

*John Welch*

**Also by John Welch:**

**Poetry:**

- A Place Like Here* (Katabasis, London 1968)  
*Six of Five* (The Many Press, London 1975)  
*Wanting To Be Here* (The X Press, London 1976)  
*The Fish God Problem* (The Many Press, London 1977)  
*Braiding the Squadron* (The Many Press, London 1977)  
*And Ada Ann, A Book of Narratives*  
(Great Works Press, Bishops Stortford 1978)  
*Performance* (The Many Press, London 1979)  
*Grieving Signal* (The Many Press, London 1980)  
*The Storms / Lip Service* (The Many Press, London 1980)  
*Out Walking* (Anvil, London 1984)  
*Erasures* (The Many Press, London 1991)  
*Blood and Dreams* (Reality Street Editions, London 1991)  
*Its Radiance* (Poetical Histories, Cambridge 1993)  
*Glyph* (Grille, London 1995)  
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*The Eastern Boroughs* (Shearsman Books, Exeter 2004)  
*British Estate* (AARK Arts, London & Delhi 2004)  
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**Prose**

- Dreaming Arrival* (Shearsman Books, Exeter, 2008)

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- Stories from South Asia* (Oxford University Press, 1984)

**JOHN WELCH**

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**1970-2007**

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## FOREWORD

I started writing in 1957. However virtually none of this earliest work, and there was a great deal of it, is included here. I retain a certain affection for these poems, a fair number of which appeared in magazines during the 1960s, but have decided not to include them.

The poems collected here in the section 'Dust Settled' date from the early 1970s. Some of them are taken from *And Ada Ann*, published by Great Works Press in 1978; some are previously uncollected. The work in the sections *Out Walking* (Anvil, 1984), *Blood and Dreams* (Reality Street, 1991), *Greeting Want* (infernal methods, 1997) and *The Eastern Boroughs* (Shearsman, 2004) is broadly what was contained in the four collections so titled, though with some revisions and a few poems removed altogether. *The Vigil* and *A Place Like Here* contain work dating mainly from the late 1970s through to the early 1990s and previously uncollected. The final section, *The Wind Harp*, is recent, uncollected work.

My acknowledgements and heartfelt thanks to Peter Philpott, Peter Jay, Ken Edwards and Nigel Wheale, publishers of these collections, and to others, publishers and editors too numerous to list here, who have shown faith in my work over the years. My special thanks go to Tony Frazer of Shearsman for undertaking this *Collected Poems*, as well as having been the publisher of my most recent full-length collection.



## THE EASTERN BOROUGHES

1

Here I am, Leyton in summer  
And the light has aged me. Spill  
Anywhere out of this world

Or else, just here, an edge of London,  
The small quiet backs of houses.  
And I am so full of it

These dinner-hours of solo walking  
And a Faustian bargain's made in Leyton –  
*Verweile dich du bist so schon.*

The sun comes palely in  
And faces are  
An innocence of expectation.

That tree being substance of itself's  
So compact in its foliage,  
Its leaves the being of summer sky.

There is the work of being  
And I had thought it was words  
Here among the Eastern boroughs.

2

Hidden face of a lake.  
I moved my name into the sun  
Feeling an odd kind of happiness

As if sunlight wind and water  
Had ruffled the surface of the paint  
On tight-stretched canvas

I being one for whom the act  
Of reading early on became  
A kind of absence.

'Like this I can grow, like a  
Scar over myself', I had thought – and  
'Is there enough inside me yet?'

Was this why, falling quite  
Silent for a time  
I fed stories in last night's dream

To the pale hungry girl inside me.  
'This is quite a good thing I have found'  
I'd told myself, safe in my silence.

Here I'll stay with the good things inside me  
Where light embraces a threshold  
And find an emptiness that is myself.

3  
Is it that words build a silence  
Like the fruit's dense flavour built from light?  
Each Autumn I was being called

To what the winter sees  
After the spectacle of leaf-fall  
As if one by one they had gone

Back to their names and we were walking on air,  
The crisp tread, a barely yielding  
Springiness of surface.

I remember now, out walking  
Into my waiting silences,  
How the words when I first found them

Were flocking in libraries, something  
Miraculous in their way  
Of resting on the curve of a page.

4

The I of it is another, is both  
Epiphany and absence –  
The way it looks up from feeding, wiping its mouth,

It is an afterwards,  
Something that goes on clearing and claiming distance  
In the picture's painted absence.

Still I *was* there  
A winged self stretched like light,  
Pinned across the door.

Today out walking with you  
I have come into this noise  
Of wind and water everywhere,

There is something caged that  
Looks for itself out here,  
Something quite huge and I want it to leave me.

Remains of a tree still flush with berries  
Out on the empty hillside as if  
It were standing a little apart from itself.

I am feeling around inside myself  
For what might be the light.  
Are you here enough in the dark to find me?

You, the speaking silence,  
Are making the space familiar.  
You'll make me in your eyes –

Flesh and blood behind the curtain  
Owns up to being real.  
So I'll grow in becoming to the world.

5

When the camera looked at Eurydice  
And she hid in the photograph's shade.  
She was light's image burnt into silver,

Daguerrotype mirror the light went into –  
I was there too, an  
Image deposit, salts drying in air

Or an ash afloat  
On its small lake of light.  
Image on all this shininess

Is reflection seeking its answer  
Where light still writes  
Its letters from the dead.

But I have flown myself out of there.  
Pecking at the mirror  
I dreamt my arrival,

One moment, that is, of perfect being,  
Hesitant fortress  
I'd said – as if sky eats its messenger.

