

## THE PAINTING STICK

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*In Daylight* (Printed Matter Press, 1995)

*Monumenta Nipponica* (Saru Press, 1995)

*The Painting Stick* (Pine Wave Press, 2005)

*From the Japanese* (Isobar Press, 2013)

*World Without* (Isobar Press, 2015)

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# THE PAINTING STICK

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# THE PAINTING STICK

A TRAGICOMEDY IN FIVE ACTS,  
PRESENTED TO GREAT APPLAUSE

1. Honey. Apples. Summer in an orchard. A treatise on gardens.
2. A grey wolf is observed among the hollyhocks. The donning of a mask. Manifold complications and a misplaced key.
3. Thunder. Catastrophe. Tempests and earthquakes. An old man jumps from a very high bridge.
4. Multiplying disguises. Scenes of unbridled lust. The gaoler with a rubber nose. The beautiful animal is tormented in its golden cage. Seventeen rapes, five eviscerations, and the destruction of several large cities.
5. Providential manipulations and rearrangements. Thoughts on fatherhood. Three unlikely marriages and a humble restitution. After a short pause for refreshments, the whole thing starts all over again.



## UTOPIA, ARCADIA

### 1

The 3:19 passes through a cutting and across a matchstick bridge above a glassy river. It's running right on time. It continues through a level crossing and comes to a halt in a station equipped with bookstall, milk churns and a motionless porter.

The man watches over his creation, his pink hands resting lightly on the controls. He likes to wear a uniform while he plays.

In the station yard a little figure is lifting a bale into a warehouse beneath the light-bulb sun. Never let it be thought that this figure might be unhappy – he likes to do what he's supposed to do. This is Utopia, every detail perfect.

### 2

In a circle of lamplight a man raises his eyes from a page. The poems he's been reading have led him, step by step, to a small clearing in the forest of his perplexity.

They're a hint and a reminder, telling him of a world in which the annals of atrocity aren't opened from one year to the next. If you go to the central archive of Arcadia and ask the librarian for guidance, he'll scratch his head; even he doesn't know where such chronicles are shelved.

A train passes in the night, its sound coming through the forest and across small lakes and meadows. In the villages and market towns along its route the windows rattle in their frames and children stir in their sleep.

## MIRACLES

*Giovanni Bellini: Polyptych of St Vincent Ferrer*

nine panels  
encased in intricate gold

on the base  
    three small scenes depict  
St Vincent performing miracles, bringing  
succour to the faithful in their hour of need:

swooping out of the sky  
on a saint-sized magic carpet of fluffy cumulus  
to free the prisoners and raise the dead

arriving in a puff of smoke  
his arms outstretched  
    his halo undisturbed by flight  
to guide the rescuers to a buried child  
in the rubble of an earthquake-ruined city

hovering solicitously over  
a drowned but about-to-be-resurrected woman  
    a sodden white bundle half-submerged  
in a glinting rippling tide-race

in water which is pure vision of water  
a liquid hallucination  
brimming between earthen banks

*(I can't quite believe I'm seeing this ...)*

water on earth as it is in heaven  
shining and purling before my faithless eyes

*Venice, 28 December 1995*

FONTE GAIA

I

in the cathedral museum in Siena, Duccio  
has a small room to himself

where a line of chairs is drawn up  
    in front of *The Madonna Enthroned*  
as if in a theatre, so you can sit and watch  
the assembled ranks of bearded saints and dreaming angels  
performing stillness

    and listen in the silence to  
    their golden haloes chime

like very gently struck gongs

2

in a sloping piazza, beneath  
a curved façade of red medieval brick

*Fonte Gaia*, the 'joyous fountain'

where pigeons flutter, ruffle and perch  
    on the heads and laps of sculpted Virtues,  
bathe in the fountain's splash and tingle,  
spreading their wings in the gleaming threads of water  
that spill from the mouths of marble wolves –  
on whose noses  
    other pigeons balance, leaning down  
to sip with circumspection from the spouts below

a puppy  
lollops around all this in an ecstasy of exploration  
Young Master Hound  
trot and sniff, bounce and bark

nose down  
start back sideways in surprise  
such rich, such unpredicted smells  
how extraordinary to have a tail and shadow

