

I Came, I Saw

Also by John Peck

Shagbark (1972)

The Broken Blockhouse Wall (1979)

Poems and Translations of Hi-Lö (1993)

Argura (1993)

Selva Morale (1995)

M and Other Poems (1996)

Inizia: Poems Yoked at Yuletide (2001)

Collected Shorter Poems 1966–1996 (2003)

Red Strawberry Leaf: Selected Poems 1994–2001 (2005)

Contradance (2011)

JOHN PECK

I Came, I Saw

Eight Poems

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John Matthias, *Notre Dame Review*, a preliminary version of *An Unstruck Sound is
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To Levan Tstuskiridze, painter

*and with tribute to three unsung, incompatible figures from mid-century
last:*

*Jan Byzcewski,
engineer, diplomat, and émigré*

*Helmut Toepfer,
engineer, one-eyed survivor of a Russian prison ship,
and émigré*

*Johannes Felbermeyer,
painter, archival photographer, amateur archaeologist,
and émigré*

J u l y

The single juniper spearing through
the crest meadow: from our road today
it drifted the ramrod poise of a bodyguard
on the running board of a black limo.
Three goldfinches pulse and dip into pin oaks.
Already the evenings grow shorter.
A heli hammers past, its rotors winding in tackle,
its cadmium eye bleary wet.
The giant must have returned home by now.
Where did I put my knife?
Tulip, oak, maple, hickory: nothing moves.

“An Unstruck Sound Is the Initial Move”

The Logos is a dog.

—The *Phaenomena* of Aratus of Soli,
after Eudoxus of Cnidus

The argument,
while we flow through these slow-burning forms,
is that mind
on fire nests in logic on fire and slow-sounding.

And that logic
as logos, no trick of the hearted mind
to sound it that way,
is flame strung beaded along combers of sound.

At Seven Pines
a storm the previous night left high reaches
of the air warmer.
Sound curved earthward. Baritones and basses
at the nearby front
mouthed and bellowed into a dome of quiet,
even the squealing
mortars. And so General Joe Johnston
heard nothing of that
and paced waiting, then galloped to it at night
shot from the saddle.

When finally you hear it, the beat comes on
steadily, a long
concourse in flood, unvalved river.

When you attend to it
totally, it is the total, roaring at ease.

Sebastian Bach

soprano to bass set out the registers
where the fight throws them,
a plane otherwise mingled and confused,
esprit gloom joy *fides*,
and dangles them out into speech, ropey cataract
down to rock swaying.

And in their stepped
separations I hear slowness although
the years hasten,
bond enlarging throughout the speeding whole.
His chorus barks
for death, then in chorale measuredly
laments that and makes
peace with itself through sound wider than mind.

But past a feeling carried all the way out
curves the domed full
limit bellied
in wind thrown bellied by fire, sheeted fast
to the rail heeled
over in running seas, and it hums, all going.

He spread past any
single voice in the chorus, or choice foursome,
though here among tents in the
clearing come only these calls he gave them after
the storm's passing.
The jerky recitative of his gospeler—
it spikes and buckles,
then bleeds repose, space opening and saved,
one German spreading
through it to the skull's rim past Arcturus,

most lucid sleep,
the skull itself great fountain and great bowl
and he up its plume,
trajected among swift stillnesses.

In the small hours
I hear the gurgle crowning that column, I've seen
a sail curve space.
The bony campaign cup of the footsloggers
in sutured calcium
is Euclid's father and the rim of peace.

And mother's domed mother:
dementia rippled from it, a soggy veil
across her blanked brow,
when my name, finding, went in, her face a caress.

So: it lies everywhere?
This matte architecture of the dreamed
and yielded blood,
humps of it tilting from the fields? So: it
tents, pitches up, sinks?

The technical college built for the children
of Polish immigrants,
brick colonial, now a prison for women,
browed the hill over town,

Kościuszko naming one of those halls,
the émigré to Paris
who studied painting and then as extern haunted
the military academies
imbibing engineering and the *philosophes*.
Thus in Virginia

he both painted Jefferson in laurelled profile
and talked *les droits de l'homme*.

