

I Con

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I Con

NEW AND SELECTED POEMS

TIM THORNE



CAMBRIDGE

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Emoh Ruo

My poems are cladding,
washable, weatherproof.
What is inside is not
just a home; it's a house.

A white tyre is a swan
is a metaphor. En-
jambements roll, wagon wheels.
Stanzas are garden beds.

Structure and patterning
need tough material:
vinyl and pebble-dash,
birdseye maple veneer.

Reader, wipe your feet on
my jokey welcome mat.
Come in. Get comfortable.
Mi casa su casa.

It's more than a building,
more than a collection;
it's an investment in
iconic literature.

Poems 1968–1973

Star

for Stephanie

Proem

1.

You laugh at me behind your face
and twist the last ace out of your frilly sleeve.
I lose. I leave.

2.

The prisoners exercise in cages,
insane, concentric cricket nets.
No-one rages. Everyone plots.

3.

There are many things I lack,
but I'll get my own back later on.
Just wait, baby, I'll learn
every trick in the book, fly-leaf to colophon.

Amphetamine hands will cover your eyes.
Scintillating fingernails will rip your lace,
but that will be only in your brain.
I'll come up from behind.
My mind will blow your mind,
baby.
And it won't be me but my poetry
that blows in your belly.

I shall walk for you,
walk through a continent of streets
yard by dry yard
and wet,
through a string of cities

avoiding the cracks
for your sake.
I shall make
each step in praise of you:
the slow blow,
the controlled explosion of your complexion
and your composure, the skilled destruction
of every plane and crease
in your photogenic face,
baby.

Sequence

Each separate town is slapped on the highway like
a hoarding, vulgar as a teenage laugh.
Milkbars, town hall, rec. and cenotaph,
two pubs with snooker tables, public dyke
—interior: pale green semigloss (by the shire)
and thick, white coin-scratch (by the Baptist choir).

Slogans and flags wave from each service station
like some third world republic crude with pride.
Deep in those shabby, chrome milkbars I've plied
the jukeboxes with dud coins to saturation
or in the soft air of the saloon bars
sent the reds spinning like unruly stars.

Bold in studded leather I've played it cool;
aphrodisiac hamburgers and cokes
have led to furtive, half-successful pokes
under the pine trees down behind the school.
Then always the big wheelspin, the muffler gone,
the next raw town to burn. Clear out. Move on.

Crystal Palace

Cock of so many country towns, so sure,
I, who have sent so many spherical phrases
rolling for fluke breaks over the green cloth,
rhymes dropping into sweet, symmetrical pockets,
I have felt the poem grabbing at my guts,
the pen in my hand like a cue nestling into chalk
smoothly, despite the heavy breathing. Calm,
I have planned to avoid the easy eight-ball image
and have had in my head all the relevant intricate angles.

But my bitch of a muse is in league with a hustler:
prick-teasing stocking-tops at the saloon door,
every trick of the slicker with brylcreem hair
taking the simple lair for a ride
inside the bars of the city I want to love.
(The cage is merely a pun, therefore a cage,
a trap for the simple lair on every page.)
I want to love the city. I want to screw
her rolling grey in the sun. I want to screw
her cheap in the night with her neon hair. I want
that girl on the bus, busting out of her skirt for it,
the break that never ends, the one two-bob
that keeps the jukebox going till it melts.

Why should I always be the simple lair?
Why should I always wear
my poems like a shoestring tie?
My hair
too long, my pimples pointing to the sky?
The sky, it is true,
is always Mitchell blue.
I don't know why.

(Beware
of anything they offer you.
Beware of the con-man's swy.
Take care in Sydney, yeah.
Ooh,
they're
sly.)

After the killing you can only grin,
walk out, walk home. Desire has been taken away
along with your roll. Hundreds of empty cars
move down the empty streets. You cannot fill
the city with your braggadocio.
The simple grin has its own cunning, slides
values around like sheets of paper, so:
"Put it all down to experience."
"Your father could have told you so."
A fool and his cliches soon are parted from
the truth. The truth is you are beaten, broke.
She's kicked you out with your balls in a fiery knot.
The ram slips sheepishly, lopsided, off.

(Avoid the grin
inevitably inane.
If you can't win,
then don't stick out your chin;
some bastard'll hit it again.
Pack in
the down-but-not-out, thin,
brave, callow grin.
Grab pain.)

Pain.

1.

The street lies out, inviting,
the flat of a large-bladed knife.
Slap your soles on it, test its temper.
think of the edge, dwell on it, dwell on it.

There at the tip a street-light drips.
I think of all the vulnerable parts
of the human body, throat and wrists,
baby-soft hollows between ribs and hips.

