

SHIFTING REGISTERS

Also by Ian Seed

Anonymous Intruder

Shifting Registers

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'It is much better, I have been advised, just to drift with
the stream. The ink washes into a deeper language,
and in the end the water runs clear'

—Rosmarie Waldrop

1

Empty either side

Note-taking

Tout cela est mathématique

—Flaubert

A bit of heart falls away at the reader's
touch—perhaps a necessary
operating expense after coming so far

through soft rain on a Sunday afternoon
to find the answer is absent in a place
once crowded with strangers. A narrow street

passes endless windows to arrive
at the letterbox whose contours once crossed
the distance between your fingers. A pavement

singer with small hands and a strange
amalgam of narrative postures
fills the puddles with his reflections.

But there's nowhere for them to go, no way
to keep their borders safe when they dissolve,
except on this page, empty and waiting.

Theory

Empty, we can be either side
of the equation when things
go wrong. The perpetual

reverent comes to open
each time in earnest, his face
down to the last card. Light

we pass inside as balloons,
though we must be cautious with
parables and patterns. Best

pierce the order of
symmetry, the sentence truest
when readily lost.

Exterior

Dressed in white fur, almost real
in the distance, her hands repeatedly
enter the river, threadbare yet resistant,
their red mist packed for your disposal.

However lengthily unedited, there's nothing
literal about watching the weightless
train chuff its way through fields of snow,
all the more potent for the shininess

of its invitation to an intimacy
with no future, so that for a moment you think
you have fallen when finally you emerge
from the greasy swathes of steam

to see the island, the real one. But who
is speaking, anyway? My guess is he unbuttons his coat
when you're gone. Better hand back your ticket
and start a new life. I'm right behind you.

This break is the moment

once clear of the town, to measure
a journey between fields, waiting
for us always, each essential
self, as if the act of changing
clothes in the midst of strangers
was a way to say yes. She entered
the tenement building (a central
shaft held all wings and floors), then
she was cleansed. From here the sign
blinked in the distance. There is no
universe like that which bleeds, simply
the structure itself holding
its nose to indicate which
of them doesn't want to die.

One last adventure

Climb the road by the wall
where nobody can hear
how many letters are weighted
above our heads, white
in each binary pair, no one
favoured over another.

By the lake we went,
necessary and tense,
except in darkness your name
lost and multiplied, enough
to drown the story
against its telling

of how I change
on the smoky terrace
and halves melt back together
where your hand touches
or passes into the air
lit up at the edges.

Whatever it is

To enter this foreign city is to re-enter unending childhood, caught between fear and expectancy, where the story still unvoiced but eloquent, is not yet pegged to the dark tilted foreground of text on the page.

Through the street's muddy light, giddy as a boy with brand new pennies in a fairground, you wander towards the happy end where *it* will happen, whatever it is in the emptiness of what was there.

Flipbook

The sequential narrative has started
to disintegrate, setting off
our exploration of glass, mostly
between its pieces. Referring

to the act euphemistically,
how can Miranda do colouring
real and true through the flipbook
of 'alternate realities', or make

'big things' from bright paper
scraps while the boys hide away
in their rooms with a screen
to reshape their faces? But don't

get nervous: here's the canoe
which drifts down the broken river.
We're allowed to admit that we like it
even though it ends in tears.

Resemblances

*What kind of face
do I have while leaving*
—Joseph Ceravolo

Even now nothing is certain: my train
is an hour late, and I have to make my way
through faces which multiply and blur
like tears at the end of the platform.

Weightless in front of the toilet mirror,
comb in hand, I try to put myself
back 'in shape', but nothing is solid anymore.
Looking straight into my eyes,

the pupils are too fresh, too fragile
like something which needs to be kept
under glass. And from a distance

here is a man who still hasn't washed
leaning towards me with a blank stare, awaiting
I don't know what deliverance.

Mining the seams

The giant vision that greets us reflects
a tiny figure in shoulderpads. The fusion of the face
with its shadow is total in verisimilitude
beyond the real. It's this story

I always meant to write about one day
in the creamy acreage of buttock and thigh
in a voice that is not quite my own
borne on the winds of the free market,

knowing that whatever I sense in my fingers—
each of which is filled with the same sort of stuff
that connects up to my face—will resist the urge
to touch. Ecce homo: the colour

of his eyes, the shape of his nose
are never the same. For something more lasting,
insert glass eyes into broken skin. What an experience that is,
the mouth filled with a silent cry.

Off-cuts

The door in the corner leads to an empty stage. They serve up reality in comics and porn. Our eyes are holes, our noses blotches which lead to a gaping mouth. Cold thumb-prints on the skin contain delicate passages and figures I want to catch. You've got to have a good frost to make everything die. Sitting up in bed I can make out the emerging outlines of foreigners, very thin. Carrying suitcases has made their hands swell. Soon they'll be too close not to touch as the whole city of flesh-coloured work comes into being, evoking the softness you have entered from. Whose reality is it anyway? I wish I had a more youthful air to match the sudden play of light.