Kościuszko! But Andrei Tadeusz
also lived in the house,
the genius engineer who whitened
his thumbs' knuckles
by tucking each nail under and squeezing hard,
having been enrolled
an R. O. T. C. lieutenant
of engineers, infantry,
a saber with his name etched on it
in the upstairs closet,
swayback blade and basket hilt in the years
when Spain was taken, then Poland
and stiff cardboard camp photos
of lubberish pontoons
on it might have been Meade's Rappahanock
when Faulkner was cranking up *Hamlet*
for reruns in Yoknapatawpha
(*Hamlet! why I could write that*),
his unit snapped up at Corregidor
while he pulled steel furnaces
from the sleeve and tungsten of Oz,
and a sheath for Almagordo—
Washington wrote him a gilded reference
but the Czar locked him up:

bastions, angles of fire, the calculus
of materiel filtered through calendars,
cobbling together an uprising (betrayed)
while the state here
commenced morphing into max density,
growth minus magnesium
in the bones, and steel alloys accordingly,
a state without citizens

and the fortress bulked out past reason
or salient, the salient
reasons seeping into crapulous treasuries,
bilious bodies.

The figure bobbing in grease-monkey's cap
and red lumberjack shirt
at column's end, orange tiger lilies,
was my Tadeusz, alias Clarence,
who cleared the back of the cement-block garage
so that I could string up
my perpetual-motion rig (building the entire
industrial heating division,
he then bought the one house in that village
which sat next to a manure pile,
on his shelf among the manuals his dog-eared
Five Acres and Independence by Bromfield)

and of course explained that energy is conserved through
system loss, *non perpetuum*
but still supplied the gear and said we would then
see how it actually worked.

The division was undone in one year by a pet
of the company's top bosses.
As was Kościuszko at Ticonderoga,
spotting Sugar Loaf Mountain
near the great fort and advising St. Clair, in vain,
to put a battery up there.
Came total rout. I extracted 18th-century spectacles
from the back-yard garden,
Connecticut puritans having plowed there
when it was their Northwest,
whose children would do business one day

at John Brown's nearby tannery—
no insurgent he, roared safe Wendell Phillips,
no, Brown checked moral entropy,
the impersonator of God's law, an orator's dream,
a regular Cromwellian
dug up from two centuries, the very flywheel
of perpetual renewal.
Kansas the back of *that* garage, *goods without guilt*,
Caanan with Cromwell and Valley Forge,
energies compacted whirling self-renovating,
Pastor Higginson exulting
War only educates men to itself, then Quantrill
nine years later burning Lawrence
and slaughtering 183 unarmed men and boys.
Yet the thermodynamic lesson
ends with possession of the land. *The race to accumulate*,
Caanan a plump tale:
the temples on those gunmetal eyeglasses slid,
shafts through tabby yokes,
like so many laced arms in a hoe-down after harvest,
happy change of partners.

Eight years earlier
Clarence Peck was at Los Alamos, Alamogordo,
testing the sheath formula
in explosions it was meant to contain, and did.

Not motion unending
but force turned back on itself to trigger
all hell throughout hades
(the chains rattling and breaking in plutonium)
high in *heofenes*
(veiled, *sacer*, yoked in *temenos*,
havoc in the forecourts
to kindle altars in the *sanctum nucleatus*)

the man with a hoe shaking the tall orange lilies
and getting them to grow
when others with chemical finesse got nowhere,
veiled from his own kin

and a sealed secretariat at his own hearth,
separated out:
himself the secretion of capacity into desert *secretum*
so as to declare **o p e n**
the super-dense halls and enclaves of Seaborg's
Element 94,
heaviest of the primordials, saying, *Fling wide*
at the beck of my alloy steel jacket
when the love that he sacrificed, her form
nowhere in view, lay
as blood across freshly plowed furrows
through a field (Brown's Pennsylvania
or Brown's Kansas)
which crossed the field of my inner vision with sorrow
at remembering that Bromfield's book
went with him wherever his moves took us.
Many forms, the primordial
silvery white assumes the guise of allotropes
directly under the gaze,
shifts through its subaltern states *cervus fugitivus*.
Yet the hoe wiggling among curved stalks
and orange trombones, ice cream on the back stoop in June
as he conducted with spoon,
Brahms on the cranked-up phonograph, windows wide,
these stay clear of the whitish metal.
Not Lowell's dynastic peeling of the Boston onion
nor his jail time as conshie
rolled out the poetics for this coeval chapter.
Dirac's balsa glider and tight lips, perhaps.
Thus, he with hoe, me with pulleys.
Every pastoral seals an epochal white-knuckler.