2.

In my room I find twenty-one cents in change
scattered among the cheap, essential furniture.
It's nearly ten. It's worth the risk.
The pub is just two blocks away.

Calm down. Breathe slow and flex your fist.
Before I've finished my beer a drunk's thrown out
protesting. "But it's payday. I can pay!
Look!" I don't need to look. I follow him,

sure and dark, into a lane. "Got a light?"
One punch . . . a plastic wallet—twenty quid
and a crumpled photo of him with five kids.
Calm down. I suppose his wife works, anyway.

Envoi

Baby, I've shown you what I mean by art.
I've made it at last here on the big-town scene.
Sure, I've been conned and hustled but I'd been
too big too long back home. Look, kid, I'm smart.
I've got a ring with a real garnet and I wear
real sharp suits, dark socks. I know the score.
You won't be laughing at me any more.
You wouldn't recognise the country lair.
I realise now it wasn't only you
I had to get even with. I had to strike
back hard at all of them till I came through
with words that screamed louder than any bike,
louder than anything on the hit parade,
but true, but true. Baby, I've got it made.

Hustler

If you must trick my spinning, trick it out
with the trappings of death, gaily: silver chains—
each link a bell, light in any wind
against a black caparison.

You know
there's a man in Callan Park with insane hair,
locked up because he tried to write one line
of poetry.

Shoot pool: you're halfway there.
But the face of your ex-girlfriend's lover says,
"Don't try to hustle. Look across the bay.
See the *Empress* lit up like a mine."
Everyone's a guard. They'll never let
you even toss for break.

If you must trick
me when I'm skilful, do it with a flair,
otherwise the doctors and the screws
won't even understand why I am there.

High Country

1. *Homecoming*

Button-grass flats, pale through the drizzle: my eyes
unhinged, unhingeing; patch-brown pools:
my body's own still liquids.

After the climb, hard through the spine's country,
where the leatherwood and myrtle drip
holes into the bent flesh,

after the droplets running off the tight skin
around the vein-riddled gullies
stretched on a hairpin bend,

this is the homecoming, arriving at this level—
the brain laid open in the wet,
nerve ends like sags, open.

2. *The Hut*

The plastic strips flap in the doorway still,
sad alchemical colours to ward off evil.
The poet comes home like a blue-arsed fly
too late for the real summer, too soon
for the winds that take the corner of the year
on two loud tyres—the screech of March.

I light the fire and wait for my life's details
to dry out—buckled paperbacks,
the sleeve of an early Dylan record
(young jew-angel's face, cowboy mystery,
holding his guitar's neck like a flowering tree).
A man could die waiting between these hills.

Outside in gumboots, moving rocks around,
channelling off the water, watching it take
used-up petals like brain cells with it, down
to the flats where my brackish eyes are set like traps,
I am immune here, acting without itch,
connections all leached, open, waiting.
One day, too late for insects, bleak with peace,
after a month of my turning stones by the moon,
the hills will hear the brash harmonica
and send a patly scored reply in gusts.
And in that instant as the axis tilts
someone will cross the sags, his clothes blown dry.

Sideflower

Your highway body,
my love a sideflower
indigo-petalled like a
jealous kiss.

That married bastard mauled your
ringfinger.

I wore my red scarf over the Shoalhaven
and saw how sadly straight the
road was.

Voyage of the Eye

I

A short, uneven fingernail
scratches the surface of the eye.
The motors start. The big screw
turns to flood the ignorant air.
We have known many voyages;
some well. Some we've only read of
on the wall-posters/covering roughnesses,
balancing on the breath of the people/
seemed the most real. But this one,
planned in the holy, forgotten centre
of the maze,/but this one, comrades/
prepared where the dusty red trucks pull up
for fish on the broken wharf, this one
(as you will see) is unique in its
reality. Eyelashes intermesh.
The hull's long shudder slides into
the incipient vision of velocity.

II

Where are your children, senator?
The municipal playing grounds are curved
like the planet Earth. The lava underneath
pushes two pubescent silhouettes
against the hollow silver of the sky:
your children./Death comes confidently soft
in the eggshell of evening./Where are the people?
And you had left the comfort of your maze
long before the thin chemical line
traced through the pot-bellies, leaving
artificial pus. Was it only
to arrange this trip? Or did you know

your children, knowing that the heavy shadow
of the flowering gum would provide, would provide?
And children are of the people./Read the sign,
the promulgation/We dare not disembark.

