

THE DRAFT WILL

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

POETRY

Overdrawn Account
This Other Life
Entertaining Fates
Lost and Found
About Time Too
Selected Poems
Ghost Characters
The Look of Goodbye
The Returning Sky
Buried Music

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Poetry, Poets, Readers: Making Things Happen
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Poetry & Translation: The Art of the Impossible

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THE DRAFT WILL

ISOBAR
PRESS

Published in 2015 by

Isobar Press
Sakura 2-21-23-202
Setagaya-ku
Tokyo 156-0053
Japan

<http://isobarpress.com>

ISBN 978-4-907359-11-9

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Earlier versions of 'The Draft Will' and fourteen of the prose poems in the opening section appeared in *Untitled Deeds* (2004). 'The Fog' was first published in *Ghost Characters* (2006). I am grateful to Chris and Jen Hamilton-Emery for publishing the former volume, and John Lucas for the latter. 'Liverpool ... of all places' was written as a prose contribution to the anthology *Liverpool Accents: Seven Poets and a City* (1996). 'Hit the Road, Jack' was composed for the centenary of Linacre Infants and Junior School, but not published. 'Becoming a Reader' was commissioned by *The Reader* and appeared in their issue 13 (2003). 'A Performing Art' was requested for *The Cambridge Review* 106, no. 2287 (1985) and published to coincide with the Poetry Festival of that year. 'In a Tight Corner' first appeared in *News for the Ear: A Homage to Roy Fisher* (2000). Sir Hugh Cortazzi commissioned 'Lost and Found' for *Japan Experiences: Fifty Years, One Hundred Views* (2001). 'Behind "Otterspool Prom"' was written for *The Reader's* 'Poets at Work' series and appeared in issue 36 (2009). My thanks go to the editors of these various publications.

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For Ornella, Matilde and Giulia

TALKING TO LANGUAGE

Not much of the room remains. Just two walls meet at a cornice with some peeling paper and raw brick, its stepped edge hard against sky. Still, we've a doorframe, the door ajar, a few sticks of furniture on a red rug, the pine board floor; and, beyond this open-air interior, a brown-tinged hillside with greenish distance fading as far as the mountains. Here at a table, here's English herself sat on the single cane chair. Her hair in a chignon, she's wearing a chic evening gown like a hospital robe, one tender breast exposed. She's whispering phrases in my good ear.

I'm half stood up as if to leave. A splayed hand palm-down on the table, waistcoat a bit the worse for wear, yet still I'm here – and, true, where else would I go from this neither in nor out? Dark clouds flare, gilt-edging the horizon. What am I saying? Wide eye appealing to the woman in white, lips parted, with an amorous look... Distinctly mixed prospects fleck the sky. Is it anything to do with promises un-kept? Ineptitude? Scandal? Resentments only? Or debts nobody should be asked to pay?

'You've taken the words right out of my mouth,' she says, putting words into mine.

RUDE AWAKENING

In the half-sleep of our wagon-lit there were the usual trundling sounds, a clatter of points, uncoupling engines; but then I could sense we'd been stopped a long while, as at a halt or station, where passports would be checked – and our night train was anyway ringed with voices. But the views from that compartment hardly recalled banlieux of Paris. It was more like a postcard with Lago Maggiore, an island village campanile, a ferryboat passing between it and us.... It was true: we were stopped outside Baveno, our last coach derailed by a signalman switching his points too soon. We were stopped for hours not far from Stresa one fine March morning, hungrily alive. No, it wasn't the fact that I'd slept through the crash ... but being so thrown back with its faint jolt, back down the years of waking dreams, of mistakes and damage, I was reminded how hard it can be, how hard just to cross a frontier.

THE ESCORTS

Quiet on the pleasure craft, they're staring at sunset's cloud convoys, at strata, heads of hair, each clustered wind-blown pine. Some of the islands have fishing smacks, wharves hung with tyres, blue-roofed sheds and telephone poles. The waves are staked for seaweed farms, or oyster beds, crab traps marked by fluttering flags on their bamboo spears, frayed in a breeze.

