

Nocturne in Chrome & Sunset Yellow

Selected as one of the country's Next Generation poets, shortlisted for the 2004 Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year and named by the *TLS* as one of the best young writers in the country, Tobias Hill is one of the leading British writers of his generation. His award-winning collections of poetry are *Year of the Dog*, *Midnight in the City of Clocks*, and *Zoo*. His fiction has been published to acclaim in many countries. A.S. Byatt has observed that "There is no other voice today quite like this."

Also by Tobias Hill

POETRY

Year of the Dog (National Poetry Foundation, 1995)

Midnight in the City of Clocks (OUP, 1996; Carcanet, 2004)

Zoo (OUP, 1998)

SHORT STORIES

Skin (Faber, 1997)

NOVELS

Underground (Faber, 1999)

The Love of Stones (Faber, 2001)

The Cryptographer (Faber, 2003)

Nocturne in Chrome & Sunset Yellow

TOBIAS HILL



CAMBRIDGE

PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING
PO Box 937, Great Wilbraham, Cambridge PDO CB1 5JX United Kingdom

All rights reserved

© Tobias Hill, 2006

The right of Tobias Hill to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Salt Publishing.

First published 2006

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Lightning Source

Typeset in Swift 9.5 / 13

This book is sold subject to the conditions that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

ISBN-13 978 1 84771 262 5 paperback
ISBN-10 1 84771 262 1 paperback

SP

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

to HD

Contents

From the Diaries of Henry Morgan, Summer 1653	3
Repossession	5
To a Boy on the Underground	9
A Year in London	10
JANUARY	10
FEBRUARY	12
MARCH	14
APRIL	16
MAY	18
JUNE	21
JULY	24
AUGUST	26
SEPTEMBER	27
OCTOBER	29
NOVEMBER	30
DECEMBER	32
TV Dinner	33
Synthesis	34
Gravity	36
The Gifts	37
The Nightworkers	38
The Orator	40
Amphibians	43
The Lighthouse Keeper's Cat	44
Five Ways of Looking at my Grandfather	46
The Woman Who Likes Standing Under Trees in the Rain	52
Nine in the Morning in the Station Bar	54

Yellow	56
A Bowl of Green Fruit	57
The Wave	58
Horse Chestnuts	60
Summer Late Night Opening	62
Nocturne	65

Acknowledgments

Thanks are due to the editors of the following publications where some of these poems first appeared. 'The Orator' and 'Five Ways of Looking at my Grandfather (I)' were published online by *The Guardian*. 'The Gifts' was published in *London Magazine*. 'Repossession', 'Horse Chestnuts' and the sequence 'A Year in London' were published in *PN Review*. 'The Nightworkers' was published in *Poetry Review*. 'From the Diaries of Henry Morgan, Summer 1653' was published in *The Rialto*. 'Gravity' was published in the *Times Literary Supplement*.

'A Bowl of Green Fruit' was commissioned for the first wedding anniversary of Guini and Phil Webster. 'The Lighthouse Keeper's Cat' was commissioned by the Royal Mail to accompany their New Millennium stamps entitled *Life on Earth*. Both stamps and poem were issued in April 2000.

'Yellow' was anthologised in *Last Words*, edited by Don Paterson and Jo Shapcott (Picador, 1999).

To paint the sea really well, you need to look at it every hour of every day in the same place so that you can understand its ways in that particular spot.

CLAUDE MONET.

Cities give us collision.

R.W. EMERSON.

From the Diaries of Henry Morgan, Summer 1653

And so on May Day's eve I came to London,
with John Twentyman still riding beside me,
still chastising London even as we entered her,
her great steeples rising northwards and everywhere
bells, like those of towns in certain stories,
arisen from the sea on just such nights as these.

A dour and good man John Twentyman seemed,
and prudish in all he said, remarking
that the country life is much to be preferred,
there being Works of God there, and herein
nothing that has not been touched
into its present form by the hands of men;
but I have heard poor word of him since then,
and think the less of him for his hypocrisies.

As to myself, I have since had
much joy of London. My nights have been
as nights spent in the company of lovers.
I have played merry and yet have made
much good of myself. I am eighteen,
and have chattels and lace enough
by which a stranger might judge me a fine man.
I have a brace of snaphaunce from Tourner's,
and a sword all out of Damascene.

I do not think I will go home again.
God willing, I will make my home
hie to me as it were a good mare
coming up to the Bishop's Gate
and shaking her white head
at all the bells and carillons of London.

