

Anxiety Before Entering a Room

Selected poems 1977–99

I was born, in 1956, and brought up in the Midlands, in an atmosphere of technological optimism and class levelling which the South succeeded in reversing thereafter. I worked as a labourer (in England and Germany) after leaving school, subsequently as a project planner with a telecomms manufacturer (1978–87), and as a programmer for the Stock Exchange (1988–91). I spent much of the nineties with no money at all, simply talking a lot. I now work for a law firm in the City of London. A shift from (academic) linguist to computer engineer exposed a deep attachment to complex virtual arrays. I think that the social order is rigid at the hundredth-second scale and fluid or improvised on larger scales.

I am working on a projected 4-volume study of modern British poetry, of which *Centre and Periphery* is now out, and *The poetry scene in the nineties* will be. *Change and Conservatism*, a chronology of style and social change, and *The order in which sounds arrive*, on poetry and sociology, are in preparation.

I have been publishing poetry since 1978, including *In a German Hotel*, *Cut Memories and False Commands*, *Sound Surface*, *Alien Skies*, *Switching and Main Exchange*, *Pauper Estate*, *Skeleton Looking at Chinese Pictures*.

Some of these poems have been published in *Ochre*, *Straight Lines*, *Equofinality*, *Grosseteste Review*, *West Africa Review*, *Archeus*, *Memes*, *First Offense*, *fragmente*, *Grille*, *Oasis*, *Salt*, *10th Muse*, and *shearsman*. Others were published in books by *Reality Studios*, *shearsman*, and *Spectacular Diseases*, in a pamphlet by *Poetical Histories*, as well as in the *CCCP Programme*. My thanks to all the editors.

Anxiety Before Entering a Room

SELECTED POEMS 1977–99

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from *In a German Hotel* (1977–78)

1. ABSENCE

I live in the room of white walls
I only come here at night
Which no one sees but me

And Ali has a day off and on his day off
He walks in the village square in his new suit
Walks and then goes back inside

I wear the sweater on my day off
And I could never wear it any other day
And I could never wear it without crying

2. POEM TWO

Day shift in the windowless room. Fall behind a few minutes every hour. A landscape of shouts. And you can't cover up. An expression of fear on you; inside, a freezing river.

It's contact with the world that hurts me. I think in pidgin. The landscape of shouts. My stomach hurts with worry.

We see food and we see its wreckage. Watch the waitresses eat off the plates the guests leave, the pretty waitresses. I can't think in English any more. our eyes are buried deep in the soil. The waste product of perception. We are the bowels of many rich men. I see a week of hours and a week of weeks. Two hundred meals an hour. It's the instants I can't stand. Ten per cent too fast turns all thoughts to pains. memory hurts too. We are the victims of desire. Do straw dogs ache for a straw death?

4. PISSING BLOOD

My brother left because he was pissing blood

54 hours, 24 off. Your expression doesn't change
Not in 24 - it's just the same. The boredom of pain.
The room's one drop of reeking sweat
But by God it's clean, 'cause we eat in here.

Food fragments in your hair and inside your clothes
You're breathing them in
Disgust is your thoughts and privacy and self
You're dead if you see it. Don't think.

Two months I worked so fast I couldn't live
And at Easter 4 times the work came through
Curse Christ, curse Christendom.

The Turks are lonely in foreign air
In crowds that hate them.
They are slaves chained by their own hands
In the desperation of a great race
Washing plates of pork
And burning their souls in infidel wine.

The Englishman has lost his language and lost his soul
Before he wakes, he dreams of suicide
In this foreign land, in this sweat room
He looks so sad, staring from his window
Seeping blood inside, in pidgin thoughts.

And the boss drinks in the bar with the guests
With a fake peasant accent and fake clothes
And calls it work
And he's coining our blood
In a Piss Factory.

6.

Night shift in the windowless room
There's a gap in the cocktails
Schuggi gestures me outside
We walk past the slaughterhouse and the empty bottles
And by the garage he stops and points at the stars

And he says "*Turkei – limon, limon, versteh?*"
And points at the hotel
"*Chef – kapitalist*"
So I grin and nod and wave my arms around

The stars are a field of lemon trees
The moon's breasts shine on both our homes
Across religion, across Europe
Across 30 years of age, across education
Across colour, across class
Across language, across culture
Across hate and the metal split in the soul
Across the weir of ice and the plain of screams
Flowed the wellspring
Of the river running into Paradise.
We start work again, together.

So a week later he starts pissing blood
That capitalist didn't hire anyone else
Two of us doing the work of three
Ali could stand it but I couldn't. Ali looked after me.
The axe bit on the heartwood, stripped me to the bone.

