

**on
the
governing
of
empires**

Also by Alasdair Paterson

Poems for Douanier Rousseau

Hieronymous Bosch's picture history

Terra Nova

Alps

Topiary

The Floating World: Selected Poems 1973–1982

Brief Lives

**on the governing
of empires**

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Shearsman Books
Exeter

Published in the United Kingdom in 2010
by
Shearsman Books Ltd
58 Velwell Road
Exeter EX4 4LD

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-116-0
First Edition

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Acknowledgements

Some of these poems were first published
in the following magazines:
Great Works, Obsessed with pipework, Shadowtrain, Shearsman

Cover design by Alys Paterson.

CONTENTS

on heresy	11
on optics	12
on psyche	13
on verbs	14
on forestry	16
on reformation	17
on tragedy	18
on bells	19
on princesses	20
on fire	21
on stars	22
on statues	23
on ballads	24
on midlife	26
on taxonomy	27
on protocol	28
on leadership	30
on palaces	31
on monasteries	32
on bedlam	33
on memory	34
on the senses	35
on salvage	36
on civil war	39
on foreign war	40
on phonetics	41
on nomenclature	42
on history	44
on fruit	46
on lineage	47
on empiricism	48
on iconoclasm	49

on telescopes	50
on domes	51
on travel	52
on many	53
on bibliomancy	54
on healing	56
on greatness	58
on smallness	59
on murder	60
on suicide	61
on bread	62
on mysteries	64
on portraits	65
on ecstasy	67
on peace	68
on birth	69
on the library	70
on afterwords	72
background notes	74

My grandfather left me 53 volumes on governing the empire. What an inheritance! So far I have read and destroyed 30, and can state that I am in a fair way to forgetting all he knew. Some day, I hope, my children will thank me.

—Constantine VIII, Emperor of Byzantium: *Letters*

Once upon a time, in a humdrum suburb you won't have heard of, in a town that won't ring any bells even if you've passed through once or twice, my mother and father did what came naturally and there was I—nothing special either, but clutching with radiant hope the usual birthday present, an obligation to sing the words of one song to the tune of another.

—'Claudette': *A Spy in the Rose Cabaret*

For my family

on heresy

stars come solitaries first
then a host like
pilgrims no crusaders

this rock that bleached
all day in the sun
still isn't white enough

do you prefer
the desert places or
the cities of the plain
I like best the view
of lights from up here

a breath of rosemary
perfection in the air
but the bridge is the devil's

on optics

reading from the top
it's down there they
broke the glass
burned the books
and their true believers
or reasonably similar
or just different

last lines are
the streets shone
then it was darker

on psyche

underneath all of it

fountains and roses
silk weave and moths
morgues birthing chambers
perfumed kisses dripping
clocks and tortures

under all the names
for the gods and their
mouths that can't be parched
for fear of uncomfortable silences

under all of it
you're into the vast
cisterns built for long siege
dim light on amber surfaces
slime and sleek byzantine carp
pillars from unseen to unseen
and round a corner
to stop you in your tracks
head of great medusa

on verbs

we're picking their language over
like looters with a bolt of cloth
a thing of the finest weave
miraculous in shade and balance
though for purposes of siege warfare
surprisingly sub-optimal

to recap the highlights

we cracked the city
but we kept the shell
we fried the generals
but we hired the bowmen
we strung up the gaolers
but we hung onto the keys
we burned the readers
but we doused the librarians
we liquidated the banks
but we floated the accountants
we plundered the estates
but we planted out the gardeners

priests and philosophers
we kept them too as
a classic arena match-up
the stab of the imperative
the net of the conditional

we have not learned their language yet
we are learning their language now
we shall have learned their language soon
our command will be properly stiff
but our spies will be secretly fluent

our spies are almost fluent now
they have been writing almost secret reports

they report that we have changed the world
they confirm that the world continues to change
they beg to inform us that we are changing with the world

on forestry

the living stand tall
in the graveyard harvests
deconsecration is heavy air
is stripped wood disinfectant

catch your breath before
we go under the perpendiculars
grateful for even these
small bird anthems
rustle of misericord
until a dark door shuts

how many parishes
to the first window filled
with corn glow or shepherds

on reformation

ah sweet woods
it's good
in spring you came
to heal our aching windows
with old glass greens

the fishponds ran wild
when our backs were turned
but today a moorhen
we thought
walked on the water
yes right before our eyes

make a note
so far it's promising

on tragedy

out in the drenched unseen
was where the worst
usually came to the best
colonnades are what you think
but colonnades were just
the metrics and a long
echo till the building failed

by then the gods had shut up shop
slipped the search parties
bought gash papers laid low
reopened in the workshop zone
and there they took their long breaks
in the courtyard of chestnut flambeaux
or under a naked storeroom bulb
pointing the workclothes at
a chorus of death masks
and torsos pockmarked with the years
banging on about an upturn as if

nemesis meantime was no longer
the death of the past no
scarcely to be recognised in her
new uptown solo business set-up
focussed and going for volume
and hell if some customers
missed the personal touch
there was no denying
the groaning indexed shelves
those great marketplace stats