The Look of Goodbye

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By the Same Author

Poetry

*Overdrawn Account*
*Anaglypta*
*This Other Life*
*More About the Weather*
*Entertaining Fates*
*Leaf-Viewing*
*Lost and Found*
*Via Sauro Variations*
*Anywhere You Like*
*About Time Too*
*Selected Poems*
*There are Avenues*
*Ghost Characters*

Prose

*Untitled Deeds*

Interviews

*Talk about Poetry: Conversations on the Art*

Translations

*Six Poems by Ungaretti*
*The Great Friend and Other Translated Poems*
*The Greener Meadow: Selected Poems of Luciano Erba*
*Selected Poetry and Prose of Vittorio Sereni*

Criticism

*In the Circumstances: About Poems and Poets*
*Poetry, Poets, Readers: Making Things Happen*
*Twentieth Century Poetry: Selves and Situations*
Three

Taking Off
Italian Poplars
Mentioned in Dispatches
The Found Voice
Platt Fields
Hope Hospital
Life is Good
Calm Autumn
My Italy
Naturally Enough
Enduring Peace
English Abroad
The Quick Way
Disorientation

Four

What Have You
From the World
The Last Resort
Nowhere in Particular
Frost Shadows
The Reproduction of Winter
Drawing a Line
On the Scene
All in Our Day
Holding World
Mortuary Passport
The Empire of Light

Five

Loud Weather
Ratifying Kyoto
Public Holiday
Glaswegian
Huis Clos
Evacuation Drill
The Deficit
So There
A London Afterlife
Not Lost
Occasion to Revise
The House Guest
Après le Déluge
Kyoto Protocols
Auspicious Motives
Cul-de-sac
The Dolls’ House
Old Loves

Six

The Spelk
On the Mobile
Unheimlich Leben
Like a Reminder
And a Name
Heart & Company
Enigmas of August
Lying Figures
Sound Advice
Exit Strategies
Drawing a Blank
With Eyes Closed

Notes
for Ornella, Matilde & Giulia
One
The Red Dusk

for Paul Lally

I’m starting from the teddy-choirboy
who taught us what painting the town red meant
in a city where you simply had to know
who’d done what on any given Saturday
at Anfield or away —
where lives would be one long might-have-been
if the referee was blind or a linesman biased;
and even though you’ll never walk alone
I could almost taste it in a smoky sky
welling up like burst blood-vessels round the gates,
full time blown, as down we went
with the rivers of red between brick terrace houses.

You remember: a sunset was blazing on the Mersey
where the battleship Potemkin — let’s say — lay
at anchor through the policemen’s strike . . .
Uplifted, carried forward by a dimmed red tide,
red-nosed, red-faced, we were each being sent
off into the late light of a vast inflamed eye.
Brief Visitation

You again, and even here
back-lit against the window pane,
it’s as if you bring me
word of a possible way to be,
of things I could only say with you listening,
things that don’t have sense without you —
like a gleam coming in through the window,
its light reflected off piled snow.

Yes, and I’m astonished by
you again, you in this room here with me
(perhaps you’re shrugging, shaking your head
at every least thing I’ve said)
or else I’m listening, lost for words,
and eyes un-focus on a pattern-less carpet,
you saying, ‘Don’t fret, don’t forget . . .’
out of the blue bright sky.

You again, and even here
the pine trees’ stiffened waves of ice
look pleased to be noticed by one more stranger.
Defunct firms, bars, non-places impinge or
defer for a moment to this bitter afternoon
when, sooner or later, go you must —
and you’re leaving very, very soon,
you again, if only just.
Alien Registration

‘Dr. Robinson, you need to renew your alienation card . . .’

Daybreak and even the clouds flake away at their edges like fish scales, like rust, like blood on your lenses. For a moment, I’m really not sure where this particular darkness visible might be, and you know how it is, an obscure remorse or worse, something worse sticks round the memories of words; and I squirm as between clock and bed, porous with daylight, darker shapes fill out the outline in a vanity mirror speckled at its edges; and sure enough, glancing at the photograph, you notice a face they no longer recognize.

So you know, you don’t need to be told how the frustrations will gather at a stuck traffic signal or stop-sign, when queues in official places leave us all at another loose end . . . There’ll be little else for it but to take that gap between sky and unfenced concrete as storm clouds come sloping above me to shed their droplets on the finest grey dust you might ever hate to see — being humbled by that disintegrating day when any slight change in the weather was enough to be wondering what in the world could possibly put it back together?
As Like as Not

‘Is the Pacific Sea my home?

John Donne

Comes an ambivalent sky towards evening,
dark dropping fast as we climb
up through the higgledy-piggledy houses
with dusk-flares in overgrown
blind corner mirrors, precarious
contracts, un-renewable futures
reflected as street-fronts and shop-fronts aglow
back here in the back of beyond
where it’s like our real life were over:
we’re living a posthumous existence,
a paradise or purgatory, whatever,
picked out like the ant platoons
at work on a hillside of caves,
their cunning passages in the glooms
under hortensia leaves.

And this is what’s become of us.
Endangered, we have lived
playing noughts and crosses with the days
squared out on a calendar;
we’ve coped with the solitude,
the postal disappointments or delays,
chewing seaward cloud
and other enigmatic food.

Past rows of gingko or zelkova, elm,
we’ve tried to seem at home,
though now and again I’m overwhelmed
by neon in late afternoon, an alien
gazing at an alien horizon.
Then yet once more, in this far-off sunset,
I’ll start on a theme to reconcile
ourselves with precipitous mountains
and the benefits of exile.
Transit Lounge

1

Now as that story’s stopped meaning a thing and the next one not barely begun, when neither here nor there we’re over the Gulf of Finland or Baltic, it might be you find yourself over-susceptibly sustained by no more than a song, moved by implausibly lucky plot twists bringing tears with no sense to the eye. It might be, as like, you discover hopes and regrets I thought we were over catching up in the cloudless sky; then subside, exhausted, barely exist in that thin red arc across a map somewhere on the edge of sleep — till awoken for our continental breakfast.

2

Then it might be this place we’ve arrived at so as to leave it shows promise of futures not ours in the distance, a distance with church spires, with fir trees and no choices, nothing else for it but the fire crews’ practice wrecks parked like *memento mori* on an apron — us sitting, waiting, watching the spray from long-haul carriers as they touch down.

3

Nothing else for it since we don’t want soft toys, souvenirs, or the duty free, don’t want to thin attenuated senses of selfhood, despise others’ children
at their games of hide-and-seek
circling around us with shrill cries —
but squirm from them as all I’ve hated
finds me out here in my weakness,
here in the limbo of now.

4

Though now I’ve my feet on the ground,
the ground slightly rises and falls
with an undulant motion, it seems.
Then we wrap ourselves up in the tiredness,
ineluctable circumstance, and slow time
of a day going on far too long.

5

Long drawn out by this three-hour loose end,
we even get used to the transit lounge —
being nowhere in particular
with time to kill or spare,
and specially when the sky
starts to prepare for its night-flight schedules,
when thoughts of being or getting there
are beaten to airy thinness by
streams of blood in the layered cloud cover —
we even get used to this being for now
among thousands of the other stranded souls.
For the Birds

_for Ralph and Hester_

Certainly, rare birds converged on your lawn
one summer’s day as from the east,
north, round the corner they had flown

in for a chat, yes, and what a commotion
that parakeet on upper branches caused —
and what quiet once they’re gone.