The escort seabirds, attentive off our wake, with eyes right, dive to catch in avid mouths, whether gull or tern, the food scraps hurled at them. We're watching those creatures zigzag, balanced on currents of air, then drop to bob and gulp down bits of nourishment there in the widening foam. Sometimes they swoop so close you can almost touch their yellow beaks.

Perhaps that voice, as it laced each phrase with apologetic sighs, with thanks for being allowed to exist, being almost out of ear-shot in rejuvenating wind, inspired him to throw his bearded head back, extend an arm round her slender neck, to grasp at one last happiness no matter what the cost in chaos, the allies tried and friends offended.

Embracing there, they gazed across that planking deck at every wave-carved, pine-topped island.

Matsushima

PERSONAL BOXES

*'en el interior de tus cajas
mis palabras se volvieron visibles'*

Octavio Paz

1

Boxed in by schoolgirls on a tram, its separate compartments crammed full of faces, identical sailor-suit uniforms, small voices like disappearing mosquitoes at home time . . . that's how to head for a Cornell exhibition beyond the eastern mountains.

2

Or, by contrast, changing trains, we're stood on a near-empty platform, all but seeing the words reach inches from our mouths, then echo as if off the glass cases which seem to enclose us – English words gone unrecognized by the ginkgo and bamboo in late autumn.

3

Leaves rain down on this bright day, a November, in the Culture Zone. You shuffle past exhibits reflected in swathes of maple and oak across each windowpane. You hear a far-off accordion from the landscaped garden where parents' backs are stuck with leaves tossed over them by joking kids still tumbled in the autumn's lap.

4

And even if sights of a gibbous moon rising in the still light sky or leaf-smoke plumes through a stand of pine bring back uncalled-for memories, surely you might have known?

5

All those constructions of Joseph Cornell's couldn't but remind us of the hotel rooms in Tokyo. Tempted by soft porn on the box, or a fridge that bills for a peek inside, I'd be sick of the hum from a fixed air-con with misted-over, sealed-up windows – epitome, if ever there was one, of being no more than alive, alone, and left to your own devices.

6

'There are things you can't come back from,' this friend of mine let slip. We were waiting in a glass-walled bus stop, 'like words you wouldn't want to fault, yet still they're screening off your past.'

7

But then leaves gusting over asphalt in their autumn tones replied, 'Oh, don't take life too personally.'

Shiga

SIDE EFFECTS

When death cuffed me across the face, I didn't turn the other cheek, but flinched, and from one corner of an eye, the wide right-field blur shaded into night.

Now mountains come at me askance. Along a road home's snaking curves, earth's rim, its margin, is hazed in dusk. Sun flares through cloud-wisps trailed above the tree fringe, frayed, and now in silhouette.

I keep an eye on it, blood streaming in the firmament. Broadcasting tower and a Ferris wheel glint at that distance. Though it's almost five o'clock, the light of day still lingers. I keep an eye on it, twisting my neck that bit more to the right.

It's like wiping the smile off one side of your face. Now that slice of death still stares me down from any bathroom mirror. There a temple and part-unlined forehead don't live up to who they are – as if I had no strains or stresses, time couldn't leave its mark on me, as if a half a life weren't over.

Sendai

THE PAST

i.m. Fumiko Horikawa

It was already dusk when we walked into the hills and, looking back, could pick out, among darker profiles, the places we had been. Down there, from the scrum of a shoe-removing room to a quiet, raked stone garden with its adventitious wall was but a few shuffled paces. Was it emptiness or central calm? No, they were simply rocks and gravel. Whatever, it wasn't the same, this interplay of stain and edge, as five crammed years before. Arranged, those grey things there, I hadn't had the heart to see.

'The past is past,' that's what he said. We were haunting the sacred wood shrine.

He said it at the memories mentioned, as if the past were like our shoes. But they couldn't be undone, their scents just yards away in my one-time home with ghost-lives beyond a clump of pines. It was there in the moss-encrusted thatch, a weathered wood stage for fertility rites, for dances, in a sunset's last gleam where we watched, in autumn leaves and temples, fitting like a foil for fresh signs of fulfillments you'd not survive to live, while we had got this far.

Kyoto