

The Returning Sky

By the Same Author

Poetry

Overdrawn Account
Anaglyptya
This Other Life
More About the Weather
Entertaining Fates
Leaf-Viewing
Lost and Found
About Time Too
Selected Poems
Ghost Characters
There are Avenues
The Look of Goodbye
English Nettles

Prose

Untitled Deeds
Spirits of the Stair

Translations

The Great Friend and Other Translated Poems
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Interviews

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Criticism

In the Circumstances: About Poems and Poets
Poetry, Poets, Readers: Making Things Happen
Twentieth Century Poetry: Selves and Situations
Poetry & Translation: The Art of the Impossible

The Returning Sky

PETER ROBINSON

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(this address not for correspondence)

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for Ornella, Matilde & Giulia

ONE

Westwood Dusk

At the corner of Wiltshire and Westwood
what looked like a corpse
had collapsed on the sidewalk,
a smear of saliva
expressed from his lips.

Somebody glanced back,
sun setting on the sea
beyond wild thin frontage,
boulevards, palm trees
and a stoplight's countdown.

I stepped off and ran for my life.
That corpse was out cold
but breathing, and nobody
in the least fazed
at him gone west or westward ...

With siren still sounding
a paramedic fire truck
drew up at the bus stop,
those people left standing
around as he lay.

Fixed under a sky glow,
Stranger than Fiction
had opened at the Westwood Crest;
I was checking my direction
with best foot forward,
seeing and believing it there in LA.

At the Institute

after Charles Sheeler

He was touching the hard edge where life and art met.
I was gazing at precisionist
cityscapes and furniture ...
and just so's I wouldn't forget
there in a stillness like peace
and silence secured at some price
Mr. President himself was defending his own
legacy, his bloody adventure—
he was 'staying the course,' he would 'get the job done,'
a refurbishment worker's too-loud radio
come thoughtlessly from an adjacent room ...
and just so's I wouldn't forget
there *The Artist Looks at Nature*
was a painter in his studio
touching the hard edge where life and art met.

30 November 2006

Enigma Variations

1. Noir

But what had I done to deserve
this room's slatted blinds,
its film noir shadows across bed covers?
Thrown back on myself alone,
nothing much left by way of resources,
I was stood stark staring awake
with only curiosity
to save me from implosion.

2. At the Reading

Now when somebody volunteered a question
I was certain I'd seen him before
and started as if ... but couldn't have done ...

Yes, that was the day's metaphysical picture:
invited to defend what you know
by the spitting image of a Giorgio de Chirico.

3. Night Watch

Christmas tree decked out on the thirteenth floor,
there's nobody in or, no, a woman home alone,
who sees me at this hotel window—
gone like a Bathsheba with her mobile phone.

Back at the glass, now, she closes drapes on snow
turning to sleet down North Michigan Avenue
as it gusts across a lit storefront
devoted to Rembrandt born four-hundred years ago.

South Shore Line

Randolph

Somewhere still in earshot at millennium station,
granddad, you'd never have believed I got this far
dragging a silver case through the slushy snow
melted to curb pools on North Michigan Avenue.

But what with the family's fear of missing trains,
I'd reached here, as it happened, soon enough
to fetch my glasses from that left hotel room
and still catch the earliest service to South Bend.

Roosevelt

Snow blown in off the lake last night had whirled
around each streetlamp, while a solitary car
would gingerly be steering its soft-sprung way ...

Trestles thrown across this whiteness gone by,
I stare back at them as if from your eyes
through misted carriage windows and soft snow.

Kensington

Down through the back of your memory that panic
over train-times must have been a fear of losing jobs,
it struck me, as our two cars rolled past freight yards,
house yards, factory walls and the housing projects.

And that's how we'd left south central Chicago,
its automobiles down on their suspensions
and streets with NO ENTRY signs all along the way
—as if tempting passersby even, well, to try.

