

The Underground Cabaret

SAMPLER

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)

New York Hotel (Shearsman Books, 2018)

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

the straw which comes apart (from the Italian of Ivano Fermini) (Oystercatcher Press, 2010)

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

Bitter Grass (from the Italian of Gëzim Hajdari) (Shearsman Books, 2020)

Fiction

Amore mio (Flaxebooks, 2010)

Italian Lessons (Like This Press, 2017)

Ian Seed

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Cigarette*

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‘Je suis donc fondé à dire que le sentiment de l’absurdité ne naît pas du simple examen d’un fait ou d’une impression mais qu’il jaillit de la comparaison entre un état de fait et une certaine réalité, entre une action et le monde qui la dépasse.’

—Albert Camus

‘Positively there is no chair down here to offer you.’

—Joseph Conrad

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Story

The steep stone steps led down to a restaurant in a cellar with long wooden tables and shelves stacked with dusty bottles of wine. Each evening a different dish was prepared, but only in limited quantities, and I wondered if I had arrived too late. I was the last customer to be allowed in.

At the end of the meal, straws were drawn to decide which one of us would perform that evening. It seemed inevitable the straw would come to me.

I took off my shirt and announced that with the point of my steak knife I would incise the story of the day into my skin, and then sing the events depicted there with improvised lyrics.

It was bound to be a distortion of the truth, but I hoped to make it seem authentic, not only for the sake of my reputation, but also in order not to break the spell of the stories which my audience told themselves to make their own lives real.

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Working Late

I took the train to work that day as usual, even though I felt ill. I had my suitcase and rucksack with me because I would be staying overnight.

At the top of the escalator at St Pancras, I felt someone tugging at my rucksack. I turned around. The zip was open and some of my papers had fallen to the ground. A young man bent down and picked them up for me. He smiled but wouldn't look me in the eye.

I was the first one there for the department meeting, and was almost falling asleep when I felt a kiss on the back of my neck. It was my colleague S.

'Don't be alarmed,' she said. 'It's just that I think you do a wonderful job, and no one ever thanks you.'

I felt much worse now and left the room to get a pain-killer from my suitcase, but the suitcase was gone. Had it been stolen, or had I left it on the train?

The meeting went on for hours. When it was over, my boss offered to take me to the station on his way home to see if someone had found the suitcase.

He had a new, posh car.

It was hired, he said, explaining that he preferred a hired one so that he could exchange it whenever he wanted.

Wasn't that expensive? I wanted to know. He shook his head with a smile.

'Take care,' he said, when he dropped me off.

It was already night. The sky was dark and senseless.

Nostalgia

A terrible storm is brewing. Looking out of the window, I see the street has become dark in a way that makes it look like a scene from an old black-and-white film. A fine time to have to go into town. Walking through the park, all in black and white, I see a plump woman lying naked, like one of those on a fin-de-siècle postcard. She is so still she might not be alive. It is only when I realise that I can *will* colour back into the picture that the woman starts to move, and the terrible wind, which we are all at the mercy of, finally dies down.

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Missing

I found the creature – a kind of horse dressed like a doll with her ears sticking out on either side of a bonnet, wearing rimless spectacles like an old granny, and talking to herself like a small child – walking on her back legs down the main thoroughfare of the great city. She was evidently quite lost. I put my arm around her waist – soft and furry like a teddy bear’s – and led her home with me.

My wife wouldn’t let me keep her, so I put an announcement in the local paper. A man from the other side of the city came to claim her. Something about him made me uneasy, and I followed him as he led the talking horse onto a tram and down through the rows to the back seat.

The horse was chattering away to herself quite happily and didn’t seem to care whether I was there or not, so after giving her a last hug and saying goodbye once again, I got off the tram.

The tram-stop was in the middle of a dual-carriageway and the traffic swarmed by on either side. I realised I didn’t have a clue where I was, and had no idea how to get back home.

Fare

I can't eat the sausages I've been given for breakfast. They are pink and fatty and smell funny. When the B&B lady comes to collect my plate, she looks offended: 'Nothing wrong with them, I hope?' Widening her eyes, she tells me to dip them into the fried egg.

I leave the dining room as soon as her back is turned, feeling I have escaped some deadly infection. But later that day, wandering through the town, I remember the invitation in her eyes and can't help wondering what she has done with the untouched breakfast.

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Labour

For Justyna

Some old men were digging in the sun by a lane just outside town. Whenever a smiling couple strolled by, the old men stopped for a moment, rested on their spades, and nodded hello. As I approached, I thought I could see tears in their eyes and I tried to look the other way. But they called out and offered me a spade. And having nowhere to go, I took it, and was no longer young.

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Division

They were going to cut the huge park in Rome in half. They would push the southern part out to sea to cut it off from the richer north. I found myself in the park as it was happening. Luckily I was just in the right half, but a friend I was meeting up with for the first time in ages had his feet on the other side. All I had wanted was to explore the eternal city, or at least its shadows on the hills.

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Rome

Early each morning in the eternal city, I carried a knotted handkerchief full of sand so that I could feel its weight in my palm. In this way, I wouldn't forget where I'd come from. But then I'd pour the sand onto the pavement to remind myself I was free each morning to choose my life anew.

With my empty handkerchief back in my pocket, I would go to the café on the corner for a black coffee. There was never anyone in there at that time, apart from the owner and his wife, neither of whom seemed in a hurry to serve me.

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Find

Seeing that I was lost, the travellers invited me to come and live with them. But would they understand my need to be alone? As if to tempt me further and at the same time confirm my fears, they pushed a small, dark-eyed woman towards me. She buried her face in my chest as if she were a bird trying to hide.

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Provincial

It was a bright spring day. Turin's Via Roma was packed with shoppers. Strange, I thought, how in a few hours it would be dark and deserted. A part of me was hoping I would bump into my ex-wife, however unlikely that was. At the same time, I dreaded the prospect – she would see I was on my own and pity me.

I went into a bar. It was cool and quiet. The youth who handed me my beer spoke in English, telling me he had worked in New York the year before.

'At least there the streets are full of people at night as well during the day,' I said although I'd never been there.

The youth said nothing. Perhaps he did not wish to shame me by bringing my ignorance to light.

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Last Trip

My mother had a metal brace attached to one leg. She tried, but couldn't get up the steps of the seaside train with the open roof, and I had to lift her. She was so light it was as if she were already spirit.

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