SHAPE, SCORED IN EARTH

Black wings thrash around the head.
The helm descends, skull of a burnt-out falcon.
An event in the field of the nerves
Disturbs the earth's flux. The alignments stir.
Impulses flicker in the middle sky, outlines form and move.
The myth invests the raised head, exposed to the winds.

I stand upright, tempting the vertical crush forces.
I sway on unsteady legs.
My blood flows through the air,
Enthralled sight moves through broken spirals.
The blue knight moves eyeless across a sacred landscape,
Welded inside his fate and nailed to his route.
The sky hangs on my shoulders like a carved roof.

I remember nothing.
Sight was dim with rage, as blood beat, or
The country was brushed with pale smeared wisps.
The script of mare's tail curls high above is fragile as a breath,
Yet so clear.
The lake-surface forming sight is stilled among the breezes
For a glimpse
For the fixing of illusory axes into idea
And dispersed . . .

High above the middle realm, the machine of passion,
Intellect perpendes susurrating numbers, pale fictions
Free of sense.
In a flash I build cities out of earth,
Walls and grids extrapolating,
Subtending spaces and symbols.
I saw the branch of a tree become a human arm.
I saw a rushy, dripping head rear from the stream and open green
 lids.
The earth knows nothing.

Shape recedes like blood from distended veins,
As if twilight disimaged the clammy waters.

The wings lift away. My gaze is cold now.
Desire is a flame raging in one clod of earth,
And a haze of illusion dripping from another.
Nor Memory nor the forest pool
Hold the face I imagined.
Meaning has no part in Nature.

from *Threads of Iron* (1980–81)

DEAD WIND

Storm winds scour the streets of the winter town.
Rags stir in an alley,
Eddies of grit blow in my eyes.
A scree of dust blows up the neck of the streets
Like shale down an empty stream bed.
Rubbish is thrown up on waste lots,
Bright colours of dead manufactures.
Odours wash from dumps and incinerators:
The pyres of carcasses which part flesh and bone.

Poor youths shelter between close walls,
Like sheep in a hollow on the moor.
They live out on the street and beg; high above
I stare out into the wind zone,
Flesh numbed in the fragrance of the idiot wind,
In the immunity. I listen to music.
My destiny written on torn scraps of paper
Goes round and round in the street, numb terrain.
A wind blows from the dead heart of things.
A vain liquid pulses in the canals of my ear,
Dead wind.

The streets are full of lies and fears and powers.
Intimate poses smile from posters, the frozen
Flesh blown up covers the side of buildings,
The drilling of images wearies the eye.
No-one looks at each other: broken gazes broken words.
Our assent creates huge chaussees,
Scoured by inhuman forces.
The cars crawl by like a reel of film in coma,
Grit roar and fumes waft up on a metal wind.
Commerce corrupts dead sense. The air is soaked in words . . .
Shapes in my mind buckle and taint, realigned
By null forces.
A sick wind creases the sky

A sick wind jars the words in my mouth.

Numbers, numbers

The tangent to the curve of change veers over,
The body of oppression bursts, its parts shift shape.
The axis starts to spin
The pure light falls on the pure lens
Material factors reverse their moments
The axis drives
The cup of bitterness is broken, the winged seeds

Plunge into the bridal earth. All movements
Find their end. How many more years?

Stone is winnowed on the threshing-floor of winds.
Vague cries from the death of matter.
The supple riddle sifts a grain of stone.
Tall buildings are ruined incessantly;
The edifice of thought shivers instantly.
Time swathes cities like a man walking through reeds.
A celestial jaw polishes the brick-husks into dust.
Verticality is laid low,
The hedges of struts cannot resist. The term
Of their arcs is ruin. Ruins of Time
Are the fauna of memory: living stones.
Stone reared up is the properties of the City,
Stone crumbled is the flesh of the black earth.
The living eye has read the scriptures to the end.

Your voice is torn away.
I see mouths rent open without a sound
I cannot catch the words.
A rat riddles the walls and substructures
A jackal slinks
Along the lines of towering graves.
Through broken windows and into deserted rooms
An oracle wind gasps out, in the dry skull of the City,
“How many more years?”
A dead wind drains the warmth from my head.
A sick wind drains the words in my mouth.

ON FIRST PUBLICATION

Three years' work and it's worth nothing.
Less than that nothing worth
The dole of £13 each Tuesday from other hands.
You pay for the printing, you work on the setting.
You put it out and no-one buys it.
Amateur! The pros tell how it feels to be rich
In paperbacks as bright as sweet packets.

Who'd have thought I cared so much for money?
My years fold in pleat on pleat of yellow treason.

I'm exhausted by warring shadows.
More calm? more force? unclear, I start to shake.

