

Spiritual Letters
(Series 6)

ALSO BY DAVID MILLER:

- The Caryatids*, Enitharmon Press, London, 1975
South London Mix, Gaberbocchus Press, London, 1975
Malcolm Lowry and the Voyage that Never Ends, Enitharmon Press, 1976
Primavera, Burning Deck Press, Providence, RI, 1979
Unity, Singing Horse Press, Blue Bell, PA, 1981
Losing to Compassion, Origin Press, Kyoto, 1985
W H Hudson and the Elusive Paradise, Macmillan, London / St Martins Press, New York, NY, 1990
Pictures of Mercy: Selected Poems, Stride, Exeter, 1991
Stromata, Burning Deck Press, 1995
Art and Disclosure: Seven Essays, Stride, 1998
Spiritual Letters (I-II) and other writings, Reality Street Editions, Hastings, 2004
The Waters of Marah: Selected Prose 1973-1995, Shearsman Books, Exeter, 2005
The Dorothy and Benno Stories, Reality Street Editions, 2005
British Poetry Magazines 1914-2000: A History and Bibliography of 'Little Magazines' (with Richard Price), The British Library, London / Oak Knoll Press, Newcastle, DE, 2006
In the Shop of Nothing: New and Selected Poems, Harbor Mountain Press, Brownsville, VT, 2007
Hagoromo, Kater Murr's Press, [London], 2009
Spiritual Letters (Series 1-5), Chax Press, Tucson, AZ, 2011
Excerpts from HOLGER ENKE'S ROOM, Smallminded Books, [Devoran], 2011
Black, Grey and White: A Book of Visual Sonnets, Veer Books, London, 2011
A River Flowing Beside, hawkhaven press, San Francisco, 2013
Reassembling Still: Collected Poems, Shearsman Books, Bristol, 2014

EDITED BY DAVID MILLER:

- A Curious Architecture: a selection of contemporary prose poems* (with Rupert Loydell), Stride, 1996
The ABCs of Robert Lax (with Nicholas Zurbrugg), Stride, 1999
Music while drowning: German Expressionist Poems (with Stephen Watts), Tate Publishing, London, 2003
The Lariat and other writings by Jaime de Angulo, Counterpoint, Berkeley, CA, 2009
The Alchemist's Mind: a book of narrative prose by poets, Reality Street, 2012

Spiritual Letters (Series 6)

David Miller

Shearsman Books

First published in the United Kingdom in 2015 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 978-1-84861-455-0

Copyright © David Miller 2015

The right of David Miller to be identified as the author of this work
has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyrights,
Designs and Patents Act of 1988. All rights reserved.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some of these texts have appeared in *Fire*,
Long Poem Magazine, *Poetry Salzburg Review* and *Shearsman*.

Spiritual Letters (Series 6, #6) was published
as a broadside by Ed. Il Bagatto.

1

I was travelling home by boat from Greece, and found myself one misty day in calm water without any sight of a shore: was the vessel really moving or, as it seemed, at rest? He accidentally knocked the ostrich egg off the shelf; picking it up, he saw that it was cracked. We were preparing to go on another trip together, but this time we spent days sorting through belongings, packing some, while discarding others – in spite of which, boxes and boxes piled up. Finally, he decided to leave before me, impatient to be on the journey. Under the enormous ceiling, lit by chandeliers and candles, the girl with the scarf over her dark hair turns her head towards you, turns away and turns back again; she stops singing, and smiles. After the memorial service, we visited the cemetery and drank ouzo and poured it over his grave. We went on to a taverna, and exchanged stories about him, surprising each other over and again. He spread linseed oil varnish over the painting's surface with his fingers, removing the excess with the heel and side of the hand. To touch, to kiss: as if the chasm didn't exist. The fire forms itself into a sail in the wind, then a vault, enclosing him. Deported to the labour camp, he was stripped of his priestly garments, shaved of hair and beard. He shared the little bread he had with those who were sick or dying, up until the time he was shot. *Even if while fixing his gaze on the icon, a brother walks from west to east, he will discover that the icon's gaze continuously follows him. And if he returns from east to west, it will likewise not leave him.* The young woman at the back of the bar suddenly breaks into song, her singing clear, vibrant, melismatic: *I once was lost....* He was on the same island where you and your wife and children were staying, though you didn't

