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Poetry

Torse 3: Poems 1948–61 (Longmans, London)

Nonsequences/Selfpoems (Longmans)

Our Flowers & Nice Bones (Fulcrum Press, London)

The Lonely Suppers of W.V. Balloon

Carminalenia

111 Poems

Two Horse Wagon Going By

Selected Writings (Paladin Books, London)

The Balcony Tree

Intimate Chronicles

The Word Pavilion and Selected Poems

Of the Mortal Fire (Sheep Meadow Press, Riverdale-on-Hudson, NY)

The Anti-Basilisk

The Tenor on Horseback (Sheep Meadow Press)

Collected Poems

Prose

‘Bolshevism in Art’ and other Expository Writings

Pataxanadu and Other Prose

Serpentine (Oasis Books, London)

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Jackdaw Jiving: Selected Essays on Poetry and Translation

In the Mirror of the Eighth King (Green Integer, Los Angeles)

Crypto-Topographia (Enitharmon Press, London)

Palavers and a Nocturnal Journal (Shearsman Books, Exeter)

If from the Distance: Two Essays (Menard Press, London)

Depictions of Blaff (Green Integer)

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The Enjoyment of Shouting

Artist Unknown

While Tartar advance-guards
tore the settlements apart,
platoons on horseback fanning out,
ugly men, often drunken
torching the huts
with speed and arrow frightening
the tidy inhabitants,
he stayed at home
all bamboo perhaps
and with a steadier hand than once
painted his unforgettable 'Cat
Threatening Butterflies.'

The Dance Itself

What could he have been sniffing at,
This red dog like a retired greyhound
In Gauguin's picture? An enigmatic wave
Runs down his backbone, then up
It goes to the shoulders, those
Of two women, one of them whispering,
One in a dusty blue, the other in white,
Cross-legged, putting a hand on her ankle.

And what could they, posing side by side,
Be communicating? One in profile
Has told the other, in white, of troubles
Perhaps, yet the other looks out at you
Straight-on; surely she has often heard
This sort of little sylvan history?

Behind them, a hard green. Three
Female figures whirl in a dance there.
Our couple sits beneath a tree.
The dog was passing by, in a moment
Off he walked, having doubtless
Dramas of his own to be taking care of.

Might not the eyes then have it to be
That in the picture its principal figures
Articulate one wave, its rise
In the sniffing, its crest in the dancing
At the apex, its fall for the time being
In the whispering? And that this,
Here, is an image of time caught,
Caught by the tail, made by colours
To open itself, become transparent?

At what the dog sniffs we only know
That in no time at all he'll piss on it;
Of what the one woman whispers to the other
We cannot so much as guess, truth to tell;
And what are the distant dancers dancing about,
If not to rhythms inaudible the dance itself?

(Arearea, 1892)

The Strategy of Apanea

(B.C. 140)

Of the Syrian Greeks it has been reported
That for those who lived in considerable cities
Earth, more or less of her own accord, delivered
All the food and drink they could possibly want.
All day in halls at the long tables carousing,
Or strolling in cool porticos,
While a few slaves distributed nature's productions,
The citizens could pass their time watching shows,
Learning to play the harp, to tell stories.
The city air was filled with eloquence and music,
Flute girls or boys ran up obligingly,
If in a figured bowl you brought your dinner home.

It is also said that the men of Larissa never stopped
Being manly. Ten generations of fighting
From Babylon to the Hellespont
Had not made them think twice about belligerence.
On the march to war with them
Once a brigade of Apameans was discovered.
The hats they flaunted had the broadest brims
And were "exquisitely adjusted
To shade the neck but not divert the breeze."
A string of asses trotted behind the Apameans
Laden with wine and every sort of viand;
Pipes and flutes bristled from other baskets—
Instruments (as Posidonius helpfully
Reminds us) not of war but of revelry.

Among Egyptian Cenobites

(Valley of Nitria)

Makarios the Alexandrian in his cave—
A hyena surprised him, holding a little one
Between her teeth. Gently then
She laid it on the rock, at the hermit's feet.
Mother Hyena, she backed off and waited.
Makarios waited too, And soon
He did something.

Blind no more, wisely beside the mother,
Stumbling a bit, off goes the little one.
Days pass. The mother eventually
Revisited the cave, between her teeth
A sheepskin.

When he chose to sleep
Makarios could curl up on it. At a great age
He gave it to the dauntless Roman lady
Melania. She took it home, quite likely,
And tacked it, unlaundered, to the wall.

But if she took the time to scrutinize it,
Melania trembled. Might a hyena's breath
On embers in her memory blow away
Five centuries to Jason,
The Golden Fleece, and the Argonautica
Of Apollonius of Rhodes?