Our seminar conversation at noon
concerned angular momentum, not Dante.

*Here is where you must add
input smiling to keep your design going.*

He lifted the sinker, my fail-safe,
which never rose quite as high the next cycle.

The true white-knuckler prohibits
recollection, forestalls the pulley's rope gather, preoccupies.

Over the desert that peculiar
luminosity doggedly perseverated in seared retinas.

His birthday gift that year was a dinner
with his colleague R.
who brought his hand-made telescope and propped it
in backyard drifts to pull in Venus,
colleague Helmut there, too, hired from '50s Germany,
one eye and one good hand
(a prison ship in the Black Sea), the black patch a jest for French R.,
all three men, I now sense,
in their turns at the cold eyepiece knowing relief
at having been secreted there
safely, chatting about orbits, objective lenses—
for *The Aesthetic Education of Man*
must include them also or else it stands prejudiced,
include as well the former priest
who smartly blurted to me at the early café
in a wintry Swiss city
Your president has just bombed Baghdad
All precision, all snappy
as if playing an ace and leaving me with a full hand,
that release of tension a coitus
as elemental as rape long threatened then sprung,
bringing Venus in close
with her torn cloud, the stretch marks of unacknowledged births,
all those worlds
deposited short of nourishment and futures

so that the posture of freshness
not examined too closely might still jive Mars.

When the division collapsed, Peck with two helpers
worked at card tables for months
into the night, placing every man with cousin firms
and rivals. So at their reunion
he was the other Kościuszko with diagonal sash
and the *Virtuti Militari*,
an aura coming off his skin in the Sunnyvale
sirocco: his men. His men.

The argument also is
that an unstruck seeing
goes blind, because deaf—
that the eye which has heard nothing cannot yet
see to see. At one speed,
sight inside hearing, one riding the other
into their bond
in our white cup.
As hulking Orion tilts on one heel unfazed
by the deep smear
of a meteorite down midriff and belt—
the long return
was over, his pride and blindness composing him
to shoulder a dwarf
who saw him home to the rising sun. For now
fate was otherwise,
destiny had gone out in freedom among
those lanes and endless
sparkings and not been seared or scarred further,
the skull threw no more
Lutheran nights beyond itself but sped
to the maximum
velocity of event here, sang, and floated,

for all the damage
had been done. The doers were now no more
than four scorable
tremors of the mind's heart of Deutsch
rectified, rising.

So the scout knife from Norway,
that gift with blond haft and thick fixed blade--
to set roofing tar
my father took it, then gave it to his father
for gutting fish.
So with most of my learning: the shine went under
and the tool traveled.
But gone it teaches me to listen for rumors
of the unsounded—
knowledge is never *now*, and the second learning
waits just there. A Muskelunge
drooping his hand as, up the slit, swift gleamings,
wide for all the answers
meant to remain unstruck—big saddle vacant
as the crash stills.

As a splattered vee down the fast lane slides under,
the contents thus of
one sack of Roman lime and Greek will
to align columns
on the wild aperture, arrayed trunks opening,
spilled from a van
and married to the rains. All at one speed.
Yes, it is ersatz
prefab the stuff is destined for, yet porous
and unmorose past it
the thing that I must build rises to grasp it.

And were I still shooting
to meet it down that lane, the trowel-less hand
of a great sower
swiping, flared flat, would rustle across the pale
non-statistical
corsage of horizons, pinned there from no garden
I ever asked for.
Yet I dug, planted. And have turned to face
that fire the Bushman tells us he hears
ringing, the sun.