

Visiting Exile

Also by John Welch:

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)

Greeting Want (infernial methods, Cambridge 1997)

The Eastern Boroughs (Shearsman Books, Exeter 2004)

British Estate (AARK Arts, London & Delhi 2004)

On Orkney (infernial methods, Stromness 2005)

Collected Poems (Shearsman Books, Exeter, 2008)

Prose

Dreaming Arrival (Shearsman Books, Exeter, 2008)

As editor:

Stories from South Asia (Oxford University Press, 1984)

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Visiting Exile

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the Estate of Ralph Russell.

The cover depicts the sculpture *All Dressed Up and Nowhere To Go* by
Souheil Sleiman. Reproduced here by permission of the sculptor.

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for
Lily Vera

prologue: foreign bodies

The installation by Souheil Sleiman comprised a shallow heap of sand covering the floor of the Gallery with plastic bags placed over it. It was shown at Mafuji Gallery, Hackney, 2000; Zico House Beirut and Maarouf Saad Cultural Centre Sidon, 2001.

Private View

which is on the top floor of an industrial building. Here the 'art' goes to an edge, an edge that is brushed by our footsteps as we look down. I imagine being right down there and the sand's edge is like a cliff. Looking across at the bags, neatly arranged, maybe they would look like fields and farms. The thing is, do the bags hold the sand down or are they held down by it? Are they emerging from the sand or are they being buried beneath it?

What it made me think of was *Death in Venice*, the Visconti film. I thought of the Venice Lido, somewhere I have never been, towels and deckchairs neatly laid out suggested here by the striped and lettered plastic, a beach nostalgia with heavy Mahlerian music effects sinking down through the floor to the next stratum, that is the garment workers on the floor below. So here is the beach; in this country you have to pay to go there, you are arranged in rows and death comes down through the ceiling in a shower of plastic, like the ash descending on Pompeii, and this is what's left afterwards, this array of emptied out signs.

Later I thought of the time I read Chateaubriand's *Atala*, when I was at boarding school. Chateaubriand was an early French Romantic, an aristocrat and diplomat. All I can remember of the story is that it featured a romance between a traveller and Atala, a young Native American woman. Atala dies and the one detail from the book I can now recall is her burial. Her naked body is covered in earth but with one breast left protruding above the soil, pale against the dark earth, suggested by one of these plastic bags, as if this one image were what the world-weary traveller in pursuit of the exotic brought back, all the horrors of an emptied-out sign.

Older now still trying to read what the world says, commodification of an existence. And the gallery space? It was like a pacified ocean. The corporate art consultant was there. She had ‘moved eastwards’ she told me, and bought into a new canal-side development. As for the area, she gave it ‘the next twenty years.’

So welcome to these excavations.

Street, Cemetery and Park

Marginal existence, flyblown hot light where the street is an edge. As if dressing up like that, tattoos and multiple piercings, might for a moment make you feel complete before the next stratum descends.

A field that fills with names. You can tell who are the ‘well-loved’ just by reading their inscriptions. Shall I inhabit this place with my name? In the smashed chapel there are fragments of light where the remaining fragments of glass hang from their lead tendrils—and the plants that sprout from the building’s roof, it’s as if they are waving to me. Here are millions of leaves, I shall sleep with the sound of them always in my ears. And sculpture’s unending moment—but I have a question to ask. If a man stand still as a statue will he become?

In the park ‘Do Not Disturb’ the artist in her tent. All these recuperations of an existence. Two turtles, slow in their existence. I write this in leaf-light, leaning on the bridge. Animal cries of humans in distress as if they have been deserted by something. The signs on parade, but here is another one drifting towards me over the pavement bellied with wind. Let us consider the meanings, one by one, taking them home.

Abandoned Sites

The poem a site of lost meanings. Archaeology of a once-self, it hovers, a work that disappears and then re-appears where another exhibition opens at twilight and a subsidised music begins, here in another abandoned workshop. Making meaning, something swept up like that enormous weight of sand in the gallery.

