

Selected Poems

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The Interior Designer's Late Morning, Many Press 1983
Bar Magenta (with Simon Marsh), Many Press, 1986
Odes on St. Cecilia's Day, Poetical Histories, 1990
The Metro Poems, Many Press, 1992
Psyche in the Gargano, Equipage, 1995
Paul Klee's Diary, Equipage, 1995
Keith Tippett Plays Tonight, Maquette Press, 1999
Blueroads: Selected Poems, Salt Publishing, 2003
Sound Signals Advising of Presence, infernal methods, 2006
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Nistanimera, Shearsman Books, 2007
The Sardine Tree, Oystercatcher, 2008
The Summer of Agios Dimitrios, Shearsman, 2009
Behoven, Oystercatcher, 2009
The Pistol Tree Poems (with Simon Marsh), Shearsman, 2011
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Contents

Ars Poetica	9
Premonition	10
The Seasons	11
Ode on St. Cecilia's Day	17
from The Metro Poems	
Ottaviano	22
Spagna	22
Repubblica	23
Manzoni	24
S. Giovanni	25
Ponte Lungo	26
Furio Camillo	26
Lucio Sestio	27
Giulio Agricola	27
Subaugusta	28
Colosseo	29
Piramide	30
Magliana	31
Marconi	31
Fermi	32
Laurentina	32
Quintet for St. Cecilia's Day	33
Education Policy	36
Apples	37
Night Driving	38
Psyche in the Gargano	39
from Paul Klee's Diary	43
West Coast	58
Tenor Legacy	58
Joe Pass Live in Every Hedge	59
Real Book	59
Oystercatcher	60
Starfish	62
Landing	63
from The Green Hill	64

Peg	64
Liederkreis	65
from The Summer of Agios Dimitrios	68
from The Pistol Tree Poems	83
from Lynn Deeps	108
Poly-Olbion	111
from Behoven	112
Sabi	127
from Collected Letters	129
from Site Guide	136
from 18	139
from Interscriptions	141
from Quite Frankly	143
from The Sardine Tree	145

for Lynn

Ars Poetica

Sooner or later
on the cold and parching landing
where the clock hands unravel
the golf-ball innards of your head
a telephone rings in a room
to which you've lost the keys.

A granular wagglng
as of sand and a flounder's tail
is the vestigial soul
which flaps up from its bed
as you shoulder the door crashing
into vacant sunlit space

where the phone has stopped.
In front of the window
a plastic bag of water turns
suspended from the pelmet
and fans the lunchtime light
in gold and marching bars across your face.

Premonition

A bee trudges through the air behind me
appears and charges the pink swing doors
of a moist and odorous June rose.
Trees hold creosoted plates where lopped
phantom branches once grew. The noise
of crows and a mower stops behind the fence.
To understand the elevation of silence
you would want to go through the last tick
of the mower, the big square of sun
on planks, the stink of damp mint
and old splintering timber. Exactly then
you see that the perfect circle opposite
wasn't a hard black knot in the wood
but a hole into the neighbours' dark premises.

The Seasons

i

Night squats to listen as the boiler
starts playing chanter to the local dogs.
Metaphors trundle up the garden path
like bison on roller skates
ignoring the shuttered windows
encased in scaly plaster.

I believe in nights remains inscribed
beneath this heavy souvenir ashtray
with burnt butts resting at the brim,
stocky doubled-up sailors asleep on the moon.

What was the name of that film?

Drawn through perfectly empty pages,
clean pulls to the mind's beach,
that gargling surf which darkened
behind the retina like toast

O those were not the days
when the tilted world leaked
legends of the seasons into my glass

colossal life-guards in wheel-chairs.

The very next day we threw
crusts into our lapping faces
from the top of Rainbow Bridge.
You were saying someone had forgotten
to wind up the mallards and swans
when, daft as a grebe's tuft,
Spring unbuttoned its wet mac.

