

*John Seed*

**Also by John Seed:**

*Spaces In* (Pig Press, Newcastle-upon-Tyne 1977)

*History Labour Night. Fire & Sleet & Candlelight* (Pig Press, Durham 1984)

*Transit Depots* (Ship of Fools, London 1993)

*Interior in the Open Air* (Reality Street, London 1993)

*Divided into One* (Poetical Histories, Cambridge 2003)

*Pictures from Mayhew. London 1850* (Shearsman Books, Exeter 2005)

# **New and Collected Poems**

**John Seed**

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## CONTENTS

### Spaces In (1977)

Lindisfarne: Dole	12
<i>headlights of the great lorries</i>	13
<i>a hundred yards</i>	14
<i>winter sun silver over waves</i>	15
<i>the wind ...</i>	16
<i>never to forget</i>	17
Stalactite & Stalagmite	18
After Time	19
<i>not speaking we</i>	20
<i>minds would leave each</i>	21
<i>Tired</i>	22
<i>in the fierce wind</i>	23
<i>out of the north on the</i>	24
<i>Immensities of stone</i>	25
Into What Depth Thou Seest	26
Backstreet	27

### History Labour Night (1984)

Lines in Wasdale Head	32
Nightshift	33
'This Curious Involvement, A Dominant Species'	34
After Walter Benjamin	35
<i>meanings damage</i>	36
<i>Drenched space and whispering</i>	37
<i>The centre is space now</i>	38
During War, The Timeless Air	39
'History teaches, but it has no pupils'	40
From Ric Caddel's Back Kitchen Window	42
From Manchester to George and Mary Oppen	43
In the Sweet Dark	44
<i>in the morning isolate we</i>	45
To Wait by the River	46
Petuarria	47

<b>Interior In The Open Air (1993)</b>	49
<i>Cloud formations shift in the evening air</i>	51
Along the Thames, Looking from the Roof of the Customs House	52
Brick Lane Market	53
<i>Roofscape outlined ...</i>	54
<i>Fifty thousand nights and</i>	55
<i>Image then black</i>	56
<i>There is no form for this leaden structure</i>	57
<i>Trudging the verb</i>	58
<i>or the female skeleton in a sweat</i>	59
<i>so you couldn't make this 'Art' too</i>	60
<i>what used to be the sky again</i>	61
<i>The river flutters and seems to flow all ways</i>	62
<i>out of the warm continuous rain</i>	63
Moonrise, Snow Flurries, Nightfall, January 15, 1987	64
<i>unrealities of human speech</i>	65
Nightshift: Graves Bakery, Chester-le-Street, August 1987	66
<i>Some times it is always</i>	67
<i>outside the dream no</i>	68
<i>So resistance shrinks to these</i>	69
<i>Singular waking</i>	70
<i>Shadow of the gable-end</i>	71
<i>Silence inside the empty rooms</i>	72
New Year's Eve 1989. Driving South	73
From Escomb, County Durham, July 1990	75
Crossing Westminster Bridge, Nights, November 1990	76
but the precision	79
Passing each	80
Empty chairs around	81
Novel	82
<b>Transit Depots (1993)</b>	85
<b>Three Wednesdays in July (1998)</b>	109
<b>Prague / Sofia</b>	123
<b>London Starting from A (2004)</b>	125
<b>Divided Into One (2004)</b>	133







# INTERIOR IN THE OPEN AIR

1993

'even in the most sublimated work of art  
there is a hidden "it should be different" ...'  
*Theodor Adorno*



Cloud formations shift in the evening air  
Clear almost to infinity over the  
Crowded rooftops

Stars starlight brilliant random

as the pattern of streets in  
Achromatic light  
Actual pavements almost invisible 'I wake

From daydreams to this

Real night'

. . . meaning is difficult

detours

Across darkness

Between language and silence struggling

For breath seeking roots in stone the shabby  
Corridors of the underground echoing

Footsteps a distant shout

**ALONG THE THAMES, LOOKING FROM THE  
ROOF OF THE CUSTOM HOUSE: October 1849**

Light filtered through the tangled rigging and the masts – sails looped in festoons to the yards.

