

## FLIGHT RISK

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Progress Bar* (wordwolf press, 2010)

*No Distinguishing Features* (wordwolf press, 2011)

*One More Civil Gesture* (Isobar Press, 2015)

*Underground Facility* (Isobar Press, 2018)

# FLIGHT RISK

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#### COVER IMAGE

Nonnow Naruse, DAZZLE, by courtesy of the artist.

for Magnus Oberon



An Angel came to me and said, 'Oh pitiable foolish young man! Oh horrible! Oh dreadful state! Consider the hot burning dungeon thou art preparing for thyself to all eternity, to which thou art going in such career.'

I said, 'Perhaps you will be willing to show me my eternal lot, and we will contemplate together upon it and see whether your lot or mine is most desirable.'

William Blake  
'A Memorable Fancy [The Vanity of Angels]'  
in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

Half life is over now,  
And I meet full face on dark mornings  
The bestial visor, bent in  
By the blows of what happened to happen.

Philip Larkin

## CONTENTS

Self-Storage / 13
ten years staring up at the same / 14
The Song of Arcas the Hunter / 15
<i>Yōkai: Hakuzōsu</i> / 17
Mastery / 21
Epitaph for a Good Dog / 22
Learning Curve / 23
Mulberry / 24
Uxor / 26
Prayer for My Son / 28
Dreams / 31
Carion Flower / 32
The Hyena / 33
Reply to Jonson's 'Ode to Himself' / 34
Match / 35
They Back Away / 36
Balmoral / 37
What this old thing / 40
Haggard / 41
Uvula / 45
The Liberties, Kabukichō / 46
Obits / 47
Meat Palace / 48
Prayer for My Son / 50
Building Light / 54
Faculties / 56
<i>Tanuki</i> / 60



Exclusion Zone / 62

1. *Into the Zone* / 62

2. *Five Triolets: Evading Security* / 64

3. *Dust* / 66

4. *Go Bags* / 67

all week the empty larder then Friday / 70

Urashima Tarō and his Son / 71

NOTES / 75

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS / 77



## FLIGHT RISK



## SELF-STORAGE

Haul up your storage unit's door  
and throw everything away.  
These things that you've kept have kept you poor.  
All that 'value' you set in store –  
it was all fool's gold, all worthless before  
it was worthless today.  
Throw it away, throw it away.

Carefully sort through your boxes and bags  
then throw them away.  
Your heart is a maze of shelves that sag  
under the weight of those boxes and bags.  
Once you were muscled like a stag –  
now you are grey.  
Throw them away, throw them away.

Choose a few treasures that you can save –  
then throw them away.  
Your mind is a bare room. Your fingers sieve  
for the gold of years you've barely lived.  
Kneel in self-storage till something gives  
way: those years, those days.  
Then throw them away, throw them all away.

Here's the most precious thing you've stored,  
what till now you couldn't hear yourself say  
over the sound of tearing cardboard:  
the pain of some life you were working towards  
that you stuck in storage – and now want to restore  
to the light of this artificial day.  
And what does that life say? *You threw me away.*

## MEAT PALACE

At 29 weeks you termed  
yourself 'The Meat Palace' – a castle rented  
to a flexing Triton, swimmer-sleek,  
muscling himself up to fill his empire,  
your heartbeat teaching him the rhythms  
of his own hungry blood vessels –  
the epic metre of his future annals.  
He's open-mouthed, a flower breathing rain,  
accustomed now to his submerged domain.

*'Snug in your Meat Palace,'* you tease him,  
when the showerhead's hot patter  
thrubs the tuned *timpani* of your abdomen,  
a snare drumroll of thunderstorm delight,  
an underground concerto to his ears.  
He wriggles in pleasure like an octopus  
jet-squidding his dream-swim  
through your circulation's mysteries,  
your blood-warm southern seas.

What implications for him – for us all –  
in this unremembered  
sovereignty of the senses,  
founded in little more than a nutshell?  
Every girl's a princess, after that,  
a kidnapped Persephone –  
and you, son – every man's a Tamburlaine,  
an insatiable killer on a bloody throne,  
pushing on, slaughter after slaughter,

because no conquest can recover  
this deep-sea diver's hover  
on your first throne, lord of an empire  
you'll never remember –  
a king of infinite space and self  
on your mother's continental shelf,  
where your breath lives in your tether,  
its slippery, pulsing twist –  
your lifeline, your first sceptre,  
that length of living rope clutched in your fist.

## EXCLUSION ZONE

(*Fukushima, March 2021*)

### I INTO THE ZONE

That nothing seems shocking or grotesque  
summons a cloud of panic,

driving north at dusk  
along highway six.

