

AN EASILY BEWILDERED CHILD

ALSO BY ROY FISHER

POETRY

- City* (Migrant Press), 1961
Interiors: Ten Interiors with Various Figures (Tarasque Press), 1966
The Ship's Orchestra (Fulcrum Press), 1966
The Memorial Fountain (Northern House), 1966
Collected Poems 1968 (Fulcrum Press), 1968
Matrix (Fulcrum Press), 1971
The Cut Pages (Fulcrum Press), 1971
The Thing About Joe Sullivan (Carcenet Press), 1978
Poems 1955–1980 (Oxford University Press), 1980
The Cut Pages (Oasis Books & Shearsman Books), 1986
A Furnace (Oxford University Press), 1986
Poems 1955–1987 (Oxford University Press), 1988
Birmingham River (Oxford University Press), 1994
The Dow Low Drop — New and Selected Poems (Bloodaxe Books), 1996
The Long and the Short of It — Poems 1955–2005 (Bloodaxe Books), 2005
Standard Midland (Bloodaxe Books), 2010
Selected Poems (Flood Editions), 2011

ESSAYS / INTERVIEWS / PROSE

- Roy Fisher: *Nineteen Poems and an Interview* (Grosseteste Press), 1975
Robert Sheppard & Peter Robinson (eds.): *News for the Ear: a homage to Roy Fisher*
(Stride Publications), 2000
Peter Robinson & John Kerrigan (eds.): *The Thing About Roy Fisher: Critical
Essays on the Poetry of Roy Fisher* (Liverpool University Press), 2000
Peter Robinson (ed.): *An Unofficial Roy Fisher* (Shearsman Books), 2010
Tony Frazer (ed.): *Interviews Through Time* (Shearsman Books), 2013

An Easily Bewildered Child

Occasional Prose 1963-2013

Roy Fisher

EDITED BY PETER ROBINSON

Shearsman Books

This second, revised edition published in the United Kingdom in 2014 by
Shearsman Books
50 Westons Hill Drive
Emersons Green
BRISTOL BS16 7DF

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office
30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB
(this address not for correspondence)

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-300-3

Copyright © Roy Fisher, 1963–2014.
Introduction and Note on the Text copyright © Peter Robinson, 2014.
All rights reserved.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to Bloodaxe Books for permission to reprint Roy Fisher's poems 'One World', 'Magritte Imitated Himself', 'The Memorial Fountain', 'After Working', and 'The Home Pianist's Companion' from the author's *The Long and the Short of It: Poems 1955–2005* (Bloodaxe Books, Tarsset, 2005).

Details of the original publication of the author's writings included in this volume may be found in the Checklist by Derek Slade, commencing on p.192.

CONTENTS

Author Note	8
Introduction	9
Note on the Text	14

I. ANTEBIOGRAPHY

Meanwhile	17
Antebibliography	20
Brum Born	48
Talks for Words	51
The Morden Tower	62
My Trip to Brighton	63
Six Towns	65
Memoir of Richard Caddel	67
At the Funeral of Stuart Mills	69
License My Roving Hands	70

II. ROY FISHER ON ROY FISHER

Poet on Writing	99
Note on <i>The Cut Pages</i>	103
Roy Fisher writes...	104
Handsworth Compulsions	106
Preface to <i>A Furnace</i>	109
<i>Birmingham's What I Think With</i> : Programme Note	111
Reply to Paul Lester	112
Inside <i>A Various Art</i>	119
Roy Fisher on Roy Fisher	133

III. ON POETS AND OTHERS

Death by Adjectives	139
David Prentice	143
The Green Fuse	145
Mary Fitton's Foreshores	150

On John Cowper Powys' Letters	151
Thomas Campion	158
On a Study of Dada	159
On Ezra Pound	163
Debt to Mr Bunting	165
At a Tangent	170
On a Study of Robert Creeley	172
On Kenneth Rexroth's <i>An Autobiographical Novel</i>	174
Gael Turnbull	177
Foreword to <i>Spleen</i> (Nicholas Moore/Baudelaire)	178
Introduction to Jeff Nuttall's <i>Selected Poems</i>	181
Concerning Joseph Brodsky	182
Coat Hanger	188
A Checklist of Roy Fisher's Occasional Prose by Derek Slade	192

i.m. Ann Atkinson

AUTHOR NOTE

When a poem looks complete and I can see what it has turned out to be, I don't expect to find surprises if I revisit. It either has a life of its own or none. With a prose piece that has no claim to be art the case is different: so an essay, an obituary, a reminiscence, a review or even, in another life, a syllabus or a notice-board announcement may look ordinary but is for me stranger than a poem and invites looking at again and again. It's not entirely mine in its origin and I quite often play a game that involves sneaking up on the published text, stepping outside myself and judging it as though somebody else had written it. Most of the pieces in this book have had this treatment: all of them owe their origins to commissions, suggestions or various forms of pressure from friends.

