –  
those who are gone have already been reborn.'

So I asked him if none of the dead were greedy  
for more life, if none of them had fought –  
'Some were ready,' he said, 'and some were not ready,  
but they were all more ready than they thought.'

MORAY

Murderous granny  
long in the two  
teeth that remain,  
scalp blue-rinsed  
to mottled green,  
hides under the stairs  
with a cloudy eye  
upturned to the shallows'  
mirror-sky,  
tripping and tucking  
her victims away  
to soften and sweeten  
to tinned pâté.  
All pretence strips  
off with the old lace:  
a narrow skull,  
a vacant face,  
eyebrows plucked out,  
ears lopped off,  
emphysema's silent  
water-cough,  
jaw hanging limp  
from a goitered neck,  
and a tongue too short  
to lick caved-in lips  
parched and pursed by salt.  
When she grips your flipper  
in her death-grip  
somehow you know  
this is all your fault.

CAMERAMAN

(in memory of Simon Cumbers)

A man feels better with something to hold  
in his own defence,  
or better yet, something to point  
like a magic bone – at enemies, at obsolescence,

at anyone who would disagree –  
so better a weapon that can strike a man dead  
than this millstone of high technology  
with nothing but the power to go on the record.

When they turn their guns on you, you don't have time to beg –  
and even if you had the time, you wouldn't –  
knowing what's at stake through all the years you've pulled  
focus on people ready to kill for belief –

though you've turned the tables on them, since you're the one  
closer to what it meant to be a prophet:  
steady-handed to the end,  
beaming the truth out over wireless

as the murderers close in – keeping the frame tight –  
outlived only by the odds, and luckier colleagues  
who've limped through deserts, balanced on broken legs,  
walked backwards through Afghanistan

with burned hands, or a bullet in the arse,  
and kept the camera rolling  
through riots – through falling bombs –  
white phosphorus –

And so you went – weighed down only in body:  
let's say a saint, long-martyred in the practice  
of carrying the kit of the modern alchemist,  
knowing what weight it takes

to capture light, and cut it without bias,  
knowing that medium and message both have mass –  
with all it took for them to take your life  
strapped to your body in a black bag full of glass.

PINK DOG

He's dying alone  
on the streets of Penang.

I'm watching him cling  
to his last afternoon.

I'm saying: in this heat today,  
he'll die.

With no shade, nowhere to go  
he'll pose for photos.

This is the maximum  
love he's got left – no one will touch him.

His fur's completely gone.  
He wears disease and sunburn.

Shuffling at me for a stroke,  
he stops as I back

off. Even the flies  
refuse his sores.

He's six years dead,  
but I'm not rid

of the pink dog of Penang  
and his drawn-out dying.

He stands shivering away  
on my Malaccan rug.

We've traded immortality  
and some deeper infection:

he won't obey  
though I beg

*lie down in the shade, boy,  
lie down.*