III

Another blink of the automatic eye:
the gases from the legitimate lab slide out,
greet roses in the dying afternoon.
The patients are walked, slowly, past the signs
that stake the candidates' hearts into the soil.
The Central Committee/That's enough now, nurse;
my cardigan./met this morning/Turn
that damn thing off/through the streets, they said,
the streets/That rose: no wonder they call it
Peace/the Secretary/my cardigan/
the last poster/The damn machines
have taken over. See that tube;
it's growing. Peace. Good afternoon.

IV

That was a memorable voyage, child.
The pages of the diary are turned.
The senator welcomed us where old men
still spit their dreams over the rail.
We're safe. The bloodshot television
can't be turned off, but all hale breath
belongs to the people. The people are tired.
They slowly kill the image on the screen.

Whatever Happened to Conway Twitty?

My bakelite mantle set pulled him in
through the whine and crackle of KZ and I
drummed on a dented pencil tin
to *Danny Boy* or *Mona Lisa*,
tensing my hands and jaw as his art
made seven syllables of “heart”.

Five p.m. was too early to get
anything like a good reception
and I broke the volume knob off that set
trying to bring America closer,
or if not America, then at least
Stan the Man, oracle and priest.

Masturbation and vandalism
came with darkness, but first the radio
would spurt its sweet, commercial chrim,
the god would descend through static, lift up, up,
up to the top of the *Cashbox* chart
all seven syllables of my heart.

Launceston

Planted in patches, missing the steeper slopes
and the flood-plains and occasionally
leaving a col surprisingly bare
to the cold sky, rolled around your three
rivers like a fog, you have grown
out of a photo in *National Geographic*
of a town (Pop. 683) on Kamchatka.
A hundred times bigger than Kikhchik,
you have its air of utter subservience
to the lonelier of the winds, the desolate aeroplanes.

Only, on Sunday nights, in a tight rotation
of attics, some three dozen brains
are picked by a culture's plectrums till
a sour rhythm is forced through the sweet
smoke of pot and incense. Dylan lives!
Outside, FJs are dragging up the street.

At lunchtimes you can read all the signs
more clearly. Jesus saves! Bank on the Wales!
Drive-in! Give way! You know they weren't decreed
by the men who painted them or drove the nails.
Below them sit two rows of foundry workers.
The evangelist, the manager, the cop
panic where the footpath has become
a slippery gauntlet. You could hear a sandwich drop.
But someone speeds past in a white Mercedes.
There are some gods that nobody can reach.

Don't complain because the town is always waiting,
because a twelve-string on its own can't teach.
Don't yearn so vaguely for a revolution.

Walk up the hills, running your finger along
the fences. Get to know the quaint gables.
See how sandstone and fibro both belong.
Roam suburbs like divisions of your mind.
Especially, react with quiet candour;
a town can neither rant nor lie. A guitar
changes nothing, whatever colour,
whatever blues you play, unless you play it.
And candlesmoke has filled the windows in,
so no-one outside is allowed to care.

And as for the other, follow all the in-
structions patiently, paying close attention
to the width of the bottle's neck, the type of wick,
the distance of the throw required. Choose
the time carefully. Split his blond-brick
house and brick-blond wife without emotion.
Freedom's not a very abstract notion.

Highway

The sun aches.
My diesel head has
the knowledge of smiles
that knock. Fuel/need is somewhere
like a flake/is a shining giveaway.

Methedrine and bitumen
pave the way/torn cans
flash/and all the backs that built it:
Balmain guernseys bent in the rain/I am
bruised between midday and gravel edges.

High in the cab/Christ,
the sky's so loud/what are
the DMR doing in my spine?
Exhaust/various metallic colours: my vertebrae are the broken
white line.

Somewhere Between Waxahachie and Woonsocket

1

Somewhere between Waxahachie and Woonsocket
somebody dies. Cleanly,
something slides into a
life like a liquid into the
fuel tank of a Saturn.

Of course, it's never that simple
but the actions of twenty thousand everyday
are all timed keenly
by the blade in the brain
and are calculated for the big moon-shot.

Buried under the black wax soil
of the south-eastern quarter of the USA
there is a large computerised plant
where it all works.
Think of the potential there

for imagery—pocket watch
which is really a heart; the gold
of Fort Knox; the fallout shelter
beneath the White House; steam
issuing under the Oracle's tripod;

stainless steel hell; wonders of surgery.
But think, mostly, of what above all
this wired womb goes on
and what, at times on the conscious earth,
stops going on.

2

When my uncle died I was kind of
awkward; at twelve I was awkward anyway.
But after the first dislocation,
after the mystery of seeing
a grown man lie down and grunt
and piss himself in the middle of a ball game,
after Dad and Uncle Pat had come
to attend to whatever it is
that men attend to at such times,
I took my young cousins round to the back yard
and furiously played kick-for-kick with them
against the cement wall. I joked loudly.
They laughed. Then I caught cousin Libby's eye
through the dining-room window. I tried
to show her in one look
that I knew why she was crying
but that I had a job to do.

