

SAMPLER

*Voices Carry*

ALSO BY MERVYN TAYLOR

*An Island of His Own* (1992)

*The Goat* (1999)

*Gone Away* (2006)

*(published by Junction Press, New York)*

*No Back Door* (2010)

*The Waving Gallery* (2014)

*(published by Shearsman Books)*

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Mervyn Taylor

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Shearsman Books

First published in the United Kingdom in 2017 by  
Shearsman Books  
50 Westons Hill Drive  
Emersons Green  
BRISTOL  
BS16 7DF

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office  
30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB  
(*this address not for correspondence*)

[www.shearsman.com](http://www.shearsman.com)

ISBN 978-1-84861-497-0

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#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The poem 'Low' was published in the anthology *Veils, Halos & Shackles*, 2016.  
'Death in Mudland', 'Those Who Stayed', and 'The Lesson' appear in the  
online journal, *Past Simple*, December, 2016.

Many thanks to Susana Case for her discerning eye and patient ear,  
for listening to these voices when at times they tended to grow  
garbled or worse, off key.

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*for Nancy and Judy*

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I

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## Death in Mudland

Poor Professor Perry, what did they  
think to find, those thieves running  
from your residence, besides books  
left over from teaching days in wintry  
states, a bottle of preserved plums,

the icebox door ajar. What, climbing  
those rickety stairs, did they imagine  
the portrait of your wife on the landing  
might fetch from a deal in Georgetown,  
US or GT dollars exchanged in the dark,

their beady eyes dancing, in the old  
wooden quarters of that city. What of  
worth did they believe they'd discover  
in your suitcase on the unmade bed  
in a back room, half-unpacked, mouth

open, dumb witness to their crime,  
shirts spread about, and striped ties.  
And an army of letters, spilled from  
a small valise, intended for friends,  
that they'd never receive, only

news of your sad death, of the heat,  
and humidity, of the robbers in hurried  
scamper, like rodents, one reporter said,  
among them three who seemed to be  
females, judging by their long tails.

## Incoming

We used to clap whenever  
we landed, to cheer as the  
plane shuddered to a stop.

Now our minds grow busy  
mapping the route from  
airport to home, the many

places where things could go  
wrong, the gifts, the personal  
items in the suitcase, stolen.

Coming in from outposts  
in Amsterdam, London,  
New York, we've grown old

on such flights, undecided  
at which end we should  
linger, which death

might be better, in snow,  
or one where the heat  
cooks us quickly, till

we're done, like everything  
the sun blazes down on,  
the tar, the sand, the sea

making that dueling sound  
of satisfaction and regret, of  
fires flaring, and going out.

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## Those Who Stayed

In the small spaces of their yards,  
they lodge their complaints:  
everywhere there's so much war,  
and last night, in the next street,

did you hear that woman scream,  
whose boyfriend set her on fire?  
How are the children, one asks,  
the ringworm, it gone? They'll

exchange pelau for fish, an end  
of pork left over from Sunday.  
Termites are eating both their  
houses, and the boy in America

for some reason, hasn't called.  
They'll go back, after a while; one  
to her sweeping, the other sitting  
by the phone, in case it should ring.

## Enough

What if, suddenly, the spate of killings  
were to end, the blood run, a tilted  
river, out to sea. What if, after one

final eruption, the violence should  
slide like lava, and harden. Then,  
we could continue tying the children's  
laces, patting their heads once

they learn to do it themselves. If  
the sky were to become the ceiling  
in a dream, the sea a scuffed carpet,

we might begin to forget the sound  
of a neighbor being strangled, the thief's  
warning to his partner, *Enough!*, the  
engine running in the getaway car.

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## Only Son

*for Colors*

You showed me the boy, when  
he was three, red and skinny, your  
spitting image. Years later, when

he was only thirteen, you worried  
that he'd done his first job, some  
dirty work that left him, the gun

heavy in his pocket, to get back  
however he could, from down by  
the sea. Now a grandfather,

you describe how the police  
found him, out on the highway,  
head one way, leg another, how

they wouldn't let you near the  
folded wreckage, the bodies of  
those who had called him, *Come*

*go*, spread like the fingers of so  
many arms, his face no longer  
the spitting image of anything.

## Blue Lights

*after Jack W.*

The man who would be Prime Minister wants,  
more than anything, blue lights, and sirens

that squeeze shoppers against store windows,  
their faces mirrored among the mannequins.

Here he comes now, hidden behind tinted glass,  
official D of A insignias on both front doors—

our Minister of Agriculture, who should never  
be in a hurry, when one considers the trees,

how slowly they grow. His wish is to one day  
have outriders, with reflective visors, chrome

fenders, grins wiped clean during training.  
Get out of the way, you who suspect he's only

going to get a shave and haircut, and then  
to see if those ordered seeds have been planted.



## Security

Outside Maraj Jewelers,  
his face is stern, the bore  
of his rifle frightening.

What would happen,  
I wonder, if two men  
with smaller guns

surprised him, what if  
they managed to get  
their muzzles pressed

against his parietal lobes  
and in wild reaction  
he brought his weapon up,

pointed towards  
that dining terrace  
above Excellent Trading,

where a couple sits, holding  
hands across the formica,  
searching for something

sparkling, the man's  
proposal stopped  
in mid-sentence,

the blast tearing into  
the midday, the stones  
in the store unseated

from their settings,  
unfit for engagement  
or wedding, suddenly

too small, too blown  
into fragments, into sparks,  
the shaking hands of the clerk

rearranging the display,  
if the guard were ever  
to let his guard down.

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## Alma's Advice

Who are the boys we'll root for,  
when they're all dead or gone away?  
Where is the cluster of houses  
we'll indicate with a wave,  
meaning where we grew up, where  
we had our first glimpse of secret  
flesh, covered with fur.

Where are the girls we ran after,  
desire to caress them singing  
in our bones, where are those  
mothers who came after us, arms  
flailing, who knew the kind of fire  
in smell, in touch, hidden in hollows  
and in botanical gardens.

Who are the strangers now  
running wild in our country, darts  
for eyes, clubs for fists, hit lists  
embedded in text messages.  
They make our play seem childish,  
our centipedes curl away from their  
scorpion sting, all our treasures turned  
to chaff in the evil of their conferences.  
Who ever heard of shooting a man  
while he held his baby in his arms?

Where is Alma the hairdresser who  
taught us woman-wiles, a snort of brandy  
before she sat us down, who said it's  
possible to become these things:  
stone, shelf, roof, step, ravine, flooring.  
But not while keeping the heart  
that makes us human, not without

eating out of some hand the berries  
of forgetfulness, as she showed us  
her man, sneaking through a hole in the  
fence, while the gate stood wide open.

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