All the shapes I've been ignoring  
in my peripheral vision

along the coast's glittering facets  
through Iwaki and Tatsuta

like an internal emergency siren  
suddenly demand attention:

Family Marts and Eneos petrol stations,  
diners selling sukiyaki or ramen,

the ABC Shoes and the rent-a-car lot,  
the casinos with signs for 'Pachinko & Slot' –

all screaming *something's not right, something's not right*  
with their unremarkable silhouettes

as what we thought was a good day turns to night.  
Because their unremarkable silhouettes



are silhouettes, at sunset:  
shuttered, and without their guiding lights.

With their unremarkable silhouettes  
all screaming *something's not right, something's not right,*

the casinos with signs for 'Pachinko & Slot',  
the ABC Shoes and the rent-a-car lot,

diners selling sukiyaki or ramen,  
Family Marts and Eneos petrol stations

suddenly demand attention  
like an internal emergency siren

through Iwaki and Tatsuta.  
Along the coast's glittering facets

in my peripheral vision,  
all the shapes I've been ignoring

along highway six,  
driving north at dusk,

summon a cloud of panic  
that nothing seems shocking or grotesque –

2 FIVE TRIOLETS: EVADING SECURITY

I

I tiptoed out into the dawn  
and saw that I was not alone

here where the world had come undone –  
I tiptoed out into the dawn

and froze to see two TEPCO goons  
puzzling at where I'd gone –

I tiptoed out into the dawn  
and saw that I was not alone

II

One of them climbed the sea wall's shelf  
made of bags of radioactive soil

thinking I'd come to kill myself –  
one of them climbed the sea wall's shelf.

Deserted now, since March the twelfth  
ten years ago, the coast despoiled –

one of them climbed the sea wall's shelf  
made of bags of radioactive soil.

III

I stood frozen like a *sika* deer  
who watched the wave come, and was spared.

Unseen, like some charmed cavalier,  
I stood frozen like a *sika* deer

gripped by an irrational fear  
that I had no business being there:

I stood frozen like a *sika* deer  
who watched the wave come, and was spared.

IV

Let's say, we were all doing our best  
to honour, not to desecrate:

me, hiding to avoid arrest –  
let's say we were all doing our best.

You, searching ruin's rusted mess  
after you took my number plate –

let's say we were all doing our best  
to honour, not to desecrate.

At peace again among the dead,  
 who questions what the living want?

Security – somewhere to lay your head  
 at peace again among the dead –

justice, at least – and what we've said  
 to still stir feelings when we haunt

(at peace again among the dead)  
 who questions what the living want.

### 3 DUST

The Geiger counter clucks at me  
 whenever I drive past Dai-ichi –

it does the patter of a mountebank  
 near the radioactive water tanks.

All day its sleepy clicks tell me it's found  
 no contrast between this scraped ground

and the background of the universe,  
 data that seem a bit perverse

among the beams of fallen shrines,  
 the weeds, the broken glass, the warning signs.

But I carry the counter like that albatross,  
in case I stray into one of the hotspots

scattered across Futaba town  
or Ōkuma, and on impulse lie down

to take a low-angle photograph that must  
leave me covered in the dust

of the decade since the ranks of smiling chairmen  
insisted such a thing could never happen.

#### 4 GO BAGS

New Year – *o-sōji* time – and it's my job  
while the curry's simmering on the hob

to take two rucksacks from the *genkan* cupboard,  
two bags, two helmets – these days, there's a third –

take out the bags, unstrap them, and compare  
the contents to the checklist I have here

labelled, 'Emergency Evacuation',  
so if our family ever needs to run

when the next big quake shatters Tokyo,  
we'll know that we're about as good to go

as anyone could be, under the circumstances.  
You're the one who's always taking chances

with a devil's good luck, while I play the tortoise  
more focused on survival than its purpose.

So, I charge batteries; check the expiry dates  
on tins of beans and fish and long-life biscuits;

swap in fresh painkillers and antiseptic;  
switch on the Geiger counter, let it tick

like a clock that can't keep time. This year I know  
from long nights spent in Futaba and Ōno

that my checklist is a catechism –  
now that my 'go bag' is the prism

through which I see, again, the things I've seen:  
a waste land like a labyrinthine

nightmare of dull solitude  
without fresh water, electric light, or food –

the wave-smashed beach houses and shrines,  
the fallen roofs, the no-go signs –

the thousand *sakura* of Yunomori  
blooming under broken balconies.

'Preparing for survival'  
may be a worthwhile ritual

despite it being an oxymoron in  
the present continuous tense. It's serotonin

to brains debilitated by the thought  
that death is prepping all the time we're not.

But not this year. I seal up these bright things  
renewed for flight, for fleeing or escaping

from what can't be escaped from, can't be fled.  
I go back to the kitchen, with the dead

fresh in my thoughts, fresh for another year,  
thinking of those who had a bag like mine

and died without it, or despite it, since  
there's nothing in it, really, but our fear –

and filling it with our false confidence  
will weight the body down under the brine,

when all we need to see tomorrow's sun  
is to take nothing, and run, and run, and run.