

SAMPLER

*Flying School*

*Also by Robert Saxton*

The Promise Clinic

Manganese

Local Honey

Hesiod's Calendar

The China Shop Pictures

Six-way Mirror

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Robert Saxton

*Flying School*

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Shearsman Books

First published in the United Kingdom in 2019 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 978-1-84861-642-4

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## CONTENTS

### Inventions

The Chinese Wheelbarrow	11
Wandering Aengus	14
Shakespeare & Co.	15
Parkour	16
Taking to the Air	17
The Sacrifice	19
Aerial Flowers	20
The Cosmonaut's Free Holiday	26

### Skylark

Farmhouse Serenade	31
The Midnight Summons	32
October Hornpipe	34
Venetian Nights	37
Ours	38
Consolation Prize	39
Lacuna, Lacuna	40
Constellation Street	41
The Road Not Taken	42
Preset Image Valentine	43
Skylark	44
Overnight Guest	45

### Air and Angels

The Goldfinch	49
Air and Angels	50

The Silent Collection	52
Sarah Tubb	
and the Heavenly Visitors	54
At Cookham Regatta	56
Jimson Weed	58

### World's End

Other Than What One Is	61
Zoo Party	62
Vienna Consultation	63
The Golden Scarab	64
The Crossroads Tree	65
Top Withens	66
The Wink	67
Albatross	68
Revenant at a Wedding	71
Intrepid Retirement Journal	72
Roxanne's <i>Jeu d'esprit</i>	73
The Inspection Cover	76
The Signature	77
Faith and Truth	79
The Tlaloc Supremacy	81
Heavengate	83
World's End	85
The Meeting of Land and Sky	86
Frithelstockstone	87
The Immortality Show	88

### Valedictions

<i>J'ay perdu ma tourterelle</i>	91
The Tree Cartoon	92

In Wainwright's Footsteps	93
The Poacher Who Came to Our School	94
The Chicken of Tomorrow	96

### **The Secret Shire**

The Big Zero	99
Absences	101
The Driving Test	103
Wild Flower Refuge	105
The Secret Shire	107
Eidolon	109
New Year in Provence	110
The Wallington Quails	112
The Casket	113
The Scattering	114
End Piece	115

Acknowledgements	116
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*in memory of my dear father,  
Colin Saxton (1925–2017)*

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Inventions

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# The Chinese Wheelbarrow

## *The Coach and Horses*

At the end of a long day's bone-shaking journey you might just fall from your carriage – as if some crazy stowaway had spent the whole trip pummelling you. All around: a mess of broken veins, the old Roman roads.

No less broken are these *new* roads, thrown together like a gristle and bone broth for a dog or slave, a mess made of a meal – worse than a fall a kick; instead of a business trip a forced march on useless crazy

wheels travellers pretend *aren't* crazy. Starting a shared life on such roads makes a young couple see their trip as a perversion, bred in the bone, of their walk up the aisle. They fall out, bitterly – marooned in a mess.

Rain churns up an even worse mess: lanes turn to lakes. One man's crazy enough to race against nightfall, slogging in boots down perilous roads to the next inn, drenched to the bone. Sickness feeds off a desperate trip.

Cart and wagon find any trip arduous in the dark-age mess

barbarians brought, the backbone  
of the land in countless crazy  
pieces, paving stripped off old roads  
for self-defence as ramparts fall.

Sooner than feed prices will fall  
for horse and ox, angels on your trip  
will wing you high above the roads  
*gratis*, tidying the mortal mess!  
Light-freighted beasts need a crazy  
lot of hay, on roads dry as bone.

The fall of empire leaves a mess  
of crazy centuries that trip  
on a wishbone: throwaway roads.  
Who in Europe knows that faraway  
China manages roads better? Tracks,  
narrow and paved, unscroll beside  
rice fields, lakes – vast network  
of peaceful, unambitious life,  
winding like sheep's bowels. The wheel-

barrow, with one big central wheel,  
more useful than a cart in every way,  
even on cliff paths where a goat's life  
looks precarious, on most tracks  
makes little of the pusher's work:  
the wheel takes the weight, each side

laden with goods, or on one side  
a single traveller, the wheel  
tilted to compensate – skilled work,  
not arduous. Along the way,  
larks fill the ear as if these tracks  
were the precincts of the good life.

