

Collected Poems

JOHN JAMES was born in 1939 in Cardiff and educated by the De La Salle Brothers at Saint Illtyd's College there. He left in 1957 to read Philosophy and English Literature at the University of Bristol and later undertook postgraduate studies in American Literature at the University of Keele. He was a founder of *The Resuscitator* in Bristol in 1963 and Arts Council Creative Writing Fellow, University of Sussex, 1978-79. He is Head of Communication Studies at Anglia Polytechnic University, Cambridge.

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JOHN JAMES



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To Patricia Coyle

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Author's Note

This book includes the contents of seventeen separate publications which appeared between 1967 and 1996, together with two fugitive poems from that period, 'A Former Boiling' and 'Inaugural Address', which came to be printed for the first time in the magazine *One* (1980) and the anthology *A Various Art* (1987) respectively. With the exception of these latter pieces which are placed in their order of composition, the works are assembled in chronological order of publication. Where poems were subsumed into larger volumes they have been separated out, omitted from the later collection and returned to their status as separate publications. The collaborative work, *In One Side and Out the Other* (1970), is only partially represented through the inclusion of the poem 'Israel' written with Andrew Crozier. A few errors in transcription or in printing have been corrected and some further amendments have been made in the interests of consistency of presentation.

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Mmm . . . Ah Yes (1967)

Shades in a Conversation

1. *"I thought I saw N.T. Clear the other night."*

familiar face
wavering through
thickening vapour

tongue buried in
mouth's hole

2. *"Wasn't he up the same time as you?"*

face luminous
in empty corridors
the book

slipped from
his fingers,
pages flutter

sound & resound of footsteps
in the high vaulting

Cool Evening

Fugue

tranquillo

key

after key

touched

hesitation

on the old upright

while

out the window

two elderly ladies

in straw hats

fitted jackets &

cape dresses

slack over

thin calves

step by

the summer hedgerow

stippled with white

cow parsley

Plane Tree

lamplight ascending through
masses of hand-shaped leaves

yellow
now some
now other pale
undersides
as they turn
in the current of air

in which the tree's spread wavers
like a reflection
on disturbed water.

On the Way Home

water from the afternoon rain
ripples down the
laneside & air
breathes through
the valley
detailed in
sunlight

a passing wheel has
pressed a rat to
the tarmac

rooks
 scatter over
the tip

no one about
the sewage farm as
usual the
long-armed sprinklers
rotate over the
filter tanks &

from the stile the
right of way
straggles upward over
the pasture all
burst with molehills

Chi è Questa Che Vien ...

after Cavalcanti

Christ
when she opens
the door
every man
turns to look at
her, the light
definitely
trembles &
no more than
a wordless
breath
hints at
her each
rare virtue yet
no other woman
has such modesty
& I think so
highly of her
I daren't
picture the
outcome

6:00 p.m.

Oh, CALYPSO
CAFÉ ESPRESSO
Charlotte Street, Clifton
last of the old 50s bars
in this quarter

with your decor of plaster masks
as detached as
the faces of your clientele who
stare at them
& the red roughcast walls
sectioned by bamboo uprights

or through the window at
the evening streets,
the pale stone octagonal
of University Tower
discretely presiding over
the nearer facades of
ladies' dress shops.

O, Καλνψω
we're all waiting quietly here
in that interim
before night
really begins.

While Listening to 'Ah-leu-cha'

the edge of paulton might be
any other little place tonight,
& any hedgerow might be smudging
the demarcation
of any thistle-ruin'd field & sky
trailing misty clouds & smoke
from a couchfire, the
gawky elms &
cottages depressed
left side the rise,
nearer, the new
unmetalled road
gravel blocks clay
smothering topsoil.
But the light which has been glowing on a pole
in the sunken lane
sharpens to a star against
black foliage now the dusk
& horns of 'Ah-leu-cha'
impel it to the focus of the mind –
backwards the sound
trails indeed
as he walks away
seemingly playing forever,
the sound of a dead man, but
as startling a light as that
which makes us look up
years after its emission
from hydrogen long spent

Hengrove

Drowsing. The warm air
hums through grills,
monotonous
accompaniment
to a film
without
music or
dialogue,
shown on a
cinemascope
window – the
pale green
playing-field to
middle distance,
the slowly curving
perimeter
a line the
jumbled backs
stop at. Poor
definition
of the little
brick & tiled
houses with
tiny black
windows,
children's
drawings with
square stacks
perforating the
slow grey skies –
a few weak
elms, branches
suffusing
the lower skies
with delicate
red of

pointilliste
winter
buds. For cast,
a blot of a man
in the middle
of the green, painting
invisible marks
on the grass; & the
regular extras –
a couple of hundred gulls
two pitch lengths
away, like dashes
of slush
till one throws
open its wings
in a gesture
that might well be
taken for
despair