Roy Fisher
November 2013

INTRODUCTION

Peter Robinson

An Easily Bewildered Child, Roy Fisher's choice of title for this collection of his occasional prose, is the first clause in the opening sentence of 'Meanwhile' (2012). No sooner has he recalled this state of mind than he evokes another world "sewn like a lining into the customary" one. Its "shadowy synesthesia" is felt to have "tones and imperatives of its own" and comes as the explanation, a private one never discussed by the child with anybody else, for Fisher's youthful attraction first to painting, then jazz music, and eventually poetry, his third art and the one that still hasn't "run out of road"—his poem 'Signs and Signals' was written for Carol Ann Duffy's centenary anthology *1914: Poetry Remembers* by a poet in his ninth decade. Fisher's intuited and yet barely articulated association between his states of mind as a child and later, and his unusually distinctive aesthetic inquiry into the world in which he found himself, is one of the recurring fascinations of the writings gathered here.

In his 'Antebibliography' (1989) he similarly gives an account of the three-year period immediately after the Second World War in which the boy described as the Daft Kid at school believed himself, with no evidence, to be terminally ill. Again, he describes this as a renegotiation of his contract with the world, a renegotiation that it is implied is analogous to the relation an artist will need to develop with what for such an artist is also material with, as Fisher puts it, "tones and imperatives of its own". These orders of experience are offered as something to which the artist in him had to respond. Yet they are suspected of being characteristics that, for others, were not even there, were not "sewn like a lining into the customary world" at all.

Returning to Birmingham in the later 1950s, after a period as a teacher in Devon, Fisher's relationship to his birthplace was reordered, it appears, by his life as a semi-professional jazz pianist, playing in a great variety of venues and returning home in the small hours, living with a night person's relationship to the diurnal round. Fisher reports this period of his life as the circumstance behind the composition of the poetry and prose that would eventually be collaged into *City* (1961), his signature early work. Once again, though, and most evidently in *The Ship's Orchestra* (1965), in Fisher's work there is never a straightforward mimetic relation between

sensory experience and its aesthetic ordering in poetry and prose. Among the fascinations of his occasional writings are the accounts he gives of his tastes, life events, and artistic allegiances, accounts that show how even the most distinctive of sensibilities finds self-understanding in relation to the experiences, artistic or not, of others.

This helps to indicate how it could be possible for readers who may well be among those others for whom no such “shadowy synesthesia” has been present from childhood to respond to his poetry and prose to the extent that his developing works have remained in print with a number of different publishers over more than fifty years. Again, these writings help us to see how Fisher’s sensibility, easily bewildering when he was young and leaving traces on his mental life to this day, has associated itself with others’ painting, music and poetry, with a loose grouping of poets responding to developments in American poetry that began to emerge in the late 1940s, became a rumour in Britain during the 1950s and found print with mainly small publishers in the 1960s, coextensive with the early publications of these same British poets.

Though Fisher decided not subsequently to reprint with its poem the preface included in the first edition of *A Furnace*, published by Oxford University Press in 1986, he did think it deserved preservation in such a collection of occasional prose as the present volume. The following note was also written to explain this publishing decision:

When the original publication of the book-length poem *A Furnace* was in preparation the publisher asked me to provide an introduction that might make the book more ‘accessible’ to readers who needed that sort of thing. I complied after a fashion but was unwilling to write my own advertising copy and wanted the poem to be self-sufficient, which it has been allowed to be in all subsequent re-printings.

Self-sufficiency has thus now been extended both to the poem and to its introductory prose piece, and this, I think, gives a clue both to the nature and the justification for this collection of Fisher’s occasional prose writings. Though dependent on their author’s reputation and character as the writer of those self-sufficient works, these commissioned pieces, as Fisher’s ‘Author Note’ explains, have another kind of self-sufficiency, one that appears to float free of their writer’s imaginative life.

