SAMPLER

Notebook of Last Things
Also by Jon Thompson

POETRY
The Book of the Floating World
Landscape with Light *
Strange Country *

ESSAYS
Fiction, Crime and Empire
After Paradise: Essays on the Fate of American Writing *

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Come, see real flowers of this painful world.
—Basho

Someone, he added, ought to draw up a catalogue of buildings listed in order of size, and it would be immediately obvious that domestic buildings of less than normal size — the little cottage in the fields, the hermitage, the lock-keeper’s lodge, the pavilion for viewing the landscape, the children’s bothy in the garden — are those that offer us at least a semblance of peace, whereas no one in his right mind could truthfully say that he liked a vast edifice such as the Palace of Justice on the old Gallows Hill in Brussels. At the most we gaze at it in wonder, a kind of wonder which in itself is a form of dawning horror, for somehow we know by instinct that outsize buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction before them, and are designed from the first with an eye to their later existence as ruins.

—W. G. Sebald, Austerlitz
I

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1. The skyscraper across the street reflects back hundreds of wavy images of a high-rise hotel, but a blankness where the sky is.

2. These skyscrapers say, I am the sum of your vision. Also: I am monument, surpassing vision.

3. So many blanknesses. Each with its own indifference, its own proclamations; its own prayers. The mind returns to them, again & again, traveler without end.
4. 
At night a siren starts up, then another, then others like wolves driven to keening. Then they slip away.

5. 
Haven’t seen the rake-thin Vietnamese guy who wheels his broken bike around as support for his bowed, badly-set legs, loudly addressing ghosts.

6. 
In a stand of trees near some upscale stores they’ve set spheres of light high in the branches. Charm or denial, O brilliant fastidiousness, what we want we keep.
7.  
Thought the mentally-ill man downtown  
was pan-handling, but all he wanted to do was  
bump elbows. Perhaps not even ill.

8.  
In the afternoon, light retreats from Nicholson’s  
Barber & Style with its faded MLK  
photo in the window & mint-green sinks inside.

9.  
Darkness on the darker Tuscan Cypress, the great  
formality of its silhouette a reminder of the graver  
virtues, that somber exclamation exceeding architectural time.
10.
Redbrick warehouse district by
the train tracks now warehouses night-clubbers,
art patrons & gourmands.

11.
Lily-white, crimson-red and magenta
azaleas blossoming all along
Dixie Trail, like hypnotic, post-historic prayers.

12.
You want to prove something.
With words, you want to prove
something. As if naming it would do.
13. Keep seeing the Blue Sky Farms panel truck round town with its logo of blue-bordered clouds above rolling green fields.

14. Memorial in front of the police station: a dozen or so rough-cut square pillars, different heights, grouped in Neolithic silence.

15. Iron-girder skeleton of the new train station rises up over shining train tracks curving into the distance.