3

in a triangular panel on the Baptistry ceiling  
a miniature *Day of Judgement*

large stars  
spaced evenly in a deep blue sky  
where red-faced angels blow their trumpets

an ochre desert  
out of which the dead are resurrecting

one head after another  
breaking through the earthy crust  
up and out from blankness into unexpected air

*Siena, 2–3 January 1996*

THE VISIT

*in memory of Jo Sawbridge (1945-70)*

when she visited tonight  
she was cheerful and friendly  
as young as ever  
and happier than I'd seen her for years

but even in my dream I knew she was dead

I get up and cross the room  
open the shutters, look down  
at lines of parked cars, street lamps  
wet tarmac, running gutters

twenty-five years

the dead do come back  
but then again, of course, they don't

*Milan, 5 January 1996*

## THE PAINTING STICK

*Flying over the Crimea in 1943, his Stuka plane was shot down by Russian anti-aircraft fire. While lying in a twenty-day coma in hospital, he imagined his rescue by a tribe of Tartars who wrapped him in fat and felt to keep him warm.*

I

a hunter crouches  
deep in a cave in the Upper Palaeolithic

in flickering tallow light  
with stone palette  
    and earth pigments at hand  
he gazes at the contours of the limestone wall

in the daylight world  
    out on the windy steppe  
the animals have slipped in under his guard  
untamed presences muscled with light

and now in this fissure  
    he can see them  
in the curves and bulges of water-formed rock

he picks up his painting stick:  
living deer leap out of the rock face to meet him

    fifteen thousand years

the steel door of the Grotte de Font-de-Gaume  
booms as it closes behind us  
    and our eyes adjust to the darkness:

mammoths

    aurochs and fine-limbed horses  
in brown haematite and black manganese

fleet deer

the brown-shouldered bulk of bison

2

hours spent by a child

faces or landscapes

in the wallpaper

in tumbled blankets on the bed

in damp-stains on walls, on floors

in lichen on rocks

in the coal fire's hot crevices

in summer's slow clouds unfurling against the blue

living presences

envisioned out of whatever is offered

dreaming wide-eyed as he follows the contours

absorbed in the world's fluid grammar of hints

3

in the forecourt of the Royal Academy

Sir Joshua Reynolds poses with palette and brush

a balletic gesture stiffened to bronze



the voice of Blake  
    fulminating in Lambeth  
carries from across the river, from across the centuries  
and echoes faintly in the courtyard

*folly! of what consequence is it to the arts  
what a Portrait Painter does?*

we ascend in a steel-and-glass lift to the galleries  
and enter the house of Beuys

pencil, wax, watercolour, hare's blood, fat

deer, goats, bees, a volcano, a glacier  
and nameless shapes in red and brown and ochre

drawing as dreamwork with pencil in hand  
a daily record  
    vestiges, traces of inhabitation  
discovering forms to think with on paper  
as the contours of the moment suggest them

no 'technique'  
    but that's part of the point

why is this as comforting as it is?

shaman for a murderous century

a man trapped in a plane  
as it plunges towards the earth in flames

## KNOSSOS

ruins are hard to read:  
how to imagine a world  
from the bottom six inches of a storehouse wall?

fat red and black pillars  
ferro-concrete, pastel-coloured murals –  
a ruin fabricated, it seems,  
in the early nineteen-hundreds

what if Sir Arthur had just bared the stones,  
no more mediation than that,  
would Minoan ghosts appear more readily?

outside the wire-mesh fence  
air-conditioned buses stand in a shimmer of heat  
inside, queues  
move slowly through reconstructed rooms

a woman waits with camera poised  
in front of a fresco of a prancing bull  
for a shot with no passers-by

her image  
of having been here all alone with history

## ARKADI

Corinthian columns, baroque lintels  
double belfry, double nave,  
    a sandstone cloister with  
battlements running the length of its roof

in the museum, sepia photographs  
(bandoliers, sheepskin boots and fierce moustaches)  
    and a large-scale map with arrows  
showing the Turkish advance across the hills

an explosively opened vault, once the magazine,  
where, when the Turks broke in at last,  
    the abbot set off the powder  
killing hundreds, Greeks and Turks alike

outside, across the dusty car park,  
a small domed building contains only  
    – as eyes adjust to the darkness –  
a glass-fronted cabinet full of human skulls