I'd swim upstream, thump my tail on the stones,
sliver over meadows in a black tube,
chew out a nest 'neath whichever eaves you pleased

it's that look in your eyes which
licks the sky's cake-bowl clean
turning fathoms of light
riding through the west windows
galloping up your spine
trotting through your hair
rearing under your wrists
shaken like manes by your coming

to reassemble as the lulled pool
of your breath and disappear in sleep.

The afternoon seeps away behind
venetian blinds to the diminishing
squeak of little wheels.

Evenings are so much longer.

In Summer shirts get dirtier sooner
to be washed in grandmother's shampoo.
Sun leans on the brick bell towers,
bags of cement lean on the old hives.

Territorial traffic noses and barges
past faulty traffic-lights where you haul
on your carrier-bags which won't last out,
ubiquitous stretch marks dangerously
transparent between the handle and name.

They all make out your scantily clad aubergines
as the bus creates merry hell over stopping.

The white terrier squats on the dusty verge
uneasily turning her head as the metro
soars beneath her away from the centre.

I was hanging out my washing on the terrace
admiring the dusk plants sprouting from the church roof
when I turned as you switched on the lights.
You were laughing in the kitchen but I like
splashing about in suds and Marzemino then
pegging up my green check shirt under the moon.

So if I wake up a bit under the weather
my shirt's already up and about
flapping its arms through the window
beckoning towards impossible directions.

iv

My birthday's in the Autumn
so I get a new and bigger rucksack.
Hiding the past and future
among my favourite books and jumpers
I swing the present onto my shoulder.
The left strap gives way.

The season leaches out through mulch
and post offices where every day
is a blocked culvert under the few
passing cars that drench the hedges,
popping premature chestnuts
from their rotting cream head gear.
The curtains are parted by dawn.

Dew and new mushrooms glimmer by garden trees—
matted, tended surfaces penetrated by cold stalks
shedding spore white in the postman's footprint.
You tidied laundry, pens and hair
turned toast, eggs and pages balancing
October light on the inside of your wrist.

The alder bronzed in the last of evening
its boughs rose on the darkening wind.
The water edge sounded through soaked gravel
below each separate leaf, minutes from
the beginning or end of all vespers.

Vespers! the very word recalls the second hand
scooter that carries you to your temporary
bar job where in fifteen minutes you'll
unwrap and test the Guinness tap.

v

My warmed up roll had the Union Jack
on a stick stuck in it. Affecting
to assemble snugly ham and tomatoes
it really merely held the cheery
rectangle and formed an occupied hole.

Then as I considered everything
that didn't grow and your green
tights it stabbed me in the gum.

Fortunately, a couple of pounds
of petrol will carry you up
from this dank and uppity plain
to the mountains' crisp vacuity.

Up from baffled voices, trodden
echoes in crescents and back streets

past sheep like clotted mist
to the hiss and click of skis
that slip over buried fences.

Our grins blue with postponement
we wobble back from the sunset
where all definitions lie
under the tracks we make and follow.

Slovenly beauties of effort and release,
our tracks upon the world
harden out there for a few days
as we sit back from the fire
borrowed dust and ice in our turn ups.

vi

Down we drift on the great ship
fishing, launching kites, performing
Punch and Judy for the crew.
We saw the glimmer of discarded ring-pulls
out of the corners of our eyes
as marvellous fish culminating
in the circle of achieved possibility.

I see the porthole in the mirror
as I shave and make the air hum
like canvas under Morandi vases.
The reason for being here
is to preclude the question and poetry
looking forwards over your own shoulder.

Another show has finished in the tiny
planetarium where nothing has set,
not even the nicely formed concavity
where you leant in my presence.

A float punctures the river's sheen
the line looped and acock.
A sideways nudge frees the water.
The weighted float sits straight and deep
its luminous tip fitting the slow current.

A paper sounding-board
beats in the rhythm of the air.
You don't know which is your pulse
which the pluck of the kite
as the winds take you by the hand
then take your breath away.