Repossession

The first we heard of it was the silence.
There was a morning with seagulls in it.
The air was grey, and held the smell of salt,
and when the rain began at last, at noon,

a black van pulled in by the off-license,
so silently you had to look, and out
got the bailiffs . . . unassuming men, not
well-built as you might expect, or even

wide in the shoulders. They went to the house
with the flying buttresses where the road
gives out at the end onto railway land,
and took the door right off its hinges, one

talking down to the other in a voice
so gentle it might never have been used
to speak of violence. Which is what they did,
the smaller of them each time carrying

the chattels out, while the tall one appraised
the estimated value of the bed,
the clothes-wringer, the clothes, even some seeds
the people there had meant to plant that Spring.

They frogmarched metal shutters from the van
and bolted down the door and the windows.
Then they were done, and the van was pulling
away into the rain, which smelled of tides,

the rime blown thirty miles from Southend,
and the couple who lived in that last house
came home, the woman first, trying her hand
at kicking down doors, the man returning

later, one or the other coming round
for the loan of a crowbar. Her hands bled
before they left. We saw them again once,
by chance, the two of them sat next to us

in traffic East of Clapton. None of us
had the time to wave, and neither of them
really seemed to see us there, their faces
turning just then to look at something else.

An accident, perhaps. This isn't what
I meant to talk to you about.
The thing is this.

After the repossession men had gone
the place went up for auction, but no one
offered a price. The bank was stuck with it.
And years went by, in which the house became

homeless. The garden sank down in a tide
of lost property. Shopping trolleys stacked
with shopping bags and shopping magazines
and bottles full of groundwater and mould

suspended like marvels of medicine
and earth accumulated by the rain.
The bushes garlanded with two-for-one
takeaway menus, tin cans, foam cups, string,

the straight-backed chair where foxes sat enthroned,
the mattress where an old man slept all Spring,
the kitchen sink full of the earthenware
of mushrooms and cracked blocks of Thermalite
dumped there, as if someone once meant to build
on those foundations of abandonment.

All this was years ago. And now you're here,
the two of you scything the bittersweet,
hopeful and very young, pulling up weeds,
weeding discarded shirts and shoes and skirts,

cutting the brambles off above the roots
so that you'll see them back before too long,
but here you are all the same, both of you
young enough not to give up for the want

of trying. And you've come at the right time,
in Spring. Already the garden you've cleared
is taking in the air, the taste of salt
the wind brings thirty miles from the sea.

Soon crocuses will break up to the light,
yellow as eggs cracked clean into a glass,
and flowers that you never knew were there
or never knew were real will appear

out of the yard the bank once tried to own,
and finding themselves nothing else to wear,
will put on buds that open to the air
like mouths containing promises, like hands

containing gifts, like small fists opening
in gestures that say *Here*, and which say *Here*.

To a Boy on the Underground

The laptop cauls your face with light,
unflattering and glutinous.
The iPod plugs your ears with ambient noise.
If you would only disconnect

you'd see the Underground's dark tract
unearthed. The tube train coiling out
into sharp shadows, sunlight cutting in
between ramrod Victorian blocks,

and the sous-chef or waiter who basks
in the sun in a restaurant backyard,
and the underwriters, auditors or clerks
who lean out of high windows like the girls

in folklore, one dangling a cigarette,
one seeming to be savouring the smells
of pizza ovens, Peking duck and piss,
the air half-edible and wholly foul,

and here and there green hanging gardens,
sunken gardens, roof gardens,
yards like cesspits, and everywhere carnivals
of people, the crowds embracing their collision.

Only disconnect, and all this will be yours, my son.

A Year in London

JANUARY

(A Free Advertisement for Kabul John's Café, Kilburn Market)

You're late, you're late, you're late the blackbird says,
and true enough the starlings are settling,
jostling and scuffling the snow from the trees,
imitating console games and children's cries
and mobile phones and traffic lights and what might be
the trajectory of an unidentified flying object,

and night is closing in so fast,
the day so ahead of itself
that those in search of some last purchase
go lolloping through the snow,
clopping and crumping through the fresh white fall
into the fish-grey slush between the market pitches,

and the stalls are all packing up for the night,
the man at Max Classic Trade Price Shoes
and the woman at Wanshika's Quality Underwear
who might be Wanshika in the flesh
putting away their luxury goods,
leaving nothing behind that isn't
firmly nailed to the pavement.

The lights under the covered walks
are switched off one by one, until
only Kabul John's Café is lit,
its neon spanning out into the street,