

SAMPLER

In Folly's Shade

ALSO BY JOHN WELCH

Poetry

The Fish God Problem (The Many Press, London 1977)

And Ada Ann, A Book of Narratives

(Great Works Press, Bishops Stortford 1978)

Out Walking (Anvil, London 1984)

Blood and Dreams (Reality Street Editions, London 1991)

Its Radiance (Poetical Histories, Cambridge 1993)

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The Eastern Boroughs (Shearsman Books, Exeter, 2004)

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John Welch

In Folly's Shade

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Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office
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(this address not for correspondence)

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Earlier versions of five of the six poems in 'Breeze's Counsel'
appeared in my collection *Its Halting Measure*
(Shearsman Books, 2012).

In 1975 I published a pamphlet *Six of Five*, a collection of thirty
unrhymed sonnets. I wrote more of these through the 1970s and
into the early 1980s. *Uncollected Sonnets* contains what I wish to
preserve of those that have not previously
been collected.

'Late' was published in
The World Speaking Back: Poems for Denise Riley.

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One

AT RANTERS LODGE

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CARPENTER BUILD ME A HOUSE

His poetic spirit still shows itself to be active. For instance in my house he saw the drawing of a temple. He told me to make one out of wood. I replied that I have to work for my living, that I am not fortunate enough to live in philosophic calm like him.

Zimmer, on the poet Hölderlin

As if in translation eating the bread of existence
In here is a creaking voice, turning the handle
And it does so happen sometimes just before sleep
With that slight awkwardness of language
When it takes you to another voice
As if inhabiting a seizure.

Finding the lines the poet
Wrote, in the shadow of form
Is it all done in imitation?
Among the wreckage,
Who lead such careful lives
Each step I take
But there has to be some purchase
And it's still as if that music
Were issuing out of
Someone else's side.

Loftily all the same
We'll carry it forward.

A PROVISION

To provide air for human breath
Kafka

What was it they were doing? Seen from a distance it looked as though it could be work. They went about it as if it were something they were beholden to. It was by and large a solitary occupation though with outbursts of uneasy sociability.

It was not his idea, this language, but waking at night he felt huge making words. Next day when he looked at them it was like lifting a mirror to flight. Do we want our signs *in order* to set them free?

‘Way Out To All Exits Lift Stairs And Fiction’. Yes and look at him standing out there in all weathers, saying ‘It is the thing that nearly makes me live.’

Upstart lyric impulse and neat to her skin, the paltriness of language, which is why he has come here dressed in these heavy clothes.

Sitting in an upstairs room he is trying to arrive somewhere, making his own silence on behalf of something he can almost remember. In those odd corners of being where still he waits for himself, a fountain playing in a desert. He watches the water fade, dissembling, into the ground.

‘The words’, he said ‘were to gain me a purchase on it, their empty grip on the page like a bird’s claws’ – and how neat the whole thing’s workings, like the insides of an old-fashioned watch.

This self, an emptiness he can return to after the clutter of words while downstairs there's a silence whose edge frays with voices.

Getting tired of the game it is playing you can see these 'works' one by one lifted heavily into the air. Watched through a window everything he knows is there tied in a loose bundle.

'Which part of me do you want to search today?'

The distress was real enough even as he watched its performance. A 'performance' – that is, he means what he does and slowly you can see him become what he is.

A careful staging of the self, he'd made up this continuous voice. All this for the lack of a hearer?

The tempter: 'You are nearer to it than most.'

The paper was an imitation, its creamy folds, saying 'There is plenty more for you.'

'The book I take with me' he says 'is everywhere unread.'

His subdued venom. Giving himself away like an empty token. 'It was another life, the one I had.' But these people – artists? – leading such interestingly selfish lives.

Over to here is where it now comes, nearer by far, a language, something that empties itself full. In the end there are only the words to smooth the thing.

Reading the poems and briefly noting their passing, each was a nod of acknowledgement – as if staving something off? Light-proofed the darkness in his mind, its indigent posture. Writing it out was stepping carefully round something, or someone, lying in the road. The fascination of a self-contained world of images, its dusty glitter, where words ‘blaze’. It was a moody adolescent’s place of safety, a peculiar talent pacing corridors carpeted with rain. Somewhere outside the air freshened.

Empty blessing of moonlight, someone still holding out just under the surface.

When the path ran away with itself he tried to follow.

In due course it would declare its own downfall.

Like a wordless book opening under the sky, a fish dying with the sky in its mouth.

Yes, to be small again, and inside the window’s stare

This Orpheus, in mourning he must cradle his own head.

TRANSLATED

An exile: being floated across such impossible borders he'd arrived here – the silent weight of a door that opened just enough, so that now he looks out over our rooftops, waking each day to their outline as if to an illness. I think of him waking in there in the afternoon still trapped in his dream of arrival. Splashing water over his face, perhaps he notices the way the sunlight enters, how it catches on a tap's metal with such bright authority.