Ode on St. Cecilia's Day

1

Baggy old whores topple by in perms,
dust trickling down the back of the day
 on a sudden runnel of sweat
as a slovenly Trastevere afternoon yawns,
scratches its crotch and listlessly slags off the neighbours.
Further grumbling at the doorstep of the head
 is the pronged scoop of a JCB
either scraping the street clean or dragging
the surface into unnavigable ruts.
Well below this sour pillow and its load,
a train smelling of the dead approaches
a Metro station which has been filled in
with weeds, lens caps, ketchup, mud and rubble.
That ringing thump is the last level and trace
being slapped flat with the back of a shovel.

2

He said, Cecily, something about a typical afternoon.
An ant in a rubber glove could've said as much
 without such suppository-smugness.
Odd words in green script do indeed traverse
VDUs on western cliffs, while rusty speakers
croak out compositions of static and fear.
An entire day had again gone unrecognised
in distant rumours of the ring-road,
a last draughty sun, weeds' shadows lengthening.
From the direction of the Aventine,
below the nasal nocturne of the shawm—
hark! a sackbut, in the Mixolydian mode,
on a Travertine dunlopillow of 'cellos.

3

Curve of revenge,
a sniff,
the racket
of a brimming galvanised bucket
 crashing on the marble
 stopping dead
 nothing spilt

ripples chasing each other
into their vacant hearts.

4

Through a lurid night of sticky dreams
this pillow of lace, Marmite smears and ooze
bobs above a rising sea-horse,
pouch crammed and wriggling,
continuing his tilted ascent forwards
the swaying ocean's moony roof

November exhales a lunar tastelessness
in owls' quiet hoops of sound
and dry leaves settling on dry stone.

She is only in the trappings of the world,
her musics staving off the night.

5

The dripping stops as a dense steam
unfurls along the hall.
In a zone of suffocation the sun
 has gnawed out its heart.
Night wades in the full moon of the piazza
where thirst and senses have been quenched
in the last days of the grape harvest.

Between imploded hangover and distant alarm-clocks
mounds of grapes sail past the moist hedge of dawn
where the god sits with an erection like a tow bar.
At sunrise it's even harder to overlook debt
or hard-boiled egg on the harp strings.

6

A couple of cells like notes
 have knitted fire into time.
We come in waves and particles too
beyond the comedies of measurement,
night ending in a bunched tangle of sonorous
 cocks and bells.
In a dream full of steam, blades and
 plunging consummation,
her pulse beat against the sheet
in the hollow beneath her ankle.
An absence at the edge of the lane
is an idea which began to be relished
beyond the shimmering flute arabesque
or the laborious dirge of the organ.

7

A rower stirs tree reflection,
sliding down the bloated khaki Tiber.
Frayed bunting dangles overhead and the stretch
between the bridges is empty again.

I underestimated more than you can say.

Way downstream the oarsman is making
a pig's ear out of a silken curve—
changing his own notions of space.
 Her sleeping statue's hand hangs
 over the edge of the niche.

Later there's this garlicky panoply:
brilliant awning taut over
 a cerise and charcoal accordion,
the saxophone's brazen belly-landing,
the splash and ripples of the cymbals.
A string bass walks over our graves
as we chew bits of space and pizza.

8

 This line is made of air,
bees browsing dusty chicory and thistle,
traffic and impulse clotting along the Appia.
Dead weeds scrape in the breeze
under power lines that swoop towards Rome.
Helicopters return low over eastern beaches,
the tough and legendary headlands
of another black and white video.
Meanwhile we screw up our faces,
 plug guitars into the wind
as the knots of interference extend down
through money, vowel and memory
to the new veins and ore of the Earth
(that kicked, delicious, recolonised skull of God).

9

Lizards slip into cracks under broken glass,
ants' nests and blackened pork bones.
The gypsies have deserted the meadow which gapes
between the rind in the weeds and wind in the reeds.
 Embraced by the final sphere,
each movement spurts streams of enharmonic atoms
which, so they said, popped up in the bedroom too
once every twenty million years or so.
Galaxies pack their bags—new neighbours move in.

In her final silent cavatina
she had tried to sing the rate of creation in a sphere
of radius ten to the power nine light years
in tons per second.
She sang of water on the stem
and she sang of human want
as a vast black matted ball
that could be coughed up from a cat's throat.