

Uncertain Measures

Also by Aidan Semmens

A Stone Dog

The Book of Isaac

Aidan Semmens

*Uncertain
Measures*

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*In memory of my aunt, Lorna Arnold,
nuclear historian, 1915-2014*

A Ritual Landscape

beneath the high ceilings
of the literary and scientific institute
a measurable volume of air
that would encompass the atmosphere
of several of the homes
of those who gather here
glad of the knowledge
the company or just
a cleaner lungful

the light fades in the room
as the speaker rises
high windows dimming
with evening sky
the gaslamps are lit and flare
with coalgas from the works below
listeners spit dottle and smoke
as the wisdom begins

outcropping of ore
coal iron limestone and clay
brought us here today
to work the seams
the treadles and the mills
compounding and blasting
smouldering and smelting
fresh from the waterway
the washing hangs out to dry

boats on the ouse
feel for the breeze

tugging at the wharves and staithes
the maid-of-all-work
at the works-owner's
daughter's stays
as a perfect girder
curved to exact tension
is applied to the span
transecting the river

horses work the incline
elevating and transporting
brick timber chinaclay
coke lime and forged
ingots still ticking from the foundry
barges bear away fine artefacts
axles for millwheels
tiles for the parsonage

while here on the valley side
steep where the stream carved
open the valuable strata
we institute another outlook
draw clearer breath and take
the owner and the preacher
the buyer and the banker to task

via trade line and packetboat
the traffic of desire and power
the best of all intentions
for a woman's fellow men

there are hands (damned
if not willing) waiting
to be harvested
in the forests and lakeshores
ready for putting to work
under the earth or
at the pulleys belts and wheels

molten ore blisters and glows
lighting the hillsides and sky
pours from the lip
in bright gobbets
earthen throat quenched
with fiery spirit

here the weary battleground
living water from the wooded hill
turned to fungal and mineral deposits
at the pump-mouth

what comes from the earth
to re-enter the earth
is a quantifiable volume
liths that appear to stand
freely on the surface
must be socketed securely
in stone foundations
the joints carved out with care
to a perfect lasting fit
by hands armed
with chisel axe and rasp
formed from the same hard matter

stone upon stone the blows resound
from quarryface to ritual site
the voices of men women and their children
at work on the structures
that shape their years
hard by their homes
and the fringy lake
mark-making on the land of their living

a place of gathering
an enclosure of power and spirit
sad marvels
solemnity and rejoicing
arduous paths and oblique approaches
from low hills to windblown moors

glyphs handcarved in an urban setting
diamond-hard cutting edge
of mason's craft makes
long and short work of it
mnemonic to a godfearing man
orate pro nobis

who's paid to chant
for the best rest of his soul
who takes a chance
on the mineral rights
of this man's estate

the legends are worked out
remnants left exposed to decay
under a bleak sky
dragonflies drowsily active
this late in the year

our origin myths are not set in stone
but gradually shift
in emphasis and tone from
generation to regeneration
mutating settling encrusted
with efflorescence of ore

fresh flesh
lightly undervalued
scores the structure
underlying
the tufa tougher

ultimately undone
by that capacity of flesh
for repair and regrowth

the marks in the weathering
scratches on the surface
survive a little altered
maybe but discernible to interpretation
in irretrievable eras

black box at the railhead
soft spoil and hard pipework
fossils to be read in shivered surfaces
hands soiled in toil

certain measures must be taken
samples cored and peeled
for intimate investigation
discovery and whatever may

pass up the line to the masterful
faces exposed and exhausted
exhaling lungfuls of decay
and musty air of mystery

in our fathers' ancestral dwellings
portraiture and paradox
sentiments filigreed in oxide
a ringing as on iron

low ceilings and high sacraments
bent backs and worn fingers
picking at the seams
the slow recovery of knowledge

Beyond Imagining

*If the tongue were true to the voice and the voice to the thought,
How then could the world keep the lightning of the thought in
bounds? —Adam Mickiewicz*

powerful winds blow over the tundra zone
eroding the ungrassed soil
a personal bonfire
of dangerous papers

infinity is not a metaphor
disaster never simply disaster
wind-borne deposits building
to sculpted structures

the future may always be terrible
the mind its own palimpsest
cannot be held to a single place
all that exists deserves to perish

modern primitive peoples make casual use
of a great variety of materials from shell
and sharks' teeth to bottle-glass
and telegraph insulators

I have the sorry desire to be happy
harnessing Jovian satellites
in the service of navigation
uncertainty as a revolutionary creed

the retreat of a glacier does not imply
backward movement of the ice itself
failure is unavoidable, what matters
is what explodes and spills, what erupts

how can you possibly believe
that a revolution can or should be mastered
or known in advance
if you are in touch with those

parts of the mind which the mind
itself cannot master
freedom is always the freedom
to think otherwise

dark spots creep continuously
across the surface of the sun
the past an artefact
blank time before ones birth

with the return of warm climate the river revives
enough to resume erosion in the normal way
this method of time-measurement has not
yet been widely applied but it promises much

a perilous path between heaven revered
and heavens revealed
through a telescope unravelling
as a challenge to human intelligence

people of the insulator culture
seek ways to monetise their artefacts
the middle finger of Galileo's right hand
encased in a gilded glass egg

Test Site

what I may tell you about
is the morning they tested Galileo
on a 500-foot tower
before doomed Joshua trees

the horizon in turmoil
giving no idea of the scale
the brilliance of the flash
that fuses sand into glass

a sharp and slightly painful click
precedes the thunder
a hollow sphere the size and weight of a bowling-ball
a cobra about to strike

much that has happened
cannot be talked about for years
soldiers hammering on the door
framed in a leaky authority

a condition of perpetual emergency
the fires of Hiroshima were mostly caused
by kerosene cookers preparing breakfast
knocked over by the percussion wave

model railway associations and private
societies for propagating mushroom lore
are enemies of the state and the Bureau
for Supervision of Production Aesthetics