

The Lower Reaches

ALSO BY MARTIN ANDERSON FROM SHEARSMAN BOOKS

POETRY

Snow: Selected Poems 1981-2011

Belonging

PROSE

The Hoplite Journals (complete in one volume)

The Hoplite Journals LX-LXXIX

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THE SHEARSMAN CHAPBOOK SERIES, 2013

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The Lower Reaches

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Cover drawing: *Fobbing Harbour* by Donald Maxwell,
originally published in his book, *A Detective in Essex* (1933).

“This is England, and I’m in a nice, clean English
room with all the dirt swept under the bed”.

—Jean Rhys

ONE

I

After the high pitched whine of bellicosity: “We’ll bomb you back to the stone age” the remote is pressed. Crackle of distressed air. Warm, incendiary smell. All colour implodes to a white mote. Silence. The crevasse opens.

II

Boiling white spume. Caught on steps of the public baths
before noon, the shadow of a vapour. Ash, in the dissolved
hand. Shard, or ember. All melted into air. In the stone, heart's
cold memento.

III

What keel breaks this ice? What *dignitas* is affirmed in these particulars of a profound winter? Our Lady of the Salterns bless this rotting wharf, this ramshackle back-end deserted by the tides. It is snowing over all the reed clogged wet-lands of the earth.

IV

Scent of sea asters edging the creek. “Die Tankanlagen” under the aimer’s sight. “Marschland.” Identified/located from a great height. Locked in a grid: “Zu den Sachen Selbst!” Held for a moment in his gaze, they bleed. Blackened viscera. The air receives them.

“Perched on the rotten shell of a crumbling empire.” He writhed. Listening to its long, inhaled sighs. A continent in trouble, economies adrift. Bemused at its beleaguered identity. Its ‘cradle’ mocked by its own hand. Not a ‘Hellenic Occident’ (extending east of the Dardanelles) no. No, surely. But an acropolis purged of the stain of all jewelled, scented potentates. Austere. White: its *demokratia*, its *logos*. Derided now and held up as dishonest, its people indolent. And, held up instead as its antithesis, those hardworking lands which provided souls for the Middle Passage and whose people previously they’d characterised as “lazy beasts [who] must be compelled to work—with a stick” ... and “whether they should be reckoned as beings of the same species.” Perched on that rotten shell he “received such a salutation in [his] nostrils as [he] had never experienced in [his] life.”