I'll climb into myself.  
You might be there too, cloud mixed  
With the sunshine, to make this food real.

*The Faustian bargain: in Goethe's 'Faust' the bargain Faust makes with the devil is that he will be granted one perfect moment which he would wish could last for ever.*

## GALLERY

This city – it is  
The heartfelt pause of sunlight  
Out there on a piece of shaped stone.  
A shadow of writing  
Darkens it like soot  
And we are both the tenants  
Of this. But I have taken  
Myself away from you  
This November afternoon  
And now it's starting to get dark.  
'Vase of Black Wine' is a title,  
The picture tilting its silence towards me  
As I wait for you to arrive.  
There is a kind of hopefulness waits in your arms  
Like a calm end for those of us  
Who, wearing our prose selves  
Will one day arrive  
Separate, but together  
Each clothed in our final flesh.

## BENIGN TUMOUR

Our first proper holiday after my operation –  
‘Partial debulking’ is what they call it.  
We were on the beach together. You needed to cross the estuary.  
Watching the ferry approach I asked if you had the right change.  
Then as I was saying goodbye it came,  
That moment of indescribable strangeness  
Called an ‘aura’. It’s as if a gear shifts in my brain  
And I felt I was seeing you for the very first time  
Where you were standing beside me on the sand.  
It was the thing still lodged in my head  
That appeared to be telling me this  
As you climbed in the little boat and sailed away.  
I stood there for some time in the hot sun.  
I watched the glittering water  
Not feeling altogether well  
As if ‘consciousness of self’ were a sort of illness  
And waiting there at the river’s edge I was trying  
So hard to remember  
How, taking me by the hand, it had brought me here.



## SWIFT

Entered my room to a short-lived storm of wings.  
How the swift got in there I do not know.  
The window had been closed for hours.  
Huddled there on the floor it looked up  
Out of startled eyes, more animal than bird.  
I opened the window and scooped the thing out  
Like an insect. It sailed away,  
Just a few ounces of flight this  
Creature that's riskily other.  
There's the way it consists of moments –  
Wings and the benefit of air,  
Being so suddenly there is one instant  
In the afternoon-devouring emptiness.  
What's *me* is something that's left  
Hurling around inside  
As if I had swallowed self like an echo.  
Now pressed against the window's ache of glass  
It watches for that momentary return.

## LAKE

Bending, at day's beginning,  
Over my scraps I am Tantalus  
Half-buried in my waters.  
Two days before  
There was that corrie lake we'd found  
Its silence so abruptly come upon,  
The lisp and whisper at the black stone shore,  
A sunless dazzle, something held there waiting.

I go out into September sunshine.  
My face is hot one side and cold the other.  
I walk to where the slabs of rock  
Are tilted upward from the road.  
It looks deliberately gardened  
As if it has been waiting for me –  
Honeysuckle, purple loosestrife  
But all is on the fade as if  
Seen in a mirror with a faint tarnish.  
I turn, and watch  
Today's inscrutable currents  
And I strain to see you swimming to your island,  
The one that you have chosen for today.  
Your head's a mobile punctuation mark,  
The trail you make a pale  
Blemish in the water.  
Now I have lost it, must imagine you  
Pulling your body, seal-heavy, onto rock.

Returning home I'm at the window  
Watching the sheet of quiet water  
It's then I see you stretching upward –  
You are unfolding in the distance like  
A letter in a picture book.  
Energetically you wave –  
And me? I've had to turn away  
To put the words down on my page of silence.

## BREATHE, THEN

*There's more good news says Tuka*

*The mirror is empty*

Tukaram, trans Dilip Chitre

'Come, little mouth', they'd said  
'It is expedient to breathe',  
Unwinking the mirror's siege –  
An infant's pronoun-rapture, seized with self

It grew itself a shadow full of words  
And somewhere else the world  
Being violently named.  
But now there are these patient afternoons

As if the day were hiding from itself.  
Going back to look, it is as if  
I cannot quite remember  
Just where it was I'd left it

That day the blow fell, dreaming myself awake  
To an existence in the light.  
I find it coming home to me again  
And now I may have reached a place

Where something fatal reaches me.  
I am the reader moving up behind me  
Who hovers like an afterthought.  
There is the storyteller in my head –

The one who rises with those fallen eyes,  
The me-not-me that I'm being spoken by.  
This may be as far as I  
Can take him with me now.

Creeping upstairs like a child perhaps I'll  
Find him thinking the sky  
In a room where a mirror shallow with sunlight  
Glosses the day. It empties. Outside

There is a single bird, its song  
Intact, clouds wasting all the afternoon.  
It will be almost the world  
In there, as if that might be enough

To strengthen my faith in appearances.  
Arriving, word-perfect now  
And, hearing something breathe itself, I'll breathe  
'Imagine living here.'

## I Is

From 'he' to 'I' the pronoun –  
It travelled the sky,  
Being fathered: what I am heir to,  
Tongue pressed against the moment

I is  
A mind simply  
At play with itself

And this was where  
The breathing found him  
Who will be up early – an old man  
He waits for the sun to rise.  
Years later, and I am passing my hand  
Over the stone face, asking forgiveness.

## MIRRORED

Uncover this –  
                  being  
it is a poor am.

We two, being  
worded together

who are dusts on the mirror.

I thinks of you  
Behind a window waiting  
The sunlight winking back

Here being when  
There is no more  
Pronoun  
          am  
Being lifted up: one

Axe-bright moment