You walked upstairs in a weekend silence moving towards an idea that had become an object, however briefly; past the polythene-wrapped garments on the floor below hanging there in rows like ghosts at attention. Up here at the top the walls are white and it leads you to think that you might travel to somewhere where the being of perfect silence is. As if the object might escape these signs and have no value. And the beach a halfway station where it stretches away, the lost signs emerging like Atala's breast.

british estate

Low rise, an off-white colour,
The walls a sort of scumbled finish.
It's opposite a cemetery,
Victorian. Overgrown.
'In 1966', the leaflet reads
'Relevant parts were freed
From the effects of consecration'.
A window lifts like a lid
Releasing the effects of music,
Its ethnicity not immediately apparent.

A globe set spinning in an empty classroom
Half the surface bruised with red—
As if the mistake still dogs our steps.
One summer afternoon I walked in there
Alone, among the scarcely legible dead
Arrived at a small clearing
A block of whitish stone, some strands of ivy
That clung there, instead of a name that might
Tell me what was buried in the ground
Beyond the reach of all that music.

Refugee

They'll come, from there to here.
No it is not a pilgrimage, this
Distance from you to I.
Relentless caravan,
The always being forced
To choose a different sky—
'I' wants to know where 'you' is from,
It wants your story
But you were so carefully folded
Into your own silences.

Once over here you're doing the dance of shadows
Hanging about the courts
Waiting for judgement,
Something to be 'handed down',
Ambiguous inheritance.

Festival

What they bring's a fluttering remnant,
Folk dance glimpsed through a doorway,
Men playing an endless game of cards.

We know them by their food,
Offerings as if to tempt us.
But that festival in the park—
It was a nation-in-waiting,
It was waiting under the trees
In steady English rain

And we were starting to wonder
Had they always been here
Condensing out of such emptiness
To speak in a different language,
Blamed mainly because they came near?

Here was a new kind of silence
Had somehow come to surround us
And *I am because of you* it was saying
The gap in the text the catch in the voice

And an alien music.

Screen

It has a semi-human face
Distilled on screens,
This thing that speaks in our name,

An approximation of something
Let loose on the world
And this is what it keeps on saying:

'You will pay for what I did to you
Again and again and again.'

The Singer

This was the singer
They have taken out his voice—
It must have been a mistake?
The voice that speaks itself
In a whisper now, just an inch above the ground

When a piece of earth comes flying.
Somewhere it had a name
Lost in the folds of a map.
Ownership thickened around it

And lives half guessed-at
Who'd imagined this piece of earth.
They peopled it with trees,
A sound here and there, as of running water,
Scents, seasons.
It is somewhere inside the map,
A map furled like a flag

And he is the news from nowhere
Who met with an accident of time—
Hold the microphone close to his face,
Enlarge the possibilities of speech,
He'll offer you his throat:

'I am the singer with the ruined face
The one grown hard to recognise.
How can you sit and watch like that?'
I'll stay here at the edge and wonder
How it might be for once to be all voice
And wait here on the page,
Such privileged existence!

Under Ground

Earls Court, the evening heat
Stretched out between the terraces
Where tourists pitch their tents.
Walking as if to nowhere in particular
This crowd has learned to look and eat and travel
All in the one movement.
But later in the Underground
Who could measure
The weight of his slack arms
Tattooed with 'England', a rose
And on each hand a spider's web?
You surface again
Somewhere just north of Piccadilly.
Its quite dark now, the vegetation
Is all behind plate glass.
Well-mannered jungle greens
Are shiny as briefcases.

Coalition

'A coalition of interests': information
Is dust in the eyes, a sandstorm approaching—
Those feathery trees start to wave.
At evening the soldiers are fed.

A journalist hears an explosion.
He peers shyly over the edge—
A word or two snatched from chaos
To settle here among ruins.

Does dust have a name, where it
Plucks out a cry?
Such being dust's currency, final flutter
In the eyes of a wounded intelligent animal,

Its intimations of a final stillness.
There was dereliction beyond the call of duty
And an architecture of chaos
The summer's height, its grinning numbers

Where a cloud, rising lazily
Like a curtain, is lifted away
An intelligence quick as a lizard
Still hanging on, somewhere among these ruins.