I draw benefit, one of the leisured class.
I don't have to work. There is none.
I think all the time. I try to remember
The Welsh poetic vocabulary.

A principle of silence has ordered our habits.
How long? how long?

I'm almost blind with total light, with
Dew, half drunk by the sun, half weighed down by night.
I love my art; cruel sister, remote princess.

A strong man needs strong enemies:
Poverty, madness, disdain, compromise, silence.

Years of thought. At last I crawl across the floor
To put my hand in the boss's pockets.

BLACK PANE AND DECOR

I go down the North Circular
Between the factory and the rented room
What's in my head is this around me,
It remembers me as I am.
The sound of cars overlays the sound of quarrels
And the sound of control data, above
The sound of wishes in my head.
The wishes fall and blow away, the voices
Slur and recede, there is no hearing them.

I reach my home & I make myself into a picture and assault the picture and rip its surfaces and open up the signs it carries and melt down the surface in a slew, a melt, a tide; and the picture empties; and I polish it down to black glass; and I'm lying on the ground as the black pane. I sprinkle it with stars for my diversion. The rain glints on my face. I'm staring at my drained face. I'm looking at a window and the window is my self and I make pictures in the window. The pictures I run when the rain falls and no-one comes to call. In a town far away a black haired woman walks towards me.

I wipe the image and make a garden in Khorasan, Where a minstrel in starred robe sings to a rustic court. Your last breath came from a wing: The bird outreaches your palace. The ways of sweet water and the apricot groves drop back, And the salt sea spume flecks its talon. The bird breasts the columns of air, Until he reaches the very high valley, the fell.

In the snow a smithy stands, where a dark man Makes birds of bronze in burning skies, nearby An apple tree is darkened with red dust. Under the tree is a girl. In her eye is your image. The image fades The pictures are defined by my absence; here is the line of division, an iron band; a containing spar. I can't see myself. I can't reach across. You couldn't see me.

The black pane is the self. I create a self in words it falls apart. I make a self in thoughts it falls apart. I create a love in thoughts it falls apart. The blackness concentrates in the eye, its images

washed away by a blank precision. You'd say, the wall of that White Block where I spend my days, or the visual surface of the columnar reports, of money and time. The blackness is finely textured; deep and even. Losing you solved a lot of problems, emptied me out. I've got spare time now. The black pane is your eye where I am nothing. I wipe the image down. To the *Urheimat* where the bards Gwion and

Wheat-of-Song

Wearing the shawls stitched with moon and stars,
The robes with jingles in the hem, debate
Over the brazier of smoking barsom leaves.
Gwion says, I know the language of gods, of men, and of animals.
I am looking for my last composition.
In high places
The eye of blue ice and of the eagle
Meet without lesion, pure in the sight of Khors.
I am drawn to the mountains in the region of blue light
Where breath draws deep and strenuous and round.

Where jaws of iron bite the Captive who foresees and bleeds and loves.

I will rise through the bands
Of archaic dialects and wild forests,
The ranges of pristine rulebound metre; passing
Beyond, into the ultimate North where the crying sun
Is quenched in the seas of pure ice
And its drops harden into gold, as here
Into green; where light metallizes, dropping on the strand
As dew from the rollers of dawn
Or meteors from the iron leaf of heaven.
Breath is the pulse of knowledge,
Running in inner and outer things;
Scaling, the courses of the body race like scouring streams,
A column reared and penning back the fall; and
in our onrush
The parts of the world reach their greatest force.
As dimness falls away. I have no mind to come back.
As my life spills, blood ingots red on the high firn;
My last song will roll
Like the stars running nine times in their circuits

Great winds will boil from my lungs,
And stir the dust on the plain where men stoop to dig.
The eye which foresaw is replete. The darkness closes in on the
pane with a steady, edgeless flicker. Quenching the points of light.
Wiping each part of the cherished image. Serial logic in cadence
towards zero. An ordered and causal decay. The world falls out of
the picture frame, due to the carnal nature of the eye.

memory is discarded
Like something bad to eat
The eye is part of the grey listless flesh that slips beneath the
tooth.
The food devours the tooth
Soaked up by the swelling
tissue of the inanimate, the Soulless Breadth
the dumb interior which has no skin, no eye
the unwriter of language and of my caressed forms
the wordless which words fail to know
Speech takes this up and is a lie
Fantasy takes this up and loses velocity
to be shed as dust on the floor. Dust glimmers in light.
The black pane is an edgeless shimmering plane. The black pane
spreads to the grey rim.