Unwilling to produce his own advertising copy, one might think of Fisher as the Bartleby of contemporary British poetry, and certainly this

volume is marked by a number of tacit refusals and reluctances—refusals and reluctances, that is, to do the predictable or expected thing. Asked to compose an autobiographical sketch for an American reference work, Fisher chose to compose an account largely focused on his parents and grandparents, allowing the future poet into it only in so far as he was himself, as a boy, part of their subject matter and environment. Yet the resulting ‘Antebiography’ is one of his most sustained, sustaining, and enlightening pieces of occasional writing. It also serves as a first-class introduction to the sensibility and its cultural origins that came to write the imaginative poetry and prose for which he is most well known. In this, and characteristically, Fisher fulfilled the assignment by appearing not to do so.

Similarly, though no jacket-copy writer for himself, when asked by *The Rialto*, Fisher was not averse to writing the self-review ‘Roy Fisher on Roy Fisher’ (1996), in which he calls *A Furnace* “for all its unconscious or unashamed solipsism, one of the most ambitious recent English poems I’ve read.” It is characteristically subtle of Fisher to qualify his poem’s solipsism as both “unconscious” and “unashamed”, for it would be impossible for him to be unashamed about it if it were unconscious and vice versa. Yet this self-review again gives him the opportunity simultaneously to know what he’s talking about and speculate about it as if he didn’t:

With no gift for the anecdotal discursive, self-contained, teachable A4 poem, he’s happiest at the extremes of duration: the three-or-four-line fragment or the forty-page long haul, and this takes us to the heart of what he’s about. I think he’s a Romantic, gutted and kippered by two centuries’ hard knocks. The willingness to regard his sketch-books as exhibitable (‘Diversions’, ‘It Follows That’) and to go on shamanic mental trips though humdrum-looking material are the indicators. Either way, the technique is one of epiphanic revelation.

Thus, a further interest in reading Fisher’s work is to understand how such a self-conception could issue in work which communicates to others, and gives no impression that the world which it evokes and explores is not the one shared with him. Illustrations of this are everywhere to see in ‘Antebiography’, for instance, where the young Fisher’s emotional states, however unusual and remote, are conveyed in terms that make them perfectly intelligible and related to the circumstances of war or of a

developing set of artistic stances towards the world. It also shows in the many and various accounts of others' behaviours, actions and works both in the memoirs and prompted critical forays gathered here.

One reason for taking up his characterization of *A Furnace* as manifesting “unconscious or unashamed solipsism” in the self-review is not only to make the point that to call yourself a solipsist is to be aware enough of your self among others in the world not to be one, but also to try and get a bearing on the relationship between his acute perception of and reflections on other people in his work, and the insistence, in his poem ‘The Lesson in Composition’ that, because art “stunts itself / to talk about the rest in the rest’s own terms”, he must “for a while ... seem to be away” from a “worldliness that sticks to me” so as to find in his material the art that can be made out of it. This is a further conundrum Fisher has explored, one which helps explain how his poetry can have a sustained political and ethical character, while overtly eschewing—as in ‘It is Writing’ where he will “mistrust the poem in its hour of success, / a thing capable of being / tempted by ethics into the wonderful”—any such thing. For thus he has shown what would be travestied were it to be told.

Introducing the Flood Editions *Selected Poems* (2011), his choice of Fisher’s work for an American audience, August Kleinzahler performed the impressive balancing act of both explaining how Fisher “has never aspired to a readership” while asserting that his “selection should broaden Fisher’s American readership beyond those very few who have attended to any signs of life in British poetry over the past fifty years.” Looked at from a British point of view, the idea that he is and has been a poet discovering what it is possible to do “freed from readership” is perhaps less evidenced than it may be in the United States. Kleinzahler reports Fisher saying that experience of being read helped to precipitate a writing block that let him to release a first *Collected Poems* in the late 1960s while under the impression that his poetry writing days were over.

Yet that experience, and the differently testing one of finding himself polemically misunderstood by Donald Davie in *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (1973), did not prevent him from finding imaginative ways beyond these challenges, for finding that he had still not “run out of road”. Fisher’s sense of his own distinctiveness, his bewilderment, his need to de-socialise his material in order to find artistic value in it, have not in any sense reduced his perceptiveness about what he calls in his self-review “the only world, into which everybody’s born already swimming or going under.” This is also the ‘One World’ of a poem in which, sinking or swimming,

the children of its lines are simultaneously in the world of the magazine in which the poem was first published and yet, it also acknowledges, unlikely to find themselves reading it:

But to name names: if John Snook,
Ann Pouney or Brian Davidson,
Pat Aston or Royston Williams
should of their own accord and unprompted
read over this and remember me—well
if they're offended they can tell me about it.
It would be good to know
we all look at the same magazines.

