

Its Halting Measure

Other publications by John Welch include:

*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)

*Greeting Want* (infernial methods, Cambridge 1997)

*The Eastern Boroughs* (Shearsman Books, Exeter 2004)

*On Orkney* (infernial methods, Stromness 2005)

*Collected Poems* (Shearsman Books, Exeter, 2008)

*Visiting Exile* (Shearsman Books, Exeter, 2009)

### **Prose**

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### **As editor:**

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

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## one: voice in a mirror

*Printing: the art of turning paper into emotions*

Is printed, in ink that won't come off on your hands  
Writing that blackened the mirror searching for change,

In winter sunshine the dustless afternoon clouds,  
The voice-performer's light-filled skeleton.





## John Sell Cotman: 'Trees in the Alban Hills'

Some force, in among them, a  
Driving apart  
Where the wind gets in there all among those trees  
Perched on a hillside, over against the city  
As if the god were there,  
A sort of visionary absence?

## Four Walks

### Floating Cargo

*Cheshunt to Broxbourne and back*

Walking steadily

Like this beside the water

Does bring a certain kind of peace.

Discarded blossom lies along the surface,

All this stuff that's drifting down

And a powerful scent of elder

Whose musk is edged with sweetness.

People you pass are not quite sure

Whether or not to greet you

And here's a sort of bollard,

It's like an abandoned phallus.

Trees have that hint of greyness—

Sunlit upturned leaf drama

Against a dark threat of sky.

You carry on, through surprising groves

Putting some distance under your feet

Till, breaking into the open

Space of a silent field, there are

Unmoving clouds

And what's this shrub with whitish flowers,

Its musty-spermy smell?

You turn back to that waterside

Whose floating cargo of blossom

Is almost as motionless as text.

## Near Guiting Power

Used as title, a taking possession,  
It does have this 'watch-me-doing-this' aspect  
Like a man with that falsely knowing expression  
Who, looking self-consciously relaxed,  
Has briefly rediscovered the joys of reading.  
But the hedgerow flail has been this way  
Leaving twigs like the chopped ends of thumbs  
And a bird in the mist is making a gargling sound.  
Things unseen beckon, as we move on  
Heads down into the wind. The Cotswolds?  
It's well-behaved children, on well-behaved horses.  
It's probably the English Tuscany,  
Wealth carefully hidden behind the trees  
Like that Roman villa in Spoonley Wood  
Gone now to a heap of stones.  
The villa is real enough, the mosaic  
A Victorian fake, under an old tarpaulin.  
Out in the open again,  
The furtive sound of an unseen plane.  
It's the details that still have the power  
To make you happy—that cotoneaster  
Flaring out over a wall, red berries  
And dense, bare, almost feathery twigs,  
Solitary trees, stock still  
As if they were the substance of our thought.

## London Loop

*Bexley to Petts Wood*

thin covering of cloud  
excitement of starting out

skylarks and doggerel    traffic  
tipping this way, it empties itself for you –

a landfill site?  
continuous traffic's a curtain now, useless angers

. . .

a sort of special thing  
for throwing a ball for it

five arches bridge  
a 'visual climax'

a semblance of gratitude  
to free up what's inside you

here's a monster celtic cross  
'the founder of cable and wireless'

she tells me and  
'fourteen lead-lined coffins –

we have many important people here  
from the big houses'

well, everyone's marginal  
shavings of birdsong a central process

...

a stagnant pond in a wood  
and a viewing platform

discarded beer cans  
someone has torched the 'kissing gate'

puzzling pastoral remnant  
what people come to these hidden places to do

alcohol fire as offerings  
in the hot twinkling wood

anemones and others  
each individual flower very pure

Deal to Dover

*The cloud-heart melts away*

Lord de Tabley

So, the surprise of nothing being found  
the pupil shrinks in so much light

and our restlessness, against  
an odd still sea  
its peculiar deeps and blues—

Danger Of Death

No Diving

No Jumping

the sea's

steep syllables.

When the reader gets up from the book  
it is as if almost in paradise  
and still there is that expanse before him.  
Imagining it an audience  
and it saying 'I want every inch of you'  
but he has no name to find it with.

Mid-afternoon, yes  
but why should words help,  
what *is* beyond  
this beckoning?