know until later. Your aunt was with you, too, and she happened to travel back on the ship that carried his body home. Red sandstone cliffs with sculpted, flowing contours, from countless years of heavy rains and strong winds – rain that also washed down the cliffs into a river and turned the water red. It must be a house full of birds, they said when they heard him playing his saxophone ecstatically, late at night in his upstairs room. They said tears not only streamed from her eyes, but also, inexplicably, dripped from her fingers; can I believe this of a painted image? Photographs you took in gardens and parks: philodendron, cabbage rose, lady's mantle, Japanese magnolia.... Rosa alba. Walking across a bridge over the lake, in a light drizzle, I stopped to gaze at the small flocks of birds in the water, and a swan near the bridge dipping its head. A friend wrote to me: *One, a 'gardens' window, commemorates a local gardener and includes a great many of the flowers he grew. It is teeming and medieval in its richness and variety and secret personal significance.* She wandered through gallery after gallery, finally stopping when she came across someone standing absorbed in front of a large abstract painting. Recognising it from a previous life, she said to him: You know, I did that. From the long, horizontal upstairs window, I could see fog drifting across and enveloping the bay. *Eight years of painting and re-painting, building up and scraping back and building up, gluing pieces of wood and bits of jewellery to the surface and painting over them....* – Should I attempt a description? – Stray, she directed. – If you think you know something, you can only appear deluded, bereft of your senses, insane.

2

– Just to remind you of the wind those days, he wrote, enclosing a photograph of us walking together on the island, his sparse hair standing up, my long hair streaming. A walk in the night: the sky starless, against expectations. Sick of his host's solicitude, he asked for a hammer and nails; and when she brought them, he boarded up his door from the inside and used the window to get in and out. He'd take long walks through the city, and on the way home he would traverse a park, always climbing at least one of the trees and sitting in the top boughs. Tents of black goats' wool, frames of bamboo covered with thatch, structures of mud brick and stone rubble.... I wanted to call it poverty architecture, but knew it was more complicated than that. Water pools. Cupped hands: for simplicity, he said. They broke off the bases of glass cups, decorated with gold leaf, and embedded them in the mortar; the gilt inscriptions and images conveyed good wishes and messages of hope to the dead. Bracelets, earrings, statuettes, bells, lamps and small glass vessels were also fixed in the mortar. Clusters of white roses in a neighbour's front garden. We took refuge from the downpour inside the doorway of a café; the staff allowed us to stay, even though they were closing up, but it seemed the rain would never cease.... The aeroplane she was travelling on flew through a blizzard: one of her fellow passengers suffered a heart-attack; she calmed herself by praying slowly. *The water of the canal flowed backwards. They said, 'Water cannot prove anything.'* Reprimanded, the wooden beams of the study house ceased bending inwards, and began to lift themselves back into place – but stopped before they were completely straight, and stayed that way. She knocked at

the door of the synagogue, though it appeared to be deserted; a man came out and spoke with her in Hebrew. Invited inside, she was welcomed by worshippers in festive Shabbath attire, who explained that they were fearful of attacks. Black suit, black hat, and black scarf over his eyes – he stood upright in the boat crossing the water; on another occasion, he dressed in a gold suit and hat and carried a long golden needle when he was ferried across the lagoon. All the walls had to be painted deep red, as he demanded; the windows washed clean of rain streaks; clutter removed from beneath the stairwell: all in preparation for his display. – This perfect form, this ideal image, he said.... – As if this finite, shattered and suffering world could admit of perfection. ...*the brightness all around us was so great that our house was completely lighted, and as far as we could see all was illuminated with a sheet of fire that nothing could arrest. The wind blew and the night was so extremely cold that what little water they could get froze, and... the tide was down, so that they could not get a supply from the river.* She wrote about how odd it seemed to see depicted in great details the black lace-up leather shoes of nurses and the slightly softened but still harsh lines of iron beds in panels right under barefoot angels.