“I want to believe I live in a single world”, Fisher had written at the start of the closing prose paragraph to *City*. The evidence of his occasional prose does suggest that he has both continued to “want to believe” and has been exercised by the degree of discontinuous complexity that this singular entity may contain.

Writing to get around in his mind, “to go on shamanic mental trips though humdrum-looking material”, he has also treated himself as a terra incognita, surely the most sensible way to take an interest in one’s experience of life, and a further reason why solipsism doesn’t seem right, unless to add that he can be solipsistic in his engagement with his supposed solipsism, or, as I would prefer, that his critical detachment even from his own self-absorption lets in the vital glimpses of unexpectedly shared realities that, in my experience, is one of the most lasting and portable values in his writings. Fisher has described himself as “eminently quotable, if only anybody could find a reason to quote him”, but he also indicates what such a reason might be in ‘Diversions’ when “*The power of dead imaginings to return*” is characterized as “Built for quoting in a tight corner.” If your troubles lean, as ‘The Lesson in Composition’ puts it “to the vague and hard-to-help”, Fisher’s accesses to his “shadowy synesthesia” can prove efficaciously quotable.

Those who have found or have yet to find Roy Fisher’s writings can be helped around its corners by growing more familiar with the mental and actual environment, the nurture, as it were, from which they sprang. And since that double-character environment, the world with another one sewn into its lining, has issued in works with such unique natures, any track-ways and signposts will likely prove essential aids to those rambles who, “of their own accord and unprompted”, choose to stray therein.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

This selection from Roy Fisher's occasional prose was organized and shaped by its editor in consultation with the poet. For those curious to note what has been left out, a complete checklist by Derek Slade is provided at the back of the book. In sequencing the items with Fisher's help and advice, I have tried to respect his scepticism about chronology and autobiography, while also offering an ordering of pieces that makes a coherent read through Fisher's recurrent concerns and points of reference. Again, for those who would like to follow the chronology of composition for these pieces, the dates of first publication for most of them are available in the checklist, a listing that also functions as an acknowledgement of the publications and their editors that usually occasioned their writing. One unpublished piece has a more convoluted genesis. 'Concerning Joseph Brodsky' began as a series of responses to generic questions put to Fisher, and a number of other poets in 1997, by Valentina Polukhina. From the raw materials of his answers, and with the blessing of the poet, I have lightly edited them into a series of numbered observations.

The collection has been organized for convenience into three sections: the first contains works related to Fisher's background and environment in twentieth-century Birmingham, his life as a semi-professional jazz pianist, and some memoirs of his life and contacts as a poet; the second brings together writings on his own poetic work and the occasional prefatory notes or commentaries he has written about the composition of individual texts; the third gathers his writings on other jazz pianists, a painter contemporary, a photographer, two novelists, and a range of other poets' works. Some semblance of chronology has been given to all three of these sections, but it is usually one related to the materials, topics, and artists he addresses, not that of the pieces' composition.

The choice of the book's main title is Roy Fisher's, and I have placed the 2012 memoir 'Meanwhile', whose first sentence provides it, at the head of the first section for this reason.

I would like to thank warmly Eleanor Cooke, Roy Fisher, Tony Frazer, Andrew Houwen, and Derek Slade for their help in bringing together the items gathered here. David Prentice agreed before his death to allow one of his works to grace the cover, and I am grateful to his widow for the permission to reproduce. The choice of dedicatee for the book is also Roy Fisher's, and I would like to thank him further for his patience and understanding during the time it has taken to bring this project to completion.

Peter Robinson
June 2014

I

ANTEBIOGRAPHY

MEANWHILE

An easily bewildered child, I nevertheless had no problem in hanging on to the idea that sewn like a lining inside the customary world there was another with tones and imperatives of its own. A shadowy synaesthesia, I suppose, it has been with me lifelong. It visits most days. It arrived without language, for it never came up in conversation, so throughout childhood I drew and painted obsessively, eventually acquiring an identity as the official artist of Wattville Road Junior Elementary School, Handsworth, Birmingham.