Gary Metro

Further, more snow flurries turning to thin rain,
WELCOME TO GARY it spelt out on the town hall,
but still your familiar rust-belt squalor
couldn't make me feel any more at home.

By painted clapboard houses ran our corrugated train,
screen doors tacked up with cards that read FOR SALE
(sub-prime, though I didn't know the term,
and, granddad, they so weren't going to be sold).

Hudson Lake

Money growing tighter, as it had in your hey-day,
where I even less belong, no one seemed to belong
and south the Saint Joe river bends—

granddad, I had got this far ... where farmers have a tall silo
and at gateless crossings, our train had to slow ...
and the engineer made his lonesome horn blow.

Enigmas of Departure

for John Matthias

It was while I walked out to the plane
readied on an apron at Giuseppe Verdi airport,
hair raised by the breeze
and a few spots of rain
spattering the tarmac,
across its spaces came a sense
of release in roaring silence
before being cabined, cribbed, confined ...
And while I walked out from the gate
it caught me once again
as at South Bend, Michiana,
since we also had to wait
while our O'Hare plane arrived,
and the Michiana field
hazes off equally in a great plain ...
Not that much wanting to go or to stay
but exposed in their flatness,
what I would fleetingly feel
from another winter's journey in the vastness
was an isolate air around frame houses
in yards out beyond wide sidewalks and a green
expanse, right, then a grey one
as we were cleared for take-off and were gone
to put yet more distance between.

Peripheral Visions

Glimpsing a stretch of dawn skyline
revealed by raw spaces between
the lopped poplar trunks,
pillars of a screened villa's drive
I turn and in the window
(like a hinged mirror) catch sight of you ...
Although a perpetual hum
of trucks on the ring-road reaches my ear,
we can see them now
as they rev out through our *periferia*.

Yet more, as I've caught my reflection
and yours reappears in the glass
where Daphne's wild arms used to wave,
I see it's like this any time
we arrive from elsewhere and are lost
by slip road, lorry park, by-pass:
the signs have too much, or no sense at all,
like an eyeful of how things appear
when we're not used to them ...

Yet more, as its reflection
glimmers in a rear-view mirror,
I see it's like this any time
we arrive from elsewhere, foxed
by a new gyratory system
or half-erected towers and cranes;
the town's a rash of roundabouts—
and we'll be lost once more
among growth rings, ripe stains
of year after year after year.

Huntley & Palmers

1

Then that tightening in the chest
and tear-duct, like a taste
of whatever it might be,
comes with the looked-at brick façade
seen on a canal bank walk
but in so much perspective,
with the strollers' voices
heard as if by alien ears
(ones too full of other views,
views, reverses and reversals)
as if from somewhere else.

2

That taste could be digestive biscuit.
A sudden scent of wood smoke
rises across locked, sluggish water
where a drowned white bicycle
seems to float up from the depths.
Further, assailed by all this flooding
laburnum, ivy, rape field yellow,
wisteria that thrives in the good spring
weather, there's a memory of pain,
of pain, though not of its sensation—
no, no, I wouldn't be without it,
looking at what's left, and gone.

Whiteknights Park

Pigeons poised at grey pinnacles
struck by summer sunlight
ruffle feathers like ghosts in stone.
A squirrel darts along black fence-work,
pauses on some vertical bark;
it warily eyes an ivy-covered
convenient escape route ...
Just think we might be home to stay!
Still, they keep their station.

Then magpies soar up to survey
traces of late revelries,
a taxi waiting by the flagstaff
for somebody's getaway;
or it's an African parakeet
flies over coverts, foliage tremors,
across this habitat-retreat
with likelihood of a brimful lake
and Human Resources pondering dilemmas.

What differences a day could make!
That idyll had one student girl
reading, back against a tree,
eras gone, or just last night;
its silver-birch bark, mottled shade,
defined for us an out-of-term
late afternoon when, under them—
a part of her philosophy—
swan broods had got it made.