It had  
fixed itself  
like a brooch  
but awkwardly, at his side.

and how the night becomes us  
when you'll fit me like a glove,  
you and I  
meticulous graveyard of speech.

## Two Landscapes / Garden Escapes

1

Cybele headless  
on the Palatine  
in front of her the thick, soft dust  
whose footprints in it?  
A bunch of mimosa someone left  
has faded in her lap.

Mother of a Roman afternoon  
of traffic. The city was  
a slow paste, grey and ochre

The dark and dusty green of pines  
scent of Cybele such an other absence  
such  
as music lifts one  
inch above no  
more

The lopped head like a monstrous absence  
a blatant thing devoid of eyes



2

Wind wrestled nylon around you  
where a gull went over  
spoiled landscape of garage and gravel pit  
*I too can be on the earth*

he said, I want  
some of that  
being alone: just  
there!

Mud, water, a grey but marching sky  
a tremendous rawness  
miscellaneous bushes  
garden escapes I shouldn't wonder.

Imagine, that  
messed-up landscape, it corresponds to me  
and its single gull flies over,  
the would-be transcendental  
veering home in the wind  
all that muscle against the air its home

## The Return

No change in the town  
But dumb noise in its  
Saturday streets.

Its people reside  
Among stone, and  
Traffic as always

Drifts in exuberant  
Stasis. The doom  
Now or never

Takes hold  
As the houses come  
Down, and are scattered

By slow heavy winds.  
Places become new places,  
The same knot being woven and woven

And birds veering off  
Being launched from ramparts  
At an approach of feet,

Like exiles, the towers and  
Shafts of sun, fabrications  
That glint in its shining.

...

The grove at  
Midday, heat  
Flies in and out  
Among the iron  
Trunks, there is  
A din of insects  
From the interior.

A message of wind  
Now tops the hill,  
Below, ideas  
For red brick havens.  
Bushes lean into  
The hill's side  
Where whitish bloom  
Gives off its musky odour.

Here we have come  
With our harsh boxed music  
Among swelling chestnuts.  
Arriving with cameras  
We have brought wrapped food  
And cups, to the  
Fringe of the grove  
And our games. I  
Like this nearness,  
Cramped festivity.  
Roots seek the dark,  
And hunt around –  
Launch flowers from dust.

What I would miss  
At all times is  
These streets whose air is  
Dulled with ghosts,  
The one who keeps  
A bar, her face  
A squashed rose launched  
From nowhere, now  
Official birds  
That rise in clouds  
To name the sky.

...

Now sparrows roost among yellowing  
Sycamore leaves by the market.

Where a faithless sun declines there are  
Hundreds of the shrill balls of feathers.

Only one half of a person I'm here  
My lips moving soundlessly to my tread.

At the front door I look for my key  
Stand on the moment's threshold and listen—  
The buzzing of the codes.

So it goes to an abstract colour  
But urgent at the margin.  
Riding along the rim –  
And looking out over the waterworks  
Yellow sky breathed a word

So my mind went  
With the bird up there  
Always away  
Then winter coming on like this,  
Passing the house again and looking  
Up at the lit silence  
Of what was once your flat  
And we were falling  
Further and further back, towards  
The sheet of glass that lifted  
Its gleaming blackness sheer against  
A night of restless unseen trees.

And a face, growing dark with the recognising  
Of what it was between us—  
Why is it called 'making' love  
As if in the mirror it  
Looked and saw difference, out of the  
All but unreachable depths  
Elbowing reflections aside?

Surely we were on our way to somewhere,  
If we only knew  
But I was flying with the wish  
To empty 'me' into 'you'  
And later all it wanted was  
To be indoors and quiet,  
Inhabiting a morning.

The words had put me in a shallow grave,  
Holding you holding me and falling  
Further and further back, and now  
At memory's far edge, still falling  
Towards the blackness of that silent  
Window one more time.

...

*OPUS POSTHUMOUS*

Crashing around inside his wintry lusts,  
The brake, the grove, the riverbank—  
It overflows with fitful February.

The tombs, the tombs are overgrown.

Our pub is called The Albion  
Return Return.  
It sheltered us from a May storm.  
If the laurel fits you wear it.

Little children trapped in school  
Parrot the names.