To be left behind,
Yawned at? . . . Again the lady trembled.
The cave is where it was. Fleece in hand,
And long ago Melania went to heaven.

A Longer Wind

Don't I know well enough how the world turns,
Yet a May morning, this one, prompts me
Less to question the weight of certain sympathies
Than to memorialize a sprinkle of events.

Wakings, early, from deep sleep or shallow,
That was the local blackbird, first solo
And after, to the chorus of a dozen doves;
As light becomes more largely evident,
Sparrows rap from the parapets,
And flitting in and out the gutter, chirrup.

Mariushka soon, her elfin smile, her silver trays,
Breakfast her scene, applause, bouquets, and-kisses—
I must memorialize instant somebody's arrival
From Charleston. Who? Encumbered
With wedding gifts, he tells me of his daughter
Shortly to wed the proprietor of Le Bombardier.

“My tibia anterior tends to ache.”
“My lungs—my captors;”
His calm, despite the foreign taxi-ride,
This chill in the air, sky with puffs
Of Raoul Dufy cumulus above us both,
Far as we are from Darfur, from Java,
From the Gaza Strip and what goes on
There and there. “These days any squit
Can manufacture ruins in a wink.”

A clatter of wheels crossing cobblestones
When another traveller hauls
Past the oleander bush, beneath the sycamore
Stuffs to be apparelled in, embarked

On the trip of a lifetime—
Also askance this wallpaper I memorialize,
Outfits from the eighteenth century,
People prod a giant marrow bulging from the ground;
Lovers in a gondola slung under a Montgolfier balloon;
Near several prone sheep a man dangles a parasol.

Then, heard on a swerve, the repetitions:
Children singing loud and clear from school
A complicated anthem in their echoing
Assembly hall, arpeggios on the piano—
Elation, elasticity, a pattern models the air
As when, as when for pity's sake
Hölderlin felt it, took it for a beacon
Planted by some disconcerting gods
Tenuously under contract still,
Vague as the covenant became, to the likes of us.

Even so don't stop there though the hustle
Panics memory, bless me, how awkward now—
Tudela or Battuta, which to memorialize?

Wasn't it one of them commits to words of power
The singing of Constantinopolitan children;
A pervasive music stole upon him as he wandered in
The maze of monasteries crumbling thereabouts:
And what they sang of, did they precisely know?
That might have been two centuries, even,
Before the city, all its instruments betrayed,
Its ruins more conspicuous than ever,
Opened to the army of the Barbarian.

(Paris, Hôtel des Grandes Ecoles)

The Very Capable Waitress

Jacklyn's gesture
resting briefly her head
on the barman's breastbone
then, revived, effortless
raising it,
god knows, as might
a swan or a dolphin—
can it be time alone
soaks only to clarify
these timeless things.

Calligraphy

Aha, I find the late fourth century pope Damasus
Had seen to it that the tombs of martyrs

Were given fresh distinction by calligraphy.
With a calligraphy from his own pen old stones

Were incised by a mason selected not only
For his dexterity, also for his sympathies.

How different it is, that order of things,
From the reburial, pronto, of carving dismembered

By the constructors of emporia and office blocks
Over the sunken city in modern Mylasa—

What do the planners care about things Greek,
Ancient inscriptions or extended gods

Who still cling with touches of sunlight
To fluted stone scheduled for reburial?

If mind did not become a Mylasa, who'd recall
The crates of American rifles in summer 1940,

And how the girls and boys of freedom lift
Those greased guns from the crates in England,

Old grease, with rags wipe every vestige off,
Clots of grease hidden in the dark magazines?

Plain or grainy, the wooden rifle butt,
Polish it up until it glows

Fitting snug into your skinny shoulder—
An age before you knew what calligraphy was.

A Grackle with a Greek Motif

As if the wind had many borders,
The sharp angle it was open at—
Orange beak of the grackle-cock, the solo
Busily grooming boat-tailed grackle-cock—
Had many borders, many,

Much as Louise alleges, of the wind.

So too some laughter, in a twilit bar,
Of secretaries having a real blast—

As if to groom the grackle-cock was hoisting
First one wing to peck at, then the other:

All at once, from black and glossy
Plumage it has saturated, a cascade of lights
Rushes out, as if to meet the eye, welcome it,

Whooping and cartwheeling iridescence,
Momentary hues it would be hard to name—

Borders are spilled, others the eye eliminates.

Capacious they too could have been,
Those nothing-nits the beak was open for,

As if the uncontainable had been contained
In grackle-flesh, as if in feathers

The wind revolved its borders, let them go.