3

Watch out for the bare wire,
for the spark in the cracked socket.
Kneeling, you are vulnerable; down
by the skirting-board, aware
of the volume of the room behind you,
of the space you occupied standing.

A second ago you knew all
the secrets of power. The future
was clean as the moon.

The present moment is liftoff.

4

Memento mori. Don't forget
to keep the hatchet blade well waxed.
The skull serves as a paperweight
or a reminder of your next
appointment with the dentist. Buff
and rinse, the clean drill gets the last
of the dull clinging film right off.
Grin at the nurse.

But you know that rust
on the hatchet would be a different story.
Coating with wax will keep it away
(bone round the brain).

Memento mori.

But in the meantime avoid decay.

5

Transmission from the promised landscape:

to the memory of Jules Verne,
to the guiding electric prophecies:
while men forgot and turned to each other
we have been lifted up, surely,
ungainly hermits of the metal creed,
to the wilderness with our holy dependence
on the artifacts of progress.

Perhaps a future primitive generation
will worship that huge disc in the sky.
Meanwhile we shall keep the radio contact tight.

The sky is black.

6

Small neon fires light up the mouth
of the open street, glint on teeth
of stores and pool halls. My shoes grind
on the gravel, walking in no-man's-land.
I break a spent match and flick it down.
Across town I hear a siren moan.

Downstairs to the warm bar; the jukebox
winks its signals to the bottles and back.
It bounces Janis Joplin off
the pinball crash, the juiced laugh.
I'm coddled by fusing noise here.

Above the machines, in the blank air,
is the wholeness of the corpse in orbit
between the womb and the waxed hatchet.

Advice to a Popular Hero

Slide your fedora forward. Tilt yourself
at a similar angle from the wall. Move.
The big getaway this time. The big Ford's
near rear wheel spins: a can of film.

Somewhere out on the highway you will meet
your successor. You will know him by this mark:
the right-hand thumb-skin roughened by the thread
that opens up the shifting spanner's smile.

You must pretend you haven't noticed him.
Keep your eyes low. Grab a meal. Drive away.
We have replaced you, but you've only lost
a fantasy. Stick to your real work.

Man and Law

A milk-dipped finger points to trace
words on the table. Lacking grace
to speak his words against a tune,
he hides behind the afternoon.
Fingernails and cigarettes
suffer. The lines finished, he wets
his finger again. The words run
into each other. Outside, the sun
still drinks the suburb through a straw.
Hands are still weaker than the law.

*“O triste, triste était mon âme
à cause, à cause d’une femme,”*
he writes, forgets the rest. He who
would terrify the world has to
convince himself he is not sane,
obliterates the lines again.
from the bruised throat human pride
still bubbles like the day outside.
self-imposed penances are for
those who understand the law.

So curse Verlaine with woman-kind.
A man should hide behind his mind
if anywhere. Rage. Rage. He tries,
but he can only terrorise
citizens with cups of tea
whose eyes are ordered not to see
the shame extending from his hands
back to the brain which still demands
strength against the open door
letting in sunlight like the law.

He leaves the table, walks across
to the door, breathes, knows his loss
more clearly by looking at his fists.
The shaft of golden dust persists.
The mess of milk on the table dries.
Soon the inexorable flies
will come. He steps into the yard.
The sun burns through the soft facade
of shame to uncover even more
strength than he needs to break the law.

Sydney's Drowning

Sump oil maps the cement floor;
Aladdin's tool-box treasure for the poor
lies open. Now a know-all salesman smiles.
The spanner's in the flesh. Adjust the brakes.
The end product, gloss, fairy floss
spun on a lathe. Tick off the clockwork miles.
The electro-magnetic crusher makes
tidy blocks to be sunk in rows across
the bay. The drivers are inside.

So let the harbour take you for a ride.
The foot wavers before the ferry. Pause.
Sabotage suspected. Seek out the cause.
The shattered surface tilts. See the cracks
spread down through Kirribilli. The axe
is on the block. The deckhands are too smart.
Headlines and preying hovercraft. Let terror pass
and watch the bridge sweat in the night.
Hear the chiffon-throated girl squeal with hope.
The cowboy hats are made of fibre-glass
this year. Their cords are tight.
Slim Dusty probes the communal country heart
of Luna Park with smoke between its teeth.
the water bears the weight of screaming rope.
Oil holds the answer. And the fish beneath.