A few sharp incursions of language. At about nine, clear-eyed Edna Barnes who sat a few rows in front stood up to sing a song to the class: 'Barbara Allen': words that held beauty, life and death. Around the same time I wrote an epic, 'The Battle of Crécy', in eight thumping lines. Then at twelve, in the grip of a fervent undeclared adulation, I wrote a love poem, a bundle of clichés I was fortunately too timid to deliver. Instead I gave it to a friend to use as valentine to a different girl, substituting her name, at some cost to the metre. I could have charged him a permission fee.

My painting ran out of road, just as I was suddenly hit hard by jazz music, first in the form of the recordings of Chicagoan blues and boogie pianists. Here were sounds from another world: a music in which I was not only permitted but *required* to invent material that resembled my inner existence. Starting from scratch I set myself to learn to play and within a few years had a new identity as a useful jazz club pianist. And alongside that there was a substance called Modern Poetry, which came partly by way of school, where I was studying poetry without any thought of writing it. Young masters back from the war, their tastes formed in the Thirties, would entertain us with oddities by MacNeice and Auden. Much of this poetry was freakish and permissive in a way that took my fancy—Edith Sitwell's obtuse 'Aubade', Pound, some imagists. On my own I'd seek out anthologies of translated poetry from many different ages and cultures; and constantly to hand there was D. B. Wyndham Lewis's *The Stuffed Owl*, a treasury of pretentious and ludicrous verse.

In 1948, in my first year reading English at Birmingham University I became aware that there was a scattering of people who were openly writing and circulating poetry, something I'd never encountered before. There was a staff-student Writers' Circle, and the university's little catch-all

arts magazine *Mermaid* always carried a few poems. At the same time my piano-playing had struck a technical *impasse* I couldn't resolve, and the scene that had supported it was tired and in dispersal; so I gave up playing in public for several years. I had a hunch that poetry might hold the sort of energy and surprise I'd been used to finding in music and I began to try building my habitual verbal doodles into poems. My extra-curricular reading was heady and thrill-seeking—Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Dylan Thomas, Dalí, The New Apocalypse, any surrealism I could find—but my own writings turned out spurious, forced and lumpy. I was astonished and baffled by how inept I was. Having nothing to show I made no contacts with the Writers' Circle or the magazine for a couple of years. But I was being trained to write balanced and reasoned critical essays stiffened with whatever flashy-looking erudition I could cadge. I took some of this material, cast it into iambic pentameters and showed the results around. Riding the pentameters was fun though I could sense something hollow and showy; but I was immediately accorded a new identity, as a poet, and was given *Mermaid* to edit. My long hair and bow-tie were justified. At the same time I became fascinated by some, at least, of the ideas in Graves's *The White Goddess*, chiefly its archaic exoticism and the exalted qualities it attributed to poetry. This allegiance had one beneficial effect: it ensured that whatever I wrote during the next five or six years was automatically unpublishable. Meanwhile I learned to write.

A single grotesque fantasy found its way into print, a couple of years after I'd written it, and it caught the eye of Gael Turnbull who was guest-editing a British number of the American magazine *Origin* and on the lookout for anything unusual. We met, and, although his work and mine had little in common, became fast friends for the rest of Gael's life, nearly fifty years. For the first ten of those years all the circulation and acceptance my work had was attributable directly or indirectly to Gael. He opened things up and licensed me to go on writing. Trying to characterize the unique nature of his presence in the poetry scene I'm reminded of the stratified social system of Imperial Japan, where the rigid levels of aristocracy and peasantry held sandwiched between them the Floating World of administrators, artists and the like who had fewer obligations and more freedom. Having virtually no contact with the poetry establishment (particularly in England, though America and eventually his native Scotland found him easier to value) and instinctively staying clear of the activities of self-congratulatory but incurious amateurism, he could roam free in the floating world of little magazines and quixotic publications. He

had a nose for what he considered honest work and had no preconceptions about where to go looking for it. He distrusted anything smooth, slick or subsidised: his predilection for issuing tiny editions, mostly of his own work, in booklets hand-sewn with covers of wallpaper offcuts, the texts on the poorest quality paper and made with obsolete basic technology, was proverbial. Some of these qualities were carried forward into the magazine *Migrant*, in fact more a serial anthology of the editors' finds than a conventional magazine, which he set up with Michael Shayer, and then into their Migrant Press, which was to publish my first pamphlet, *City*. Unobtrusively and with no thought of advantage to himself he was the enabler of countless fertile contacts. Stuart Mills, whose Tarasque Press generated several of my pamphlets, was sent to me by Gael as was Stuart Montgomery, founder of Fulcrum Press, which published my first four books.