John Welch
Also by John Welch

And Ada Ann
Out Walking
Blood and Dreams
Greeting Want

as editor:

Stories from South Asia
The Eastern Boroughs

John Welch

Shearsman Books
2004
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one
ART / WORK

That’s right, keep it moving.
We have seen the spring and not been impressed.

It is tedious
Buying food under the trees. When we have
Heaped up enough grain

We’ll whisper the truth in banks
Scatter it on the water
His mouth is in the air –

We have taken him out of the city
Clutching credit cards. Our funeral
Rites are a matter of dignity,
Gold leaf on a watery grave.
CHARTRES

*Saw it just after the war – they’d taken out all the glass. Looked rather good.*

The Ambassador.

Encrusted language, high altar under snow
As if there were meaning without sign,
A word made stone, and waking
It helps us to be dressed in light
Such as hesitates on stone –
Yes this might settle the hours.
Imagine the sky a roof of glass.
Language will get us outside it,
A labial softness pressed
Against the hardness of teeth.
It is the animal part of speech,
A fattening – then all at once
The doors swing open in the house of silence,
The window-shutters folded back
Like ears. I can imagine
Being emptied into all that music
Such as might sing
Free the damaged
half of me.
EDGE

The god has gone back under the waves
Uselessly uselessly trying to write his name –
Watch each one falter just before it breaks.
He left their irretrievable margin.
His were the eyes that saw the tilted land
Where a life was waiting for us.
It grows out of a sort of mist
And the new house built on the edge of the cliff,
With the traffic behind, is a palace of views,
An entire life lived inside inverted commas.
Walking up through a rain-soaked wood,
Its speckledy light effects, you reach the viewpoint.
You stand there waiting for the photograph,
Focussing on the too-much of it.
The water is an unusual sort of grey.
Someone made it look easy then disappeared
Who met with such a satisfying end,
But now the sun has come out,
And these are our defeats the sea is smiling with.
BUNGALOW: ‘LA-MER’

This shallow box is made of glass and wood
To have a word in front of it.

It is as if the word
Were prelude to some other music,

Perhaps the distant, lifting edge
Of water that you can’t quite see from here.

But the sea is not a house, and this one
Having two birds in front of it

Which could be gulls or pigeons,
Stone or plaster, and are painted white

Frames the distance with its word.
Once inside and seated

All in that gleaming grave together
Would silence be the best of us?

Out walking early I had thought of them
In their low-windowed house,

Being born each day into the sun
With each fresh waking, dewfall on a page

Until one day they’ll slip away
And leave this name scorched on a piece of wood –

For the time being it simply lifts
Its puzzling hyphen.
Today we’re headed for the shore, but this?
It brings us close but still it holds us off,

Feather of air, a dying breath
Confronting ocean fronted by a word.
OUT WALKING, AGAIN

In the City a stench of white hyacinths,
Monstrous-headed daffodils. A prison-shaped dream
Was the future, like a vista closing behind me
With a flourish. I’d resorted to vengeful watching.

Be seated now – the fat man
Sweats slightly eating his food as a punishment.
These diners, how squalid they look when seen from above
Perched above the ruins of a meal.

Shelves of whole cheeses are ranged in a window –
Their dense expectant silence,
The sum of these vestiges a vain crust of buildings.
There is so much inside an empty sculpted head

Where a man absents himself from himself
Even if it does taste of the open air.
In an empty landscape I remembered wanting,
Chatting with the sybil

But standing as close as this
They people the unpeopled air,
These knowing faces, then look up –
Sunlight’s estrangement of the whole facade.
CREATURE

The creature has learned
To make itself music
Plucking and sawing
Away at the guts of itself.
Muzzle scraping the ground
It has learned to play with its mouth
In a special kind of a way,
Half-starved at evening here in a
City will learn to grow quiet.
Saying neither No nor Yes  
And always hurried on like this 
He travels toward birdsong 
Through the cool draughts of air 
Blown down here in damp gusts, 

Passing the roots of trees 
That have a hold on silence 
Imagining he’s roused 
The one who slept down there. 
This time he’ll bring her back. 

He’d gone to ground like lightning, down after 
Something imagined in the after-dark, 
That fearful thing, to make it sing. 
Should he turn round now, what will he see 
Mirroring an absence? 

Nevertheless like Grandmother’s Footsteps 
He senses a quick light tread of statues 
Behind him breaking into movement, 
Each foot planted in silence. 
“Was what I tried to conjure there already? 

Down here I am given 
Desire to drown in, darkness to dream myself. 
I carry my body of work, 
 Taking it forward. It fills 
The space that’s closing up behind me.”
And so, remembering days
Of waking early to float downstairs,
Words gathering round him like a press of quills –
Flight is the only answer, mastered
By the change, so he might move

Upwards and into a slow arrest of air
To be all watching.
Claws shrivelled with excitement
He’ll try to find the one swaying perch
In all that blandness.

But can the bird ever
Recover its track, before
Scattering into an insect-flight of words?
One’s circling in that dreadful hollow
He’s coming out from now, it spirals

Upward into the moment.
His open arms extend into the silence.
“Being here I don’t know what to say” –
So turns, to where she goes from him
And with that meaning marries half the sky.
IT WAS

in a painting. The way the light had
of falling just there
and, seeing how it was, you felt
it might start to make you happy.
Here are the three figures
who are turning towards each other,
in the drapery flow half-
seated and half-floating
and if they are all anchored
this is because of an arm
reaching out for and grasping
a jug. It is something quite personal,
a particular moment
but at the same time so
much out-there and not-you –
as if it is you are being reached
out, and about to touch
a concealed remoteness,
an otherness which becomes
you and so
by this oblique route
here I am being
found, at home in the world.
MISSING PLINTH

A litter of memorials –
Helicopter-like one hangs there
Shadowing an absence.
He’d crossed a city grown abruptly quiet.
The gallery was a dream-like warren of rooms.
There was only one painting somewhere inside.
Perhaps it was the one
Where the half-bandaged god
Was taken into the ground
And if he yelled in the beginning
It surely must have been for lack of self.
Now, hanging in that final room,
He wondered, is it this
That outlasts being devoured, all
Painted surface and its paradox of depth?
Aching, he rose from sleep and it was like
Being born again into the air
Turning to look back, one final time,
At the building, its facade
Lifted into the day’s first light
And calm as the missing statue’s brow.