An Open Letter to Jim Workman, Landlord, at the
Rose & Crown, Withy Mills, North Somerset

your lame foot & stick
suggest pain
carry your
trunk, head, arms
hands, the drink in
your hand, a glass
mug, pint, bringing
it to us

& if I brought you a poem
what would you do with it?
what would your hawk's nose,
your dry sniff, pulled down
corners of mouth,
mockery of Old Winsley,
scrounging his way, the way
you made him an iced birthday cake
of wood, set light to his hat

you might burn
my poem & yet

the way you know the way
foxes kill young cuckoos
in long grass, you
bait the sparrows to
a roll of wire to
shoot them all at
once sitting up late with
one candle in the henhouse to
see & shoot a
corn-stealing rat,

or your care for
your great

decorative
dahlias, the size of
a man's fist set on
shoulder-high stems,
some so purple
almost black &
bursts of red petals
curled & pointing like girls' tongues
away from the centre, the flower itself
an image you have made.

You showed me the
way to bud the
briars in June,
splicing with
raffia. Told me
dung burns the roots off
beans, to repair
the rung of a ladder with
pitchpine - "from the guys,
used to let down
the cages -
there's resin in it -
don't need no
creosote . . ."

You know the skyline without
looking at it, the rise of
the hills, the fall of
this valley,
this little Cam
taking its way through earth
since before
any of us, the fields
multiplying through
division by hedges, the
grasses green from
decomposition &

explosions of grey-green
trees in a wet May
against a grey
West Country sky,

the rain coming in over Mendip
from the Atlantic,
taken for granted, making
the grass grow taller, taking
what sustenance it can, as I,
happy with cider, yet
standing in the land
where once was sung 'that song of Lawes' –
neck craning in the driving wet &
listening hard – while
you Jim, can get it mostly
from the earth your
feet press on, your way

is a poem,
my way is a poem,

the poem has its way.

What Can You Do With a Bird Like That?

for Nick

on impulse, drinks
still in hand, the
door ajar, barn owls
croon cool &
skritch owls

the cups left on the wall in the lane,
drained, walking
the cold air
made a hole in
the membrane of the eyes –

Where's the nightingale

a north wind –
either he's gone
or he's huddled in the tree's
thickly-leaved branches,
unable to sing as before –

so the eyes involuntarily shut
after cider &
long hours of conversation.
The back-ribs chill
from the unstopped gap

Walking on the Downs Near Avon Gorge

Gaiety in a friend,
it's true to say
infectious –

Pete's ironic
polaroids &
fanged smile
shine – lively
& ingenious
intelligence
exploding
in a variety of
elbow-armed gestures,

happy buffoonery
over the grass, the
eager response of his girl –

but walking ahead
to a higher place
above the gorge I
get to where
to look out
over to grey
blocks, distant
spindles of cranes
at Avonmouth
& beyond that
the misty Severn,
Newport smoking, the
vague cloud-
like mass of the hills
of the Marches
blending with cloud,
the unseen Midlands to the East

the concrete proof of distance
reasserts itself.

A quick wind
cools the cheek.

You are
that far
away.

Flowering Shrub

Abutilon –

 the spreading
fragility
 of our love

made clear –

delicate
trails of
saffron wood

floating over

a framework of
upright canes &
slight stems

(snowflakes

wind-flicked from
parapet

interpose
eye &
figure –

green cord,
black hose
round shin
& ankle, the hem
the knees lift
to go
through snow –

The pale
green leaves
are still
in the gentle air
of the warm room,
each turns from its
petiole with
the curves of a
palm from its
wrist, spreads
into three
broad points

(kisses, nose to
chin, leaning over
the high back of my
kitchen chair
glints from
the naked bulb
dilate &
contract in
your hair
a willow cave,
sunglints,
my face
content –

The many
pink flowers,
exclamations
in that tender
discourse, not
unlike in
shape & colour
the open parts
of a woman

(lips to
lips fit
like palm
to hip,
such a
comfortable
ease of
focus, the
relaxation of
all these
parts through
one part
in each –

The whole
shrub

lives

in its
big red
flower
pot, base on
a white
dinner
plate,

the root

invisible