Barges filled with barrels of beer, sacks of flour. Hoys, deep in the moving water, tarpaulins covering the heaped-up cargoes. A schooner and a brig, both from Spain, laden with fruit. Black-looking colliers. Russian brigs from Memel and Petersburg. Lug boats. Empty lighters. Dutch eel boats of polished oak – round bluff bows and green-tipped rudders. Huge steamers with gilt sterns and mahogany wheels, bright brass binnacles glittering in the late sun. Sloops filled with cases of wine, bales of hemp, barrels of port, crates of hardware.

Busy trade and boundless capital: all corners of the earth ransacked, each for its peculiar produce.

A sort of trade.

Axis mundi.

## BRICK LANE MARKET

Dentures cracked jugs broken shoes panlids. Collar studs for shirts long since rags.

Detritus. Wish-symbols of another generation. Bent figures in the afternoon sifting garbage in the gutters. Circulation of commodities at the limit.

Human figures bent over the gutters sifting garbage.

*September 1984*

Roofscape outlined black against the  
changing sky as the streets grow blue with  
dawn. Early workers gather round the  
breakfast stall, blowing saucers of steaming  
coffee. Little slattern girl, basket slung  
before her, screams watercresses through  
the sleeping avenues.

*London, October 1849*

Fifty thousand nights and  
Chill dawns . . . structures  
Fade upward into grey  
Morning into afternoon history  
In alien familiar streets  
Gone haywire written  
Before under the same blank  
Sky all  
Lifelines converge the crystal mists the track  
Veers into obscurity peters out  
Into bramble fern barbed wire

Alien territory

our minds are blank  
Or less than blank . . .

in the drab light the  
Embarkation for Cytherea

Image then black

Like a candle blown out

. . . image images

Of capital in drifting smoke

Brief shadows moving

Across darkness and the flickering

Light of blazing cars

Lost in tangles of discourse

. . . another rainy night in Raynes Park

among the surfaces of

things blurred

a kind of path

Down into the crater's core



There is no form for this leaden structure.  
Metropolitan grey, the great cold slabs of  
power, all that excludes and does not change,  
becoming more itself. It is the water moves,  
beside the bare embankment, the chill dream . . .  
Contingency. Or there is only form. Repetition  
on repetition, impenetrable, the ungraspable  
figure of what we should have known.

What had to be believed to be seen. More  
absorbed within itself, fading into complexity it  
ends abruptly, or continues outside all experience  
its relentless trajectory. Or shifts for an instant  
sideways, into the brightness that lifts from the  
water the shining stones

Trudging the verb  
Into streets where else  
SW19 SW20  
Victorian property after  
Dark surfaces all  
Changed in five years

Indifference the local  
Currency meaningless  
Succession of signs  
Shopfronts stretch  
Limos merchants  
Of space

What can be said here  
Has to be imagined or

Imagine

Pale smudge the moon

or the female skeleton in a sweat  
at the back of the Junction selling  
meat to strangers

Different distances to convert  
into the currency of meaning

Along the Rio Grande Russia  
is going home

so couldn't you make this 'Art' too?  
And so easy. The drab contingencies of a  
Saturday afternoon, April 1988, in Stockwell.  
As it happens. Almost in spirals the blown  
dust, cigarette smoke, theories of M3 on  
the bookies' doorsteps. Sharp, clear-edged,  
against the shabby urban skyline the usual  
world

beauty protected by almost, in its  
cheap transcendence, its shoddy marketing  
strategies

What used to be the sky again

Out of the azimuth west different

Clouds stream smoking colour Morden

Chaos small

Disturbances local detail

Slightest fluctuations

Changed everything

After

of all places

The river glitters and seems to flow all ways. But the path is human, punctuated by orange pools that barely mirror a still sky. Half the morning I've walked here in my head whispering to you stories without narrative. Seeking clarity, daylight.

We left our happiness unwillingly.

It was more perfect than we knew

out of the warm continuous rain

White willow catkins

Opening over the water

And all that is not

Here fugitive

Sounds to make a synthesis to

Choose silence