

THE PLEASURES OF PEACE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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THE PLEASURES *of* PEACE

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for Maya

We sailed the great ocean and came back, without proof.

(Alan Halsey)

Rotating the stone wheels may save you from pain and suffering.

(sign at Zenkoji Temple, Nagano, Japan)

Keep to the point and make the drummer sound good.

(Thelonious Monk to Steve Lacy)

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ISLANDED

dark blue, whitecapped
waves fill the lower half of the window

heathery hills the upper half, and then

as the boat rolls, the window
frames only sky

*

approaching the island

a hundred yards offshore
the smell of cow shit on the wind

*

a curve of beach
a jetty
a low rounded hill
leaning gravestones and a roofless chapel

await the thick deft BB pencil
of Wilhelmina Barns-Graham

*

horizontal bands of colour
reach to a low horizon:

a drystone wall spotted with yellow lichen
a brilliant strip of grass
a fire-red straggle of wind-blown montbretia
slick black rain-wet tarmac
 richly smirched by the recent passage
 of a trotting herd of bees
ribbons of yellow and brown seaweed
ruffled water tinged turquoise by the sandy seabed
 darkening further out to deeper then deeper blues

on the opposite shore
banks of mottled brown seaweed slope up to
red-roofed houses and a gently curved horizon
where two wind turbines stand tall against grey sky

 small boats heave at their anchors
 in an insistent westerly wind
 seabirds bob among whitecaps

cloud shadows and sunshine
constant changes of light

low grey clouds head rapidly eastwards
high white altocumuli proceed steadily west

*

connoisseurs by now
of squall, downpour and drench

(you'll be all right atween the shoures
the boatman said as we disembarked)

weather sweeps in from the west
wind so strong it blows the pelting rain
horizontally over our heads as we hunker
in the lee of the half-height walls
of the oldest house in north-west Europe

dry and snugly sheltered, squatting on our heels
on a Neolithic farmer's living room floor

*

people friendly, grounded
always ready for a chat
somewhere where everyone knows everyone

swadge: to sit back and rest after eating

'four' pronounced *phooerr*

Michael's family:
here on the island since the eleventh century

*

The bakery bakes bread on Wednesday and Saturday – you get it hot from the oven. They can't easily send it off the island. It's a matter of sustainability – you don't want to build up your workforce, and then the winter storms are bad enough so there's no boats, and then you lose all the contracts. So they mostly make biscuits and oatcakes and things with a longer shelf life – a week of storms with no boats makes no difference to those.

*

curlews, lapwings, snipe, golden plovers and linnets
feed in the fields

grey seals

with white whiskers

sit up head and shoulders out of the water
watch us with alert and curious eyes

fulmars, gannets and gulls soar above the sea
rise on updrafts, wheel on gusts, or
let their flight be

slowly bent from its path
by the unabating, incessant westerly

*beak, bird eye and ruffled feather
the weather-wise tilt of a slanted wing
my song my flight a wind-blown silence
poised on a swerve of air*

*

in the small
airport
departure lounge

the clock
is wrong

Westray & Papa Westray, 12–14 September 2018

NORTH

the train halts

windless silence, falling snow
visibility ten metres

twigs and branches, silver
birches muffled with heavy white

*

north-western coast
a sea in turmoil
among dark rocks

*

FUROUFUSHI ONSEN

a concrete path across a stony beach
 yukata flapping wildly in the gale
to an open-air hot spring exactly at
the sea's edge

waves heave towards the land,
sheets of foam criss-cross,
overtake each other, subside
in an agitation of blue water
amongst black rocks beside the bath

steaming orange-brown
 mineral-laden water
a pink-orange sunset intermittently glimpsed
between grey roiling clouds

gulls swerve and dip
three rapid cormorants
 do a fly-by parallel to the shore

biting wind off the sea chills
the windward shoulder
fingers and toes
instantly numb on stepping from water into air

furoufushi = 'no ageing, no death'

*

the gale thumps, batters at
the flimsy building all night
loud enough to wake me, take me
to the window to watch

huge seas crashing to shore
waves tripping over
themselves and tumbling headlong
in a seethe of white

in the grey dawn
a hailstorm rattles the breakfast room windows

*

MORNING BUS

coastal villages
potholes and empty houses
no one to be seen

*

wind strong enough to have rolled newly fallen snow
into snowballs, to have trundled these across the
freezing white plain – leaving a tangled
skein of tracks behind them – until,
too heavy to be shifted further,
they came to rest, stranded
here and there in their
random not-random
places

*

AOMORI

apples and grown-under-snow carrots
fish from northern ports

in the hush after
the shinkansen's departure
boot soles creak on snow

Akita & Aomori Prefectures, 28–29 January 2019

THE PLEASURES OF PEACE

I

Sirens wail and steel objects fall from the sky,
giving banks and insurance offices heart attacks, axe-blow spasms
that shrug masonry off its foundations –
building after building climbing down itself into the street
to be consumed in fire.

This happened before I was born, but as a small child, peering
through gaps in rickety wire-and-picket fencing, I saw
ruined cellars and shattered brickwork,
tattered wallpaper adorning ghost rooms two storeys up,
traces of vanished stairways climbing propped-up walls,
and lakes of rosebay willow herb – sheets of ruffled purple
mantling the rubble and bared earth of basements opened to sky.

2

When a fire or other disturbance opens up the ground, the seeds
of *Chamaenerion angustifolium* germinate. Some areas can, after
burning, be covered with dense stands of this species; in Britain in
the 1940s the plant became known as ‘bombweed’ due to its rapid
colonisation of the bomb craters.

3

Seventy and more years on, the trees on Hampstead Heath
heave their shoulders and rustle their spreading limbs like
giants doing Tai Chi.

A sudden alarm call, and an unseen blackbird thrashes away
through heavy summer foliage.

Lifting its head above a bed of brambles, a single purple flower
stirs and sways, attentive
to the fleeting motions of the wind.

Among trees, across grass, through bracken, skirting thickets,
the path leads on like a thought.