

*Makers of Empty Dreams*

Also by Ian Seed

Anonymous Intruder (Shearsman Books, 2009)

Shifting Registers (Shearsman Books, 2011)

CHAPBOOKS

No One Else at Home

(translated from the Polish of Joanna Skalska) (Flax, 2007)

the straw which comes apart

(translated from the Italian of Ivano Fermini) (Oystercatcher Press, 2010)

Amoremio (Flaxebooks, 2010)

Threadbare Fables (Like This Press, 2012)

Sleeping with the Ice Cream Vendor (Knives, Forks and Spoons Press, 2012)

Ian Seed

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of  
Empty  
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‘Whether this is the only way, or even the right way at all, can be decided only after one has gone a long way.’

—Martin Heidegger

‘Or, comme je regardais, je vis que ce que j’avais pris pour une mendiante c’était une caisse de bois peinte en vert qui contenait de la terre rouge et quelques bananes à demi pourries.’

—Max Jacob



I



## City

I lived in Milan. I hadn't had sex for ages, yet one morning I noticed a rash of warts on my penis. I cycled as fast as I could to a doctor's surgery near the city centre. He told me it was nothing to worry about and gave me some cream in a tube with no label. When I came out, I saw a group of gypsy children clustered around my bike on the other side of the street. As I got closer, I realised it was a different bike. Mine had disappeared. 'Someone has stolen it,' I said. One boy raised a large spanner in the air, ready to hit me if I came any nearer. I walked away, thinking that if only I knew how to tell someone my story, I wouldn't feel so lonely.

## Still Life

When I walk alone in the park among smiling families, larking youths and giggling girls, it's as beautiful as a painting come to life. It's as if someone were watching all of us. But what will happen when the gallery closes at the end of the day, and the bright picture is plunged into darkness? Will we still be here then? As I walk on, I feel strangers fix their gaze upon me, pinning me in the air. In the end, I am no longer moving at all, though I swing my arms and pump my legs absurdly like a puppet.

## Town Centre

A thin youth with tousled hair and a wispy beard was walking from car to car stuck in the traffic. He tapped on each window and held out his hand for money. One driver, perhaps to show off in front of the woman next to him, jumped out of his car. Shouting and shaking his fist, he ran after the beggar all the way up the crowded high street. I thought he would catch him, but the beggar, turning a corner, ducked unseen into an Italian restaurant. I found him sitting at a table there, looking at a menu. The tablecloth was piled high with coins he'd taken from his pockets. He invited me to join him.

## Autobiography

I found my friend Dante living in a small tent which he had set up just outside the railway station. No one objected to him being there, even though his tent was quite an obstruction during the rush hour. Yet there was no need for him to camp anywhere—he had over half a million pounds in the bank, most of which he'd earned from a self-published autobiography. He kept a copy of this by his side. It was well-thumbed and its pages were spotted with old stains. He would show it to anyone who dropped him a coin.



## Ice-Cream Parlour

I have never seen so many different colours. The fat lady behind the counter smiles at my astonishment. This shop has been here for over three hundred years, she tells me. Her ice cream is made according to an ancient Italian recipe. Some say it even has the power to heal old wounds. I'm not sure I can trust her. Yet it would be discourteous of me not to buy an ice cream. I dig into my pockets. The lady keeps smiling at me.

## Intimidation

The jackets in the second-hand clothes shop by the sea are much too dear. Yet the shopkeeper—a white-haired man with watery eyes behind rimless spectacles—will be offended if you don't try one on. He will pick one out for you from an overstuffed rail. You find that the jacket never fits, but he will give the sleeves a soft tug to make them longer or the shoulders a gentle punch to make them narrower. He will lightly stroke the jacket with his fingertips and tell you how wealthy its late owner was. When you look at yourself in the tilting mirror, he may even kiss you on the face to seduce or scare you into buying it.

## Sale

We stand in a row, ready to greet the jostling crowd of customers outside the glass doors. There's a brand new product on offer: a glowing white tube, completely odourless and just a little bigger than a large thumb. It has multiple uses, including torch, mobile phone, and sex toy. We smile as we are meant to, yet there is a whiff of sour sweat—we know we are once again the makers of empty dreams. When the store finally opens, the crowd piles in. An elbow bashes my cheek. I'm scared of falling and being trampled on. At the same time, the warmth from all those bodies pressing against mine makes me come alive.

## Chances

I wasn't sure which station was mine. In my broken Italian, I asked an old man who was standing next to me. It was a good twenty minutes yet, he said, swaying with the motion of the train. He began speaking to me in a mixture of English and Italian, telling me all about Milan. By the time I arrived at my stop, I found myself not wanting to leave him. Now I would have to find my own way through the streets of a city I had never seen before.

A few days later, I stumbled across the old man again in a market place. He grabbed my arm affectionately and invited me back to his house. The woman who opened the door was much younger than him. He introduced her as his wife. I remembered then that I had seen her the day before in the same market place, and had even exchanged flirtatious glances with her.

That evening I put on a fresh shirt and went for a stroll along the city's elegant boulevards. The people sitting at pavement tables regarded me with curiosity. I went into a café, sat down and ordered a carafe of wine. When it was time to ask for the bill, I realised I had left my wallet at the old man's house. I was embarrassed, but not as much as the waiter, whose main concern was to spare my feelings.

## Marriage

He was much older than she was. One day, after a fall from a ladder, he was confined to bed for several weeks. He gave me a call and asked if I could help his wife move their new fridge.

As she and I pushed the fridge into place, her breast pressed into my arm. There in the kitchen, we had sex. She insisted on all kinds of positions, as if to take revenge for the immobility of her husband.