Your formal rigour slackened my shape, force bleeding out of it
to perfect your ideal, who cannot fill your arms. You want it all and
I am found wanting. Your need is my compulsion. You reach out
and we separate. You wrecked me. The things you want would fill a
house. I can't even recall your face because I see too much when I
think of it. Two shapes collide in the same space. I'm the lost
outline of your fantasy, I fell short. Your ideal laughs. Fends off the
squalor and the anxieties. Has money and power, makes a hearty
noise. Firm outlines, inexistent. You fend me off. In the comfort
your feelings are clear. I am existent. Your wishes tore me in parts.
I don't have feelings because I don't have power. My love drained,
puffed with air and called confectionery. the room I wanted to live
in has vanished, I am a ghost. I prattle to amuse you with a ghost
walk. You brought me to life. In your eye I'm a pattern. Two shapes
collide in the same space. You take an ideal for me and the living
soul is trapped in the wood of the puppet. You walk around with a

painted figment, a rig of wood. You turned me into a wraith, an airy man. My self is traced in air, inane limbs draped in spangles and tatters, a breeze spelt with the words which are my estate.

Someone wants to be rewarded for the years of unhappiness but is always punished for them. *Nehmt's mit vor Gottes Thron*. The absence he lived with half-turns into a woman and half remains absence: blindness; wrapped in a misty chill. The perfection he imagined uncoils as coldness in the face of the actual: this zero heat is that absence whose metric we have just tapped out. The sweet waters stopped in the courses, the eye ceasing to register images. Unowned, he finds himself with absolute title to a desert. I'm not the man you want me to be. The forms die. I defy the denial of forms and the poems I write are spread around the world as Pali texts written on palm leaves, as land grants on brass in calligraphic Grantha; in white ink on cloth stiffened with a black paste of charcoal and tamarind seeds; hammered into gold, silver, copper; written on papyrus and parchment, on paper made from mulberry leaves; stamped into the republican paper of wasps' nests; on the hard parts of animals and the yielding, markable, organs of the earth itself. In red incisions bit into lamellae of meteoric iron. Fire and clay, stamped into bricks and built into a tunnel beneath the Thames. Incised in Oscan script on a meteorite deep beneath the Capitol. Chiselled in Babylonian and Old Persian into the cliff face at Behistun. In Uighur characters on a Mongol beresta, of birch bark, in a grave in Central Russia. As spells shouted for frightening off ghosts, cut on the back of a shaman's bronze mirror in the Irtysh region. By smears, by scratches, by casting. Recorded on aloe bark in the Himalayas; in India and Sumatra, on palm leaves. In China, as the grave ceremonies of the Former Kings on split and sized bamboo canes; as Daoist poems written on scrolled silk; what the marshals of the sacrifice directed struck, in Shang lettering with its stiff marching gait, on the bronze vessels in which the blood is caught. In huge ideograms made of straw and wet clay, tracing words across a marshy plain; stored with the Linen Annals in the Temple of Jupiter; as runes on the blade of swords sunk in rivers and lakes. Carved into orthogonic Roman stone in Edict Style, canonically straight registers traced by cords and ruddled with red ochre. When I speak, it's like silence. Blown into Intel

586s. Ciphred in the video RAM at B800:0000, mapping a VDU display: number 5, the bit plane specifying blackness.

The queasy aesthete scans the pattern and is disgusted by the self; the eye of pleasure slides expertly across the surfaces and shrugs aside in weariness; the portions cut from the foodstuffs in dressing are lying out in the rain, the organs stitched in complex array; discarded; tongue and eye are slack. The maze of my inner organs lies out there in the yard where the rust blooms and floresces, turning the dead back to the organic, and the functional into the ornamental; a web of pipes and switches of unknown purpose. In the tunnel beneath the railway a jelly grows purple, bold, on the water seeping from the cracked pipe that veins the concrete with a clear blood; among the Greek Nationalist graffiti and the screams against the power order and the Milesian tales of sex. The gap between me and the landscape was disgust and is the gap between my eye and my self. There's no gap any more, I am what I see. I am lonely and not beautiful enough. The lines I draw enclose no space. I'm lying dead in the yard but my suffering is too banal. This fruit of love was too bitter on the tooth that never tore it.

The black pane, the shimmering surface of anxiety. its even pulse, so many times a minute, across the enveloping plane. the imaginary body slurs and mutates. I cannot hold its limbs in order. Whatever I imagine is unreal. Poverty, chastity, obedience, and a hall of dead forms. You imagine me as unreal. I see a grey array. Events unroll in time made out of dead flesh. The body made out of dead time lolls in slackness. My eye is empty.

I wipe this picture, cutting the points out of my eye, and imagine a city where the deep wells are being redug. The walls are hooped with ceramics; men are let down into the pit on ropes. The glassy water, unshimmering on its deep ground,

Revealed the head of a screaming giant. Four miles deep, his cry made the hoops start,

Quavered the walls of the skull, dropped birds in flight,