

SAMPLER

New York Hotel

Also by Ian Seed

Anonymous Intruder (Shearsman Books, 2009)

Shifting Registers (Shearsman Books, 2011)

Makers of Empty Dreams (Shearsman Books, 2014)

Identity Papers (Shearsman Books, 2016)

Chapbooks

Threadbare Fables (Like This Press, 2012)

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

Fidelities (Red Ceilings Press, 2015)

Translations

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)

The Thief of Talant

(from the French of Pierre Reverdy) (Wakefield Press, 2016)

Fiction

Amore mio (Flaxebooks, 2010)

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Ian Seed

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The names, characters, places and incidents in these prose poems are
products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are
not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead,
actual events, locales or organizations is entirely coincidental.

—Ian Seed

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‘Am I not,
Myself, only half of a figure of a sort,

A figure half seen, or seen for a moment, a man
Of the mind, an apparition appalled in

Apparels of such lightest look that a turn
Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly, I am gone?’

—Wallace Stevens

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Generation Gap

My maternal grandfather turned up at my council flat with his father, who was a tiny bearded man in an ancient wheelchair. I hadn't seen them for a long time. Without saying hello, my great grandfather raised a fist in the air and began to berate me for being nearly sixty and still without a proper home or job. Even when my grandfather lifted him out of the chair, carried him to the toilet and put him down on the seat, he continued to scold me. The whole flat soon started to stink, but I said nothing through fear of offending them.

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Memory

When I was fourteen, my father returned to England after a decade abroad. I hoped he might have settled down now that he had a new wife. But she told me he spent most of the day wandering around his old house as if he were visiting a city he had never seen before, with his shirt tail hanging out, cardigan buttoned up in the wrong holes, marmalade on his trousers, and with the look of a lost boy in his eyes despite his thick greying beard, which I envied because I had still not started to shave.

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Evolution

There were some large black ducks, not unlike dodos, by the German lake. I began pushing one gently by the beak until it pushed back and then slowly and clumsily chased me round and round. From nearby metal benches, some Germans looked on bemused.

We hadn't been here since my daughter was a toddler. At that time, she was frightened by the birds, and I had played the same game to amuse her. Now she was a teenager exploring the old town on her own, while my wife slept off her hangover. I had nothing better to do.

A German man, roughly the same age and height as me, but much broader in the shoulder, got up and started playing my game with one of the ducks. But he did so in an aggressive and exaggerated manner, as if to parody me. The others smiled and their eyes lit up, perhaps anticipating my inevitable humiliation.

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Late

After Joseph Cornell

The palatial hotel is over a century old and retains its grand style. The wooden lift still sits in its steel cage. Leaving my suitcase with the porter, I go upstairs to say hello to my father, who has arrived earlier that day. But there is nobody in his room. I take the ancient lift again and go wandering from floor to floor. The search through ornate corridors is so pleasurable that I soon forget what it is I am looking for. One room has its door open. A woman as glamorous as a silent movie star is lying on the silk sheets of her bed. She blows me a kiss and beckons with her finger. I stand in her doorway, unable to move. Then she sneezes, and I hurry on my way. Eventually I find my father sitting at a table in a lounge on the top floor. He is staring at his watch while waving away a waiter in a white tuxedo. He looks disappointed when he spots me, as if he should have known all along I would only be up to my old tricks again.

Views

The old philosopher has not paid his hotel bill for as long as anyone can remember. On the rare occasion when one of the staff dares to broach the subject with him, he mutters under his breath, coughs, then walks away surprisingly briskly. He takes the ancient lift all the way up to the roof garden where he will spend hours gazing out over the vast bay, his eyes following one ship after another as it disappears over the horizon.

With me, the foreigner, it is a different story. My efforts to settle everything correctly only make the staff all the more suspicious. To avoid their stares, I spend my evenings down at the port. Here I can lean unnoticed against a smooth soapy wall and watch the fishermen and their families unload their haul in the light of the setting sun.

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Soundproof

Due to a booking error, I found myself sharing a hotel room with a woman I'd never met before. She smiled at me as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and started to unpack her small suitcase, putting her clothes away neatly in a drawer. The situation was full of promise, I realised, but at that moment I needed the toilet.

The bathroom was tiny and the roof sloped so low, I had to stoop. It was as if I were trapped in a doll's house. It occurred to me that this woman, with her dark eye shadow and stiff dark hair, and black dress which clung to her curves, was no more than a doll.

When I returned to the bedroom, she was sitting on the side of the bed, pouring out two glasses of red wine. Through the window I could see a plane taking off from the nearby airport. It rose into the sky in complete silence because the window was sealed tight.

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Interview

There were three of them at the round table where they invited me to sit: a young lecturer in psychology, a drama teacher, who happened to be his wife (a little older, dark hair in a bobtail, heavy eye shadow), and an ancient emeritus professor. The lecturer was saying something about the traumatic effect of marital breakdown on children. I nodded every now and again until his wife broke in: 'I doubt you really have any idea,' she said, 'of what it is truly like for the child.'

I wasn't sure whether she was addressing me or her husband, but I felt obliged to tell them of my own father's compulsive philandering, his bitter separation from my mother when I was eight, and her breakdown when he went to Italy and vanished there. Later I tried to find him, and ended up living for several years in Turin. Here I discovered and translated the books of Cesare Pavese, another philanderer, who wrote poems despairing of the possibility of ever being able to love and hanged himself in a hotel room.

The elderly professor maintained a ghostly silence, while the lecturer stared into his tea as if thinking about something else entirely. His wife must have been turned on by my story of suffering, for the whole time she kept giving me secretive glances and pressing her knee against my thigh under the table.

Early Promise

After my divorce and losing my job, I was reduced to wandering the streets and dossing in doorways. One day a man threw me some coins. I recognised him as a friend from my youth. Over the next few weeks, he put me up in his luxury apartment. He seemed to take pleasure in my dependence upon him, for in our younger days I had been the one with the brilliant future. Now he wanted me to keep him amused. He would take me to parties, dressing me up in one of his discarded suits, which was much too loose on my scrawny body. One night he came across an old lover, and abandoned me to make my own way back to his apartment through the dark streets of the city. Taking a path through a park, I got lost and decided to kip down on a bench.

When dawn came, I could see a small building that I recognised as the Italian café I frequented in my youth. Giovanni and Rosa had always been kind to me, treating me like the son they yearned for. It was in vain that I had tried to hide my crush on Rosa, for I couldn't help blushing whenever she spoke to me. I think Giovanni knew about this but was generous-hearted enough not to mind. He would always offer me an extra coffee on the house. It made his wife happy, he said, just to watch me stare dreamily into space or become lost in a book. It was the kind of thing they never had time for in their own lives. I wondered now if they were still alive, if they might still be there, and what they would say if I knocked on their door.

Returning Home

It was after midnight. I was walking down a snow-covered street past an old church, when the lighting went off, and I slipped, twisting my ankle. There was no one else around. If I called out, would anyone hear my cry? Would anyone have the courage to leave the warmth of their house? And if a stranger happened to pass, would he help me up or would he take advantage of my weakened condition to rob me by the steps of the church where I had fallen?

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