Laying them makes a peasant's life  
pious and fruitful. On the side  
of heaven are those whose tracks  
move taxable wealth on a wheel-  
barrow, letting no double pathway  
rob two flanking fields of work.

A village breathes out sounds of work,  
shuffles and shouts of family life,  
chickens running every which way.  
Late morning brings around the side  
of a house two feet and a wheel,  
bearing a Venetian tired of tracks,

though appraising the web of tracks  
he's travelled as a masterwork,  
the perfect match for this strange wheel-  
barrow, everywhere ferrying life.  
Some recruit the wind to their side.  
A fleet of twelve a mile away

one day he spies, and tracks the life  
of sideways sails putting wind to work,  
heaven's way of helping a wheel.

## Wandering Aengus

In the unpolluted Ireland of white moths,  
those uncommercial samples of the stars,  
a weary rag-and-bone man trotting home  
with all those wretched tossed-out rags and pans  
hears ribald tales drifting from shadowy bars.

He's heard them all before: the one about  
the monk whose mistress was another monk  
whose cowl and vow of silence kept them safe;  
the one about the skeleton stalking souls  
kicked out of pubs, penniless or blind drunk;

the one about a love-struck Englishman  
in Limerick who spent a fool's fortune  
on a clockwork egg that couldn't tell the time  
for the Taoiseach's wife, for what? – worm-eaten  
apples, the bollocks of a slapped-out moon.

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## Shakespeare & Co.

A new quirk in bookshops  
is students swiping pages  
until the penny drops:

they're in the dark ages,  
with bookish fools or fops  
wheezily turning pages.

Though in the modish camp,  
you too may drag a book-  
asaurus from the swamp,

not quite extinct. 'Geeks, look!  
With that weird scholar's lamp  
he's wormholing a book!'

On shores of card and glue  
you part seas of paper  
to lead your cravings through.

Truth vanishes like vapour,  
all the sense you construe  
lost on scraps of paper.

## Parkour

Athletes of the *favelas* are meddlesome  
children unleashed from the imperturbable womb.  
Mean city streets are their gymnasium.

Elysian playground initiates defy the laws  
of gravity, eagle-hearted players  
gorging on the world by ripping back its layers –

dormers, plinths, aerials laying down the same  
challenge as stinking sewers, the victory dream  
proven true: these heroes are what they seem,

vaulting the senate house zoo of bullies and liars  
on a penthouse trapeze in stolen running shoes,  
without fear or parachute, nothing to lose,

tossing losers a lesson even they'll understand.  
Everyone can jump. (Not everyone can land.)



## Taking to the Air

*O, for a horse with wings!*

*Cymbeline III ii*

Though we swim in the sea  
without flippers or fins,  
when we reach for the sky we're undone.

We stay stuck, like a tree,  
to the earth for our sins,  
no more suited for flight than a stone.

You can flap like a bird  
while you bounce on your springs,  
like a fool. This will only exhaust you.

You can follow the herd  
on an aeroplane's wings,  
but that's cheating – besides, it will cost you.

Manoeuvring a kite  
as it floats on the wind  
might bring you a sense of well-being.

But for bodily flight  
of the Superman kind  
there's a method that's much more like skiing.

Forget all ideas  
of soaring up high:  
go with gravity's downward subjection.

Fall and face your worst fears –  
you're unlikely to die  
with a parachute's simple protection.

Falling feels more like flying  
when you gracefully pause,  
like a bluebird a mile above Dover.

You'll believe you're defying  
known physical laws,  
though you'll land with a bump when it's over.

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## The Sacrifice

Most packers are would-be jumpers,  
so longing for a drop they sneak  
the back way into the club house  
like spies, mingling with the members.  
You might see one in a small group,  
chatting, winning over strangers  
with an off-colour anecdote.

Catching his eye, you hold his gaze,  
plumbing the dark well of his need.  
You know already he'll agree  
to the time-honoured covenant:  
long hours of packing parachutes  
for no reward but the slim chance  
of a drop if someone cancels.

You watch him from the high walkway.  
He weaves his hands in the entrails  
to ensure the shroud lines play out  
before the canopy, falling  
separate, true and safe as rain  
from its cloud, the shaman drawing  
water from his own raging thirst.