I'd helped him make this translation and now it hovers between us like an anxious shade. Facing all ways at once, an unmarked milestone, he's the figure behind me as I get up to leave. I find I can hardly get out of his door. I carry its shadowy architrave like an overcoat as I move away carefully and out into the beleaguered crowd. It's as if trying to borrow his exile I might make myself lonely, a self imperfectly remembered.

Being thus translated he is a man with his words stranded halfway over a bridge. Came to a nation gloomy with the aftermath of empire – and one day he might come to know it, his otherness elided in those voices? 'Yes this is someone's home, No harm in anyone that's here.' In the meantime, back in there those desk-silences. Outside, the walls are covered in layers of writing. It's tagging, not political slogans, here in this depleted city where shadows sometimes attain a short substance, smashing and stealing.

And the rest of *my* life – as if I were reading not very adequate translation? Seeing round the words I think I can just make out the original where it busies itself with cooking, sorting papers, arranging flowers. As I watch one opens like the remains of an eye.

Out walking on the Heath here's a tree that harbours a wound. It glistens and dries where I stand and look out over London. Here are the words that almost found me, I imagine how they might all come down in one enormous descending, as the cracked tree's lightning-self once held to that split in the light. Yoked together the two of us, filling the wound with sound.

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ANTIC TORSO

Christopher Middleton's 'Anaspère: le torse antique' (1978)

Borrowed

Axe was swung

Spatter of blood in the air

The way the words take flight –
Such lightness belongs in language

A refusal it
Finds, in me somewhere

Since all the rest
Is only what I remember

And someone keeps making these books.

There remained an idea of sea
Each bird an idea of sky

To come at it fresh again
The voice as if it came
In search of me

Other people's words
That send me back to it

A simple lake

Its waterfowl

A resolve

As near as words can get
There to take shelter
As of someone or something bounding along
The way their movement emptied the dance.

BACKGROUND MUSIC

i.m. Christopher Middleton

I woke up not knowing quite where I was
Here in this hotel by the sea
Guests feeding, breakfasts of shamed meat
A mud of coffee. Picking the remnants
Out of my teeth, against the faint background music
But what will become of us,
All those half-used soaps, shampoos?
We have 'needs', they have remedies
And all the small noises they make, round the edge of us
Footfall-quiet as if respecting a corpse
In this hospital of particulars
With staff and guests helping each other along.
'It's where I sometimes go to write poems
I hear myself starting to say –
But all the time there's the faint, infernal music.
This ash of sound, it will settle us to oblivion
And, before that, one final meal, each fragment
Held in the mouth till it perishes? Outside
The clouds are still a procession going nowhere
And I am lying here being beholden to silence.
Lest I become desultory
I think of the things I am trying to make.
But next day at breakfast reading your words
How oddly fresh they'll sound.

ON THE HILL

Forests, on the edge of cities –
Going out on an expedition,
And finding a smashed bird in the road

A small space opens
Under a pigeon's
Insistent afternoon call.

Out on the hill my life's
A remote preaching of sunlight –
I can see it, almost, from here.

Dry shapes of words that rub together
Can make a dusty light
A frail thing, distant from blood,

But to hang about here
In the hawthorn's musky smell?
We climbed out onto the hill

Letting eye stare
On a hill slope where the animals
Tug and nuzzle perpetually

The many-angled stones
So close-set in their wall
They appear to be in flight.

A wind came rushing down
Through the slope's sessile oaks.
In a dull panic I was alone,

And asked 'What will spill out of us,
This chaos, mine and yours?'
Was this the trick, to throw the mind away?

Seen from there the sea was quiet as milk.
Together we walked to the shore
Then home, through several miles of English rain.

It was an act of faith
Leaving the words in those void arms
To come home in the storm.

If I could show you. If I could show,
Being here like the water's continual
Murmur against a door of sunlight –

It was always about to come alive.
The language was a kind of devolving
And then the tedium of the finished thing.

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HIS BOOKS

When the poet died
What happened to his collection of books?
There were four or five shelves of poetry.
The dealer who came took only a few
The collectable ones with signatures, greetings.
Now the poet's widow is baffled.
She surveys them spread out all over the floor.
'I don't want the shelves
Completely bare' she had said
'But look, there are far too many'.
I imagine the poet's final moments. He's thinking
'Why is there suddenly all this space inside me?'
As he finds himself slipping away
Sideways then up, high into the air.
Perhaps he looked back down
And saw the books still safe in their shelves
And then they were trying to rise up
On only one wing, to join him
But being held back by the substance of paper
Here they are now, all over the floor
In their awkward, toppling piles.

JANE

Listen to it, the sound of grief
Where she lies in the cage of her cot
Sunlight striking the curtain,
Parents still playing outside.
On the way to where
The sun is ending its journey
The child will eventually finish her crying,
Settle to sleep, our words
One day finding their way to her mouth.
This keeping self together,
It's a cradle slung in the air.
But the tongue, like a wagging finger,
Admonishes 'This is what there is'.
Is this a rehearsal? Still hearing
Those quietened voices that come
From further off now, and each time
Learning to sleep again.

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