

## The Ship

JOHN HARTLEY WILLIAMS John Hartley Williams grew up in London and has worked in France, Jugoslavija and Francophone Africa. Since 1976 he has lived in Berlin.

He has published nine collections of poetry, two of which were shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize. The latest collection shortlisted for this award was *Blues* (Jonathan Cape, 2004). He has published translations from German, French, Serbo-Croatian as well as versions of the Rumanian poet Marin Sorescu: *Censored Poems* (2001) *Bloodaxe*. He has published reviews and essays etc widely in UK poetry magazines and literary journals.

He has also written a prose memoir *Ignoble Sentiments* (1995), published by Arc, and a mysterious prose work called *Mystery in Spiderville*, reissued in paperback by Vintage (2003). A reader-friendly guide to the writing of poetry called *Teach Yourself Writing Poetry*, co-written with the Irish poet Matthew Sweeney, was reissued in a revised edition by Hodder in 2004. A privately printed book of poems and photographs *North Sea Improvisation* (2003), set in and around Cuxhaven on the North Sea German coast, is available from the poet.

Also by John Hartley Williams

POETRY

*Blues* (2004)

*North Sea Improvisations* (2003)

*Censored Poems* (2001)

*Ignoble Sentiments* (1995)

FICTION

*Mystery in Spiderville* (2003)

NON-FICTION

*Teach Yourself Poetry* (2004)

# The Ship

JOHN HARTLEY WILLIAMS



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## A Pastel Shade of Blue

Most of these poems, written between 1960 and 1980, have never been published before. I'd complete a poem and then the job of finding a stamp, an envelope, and a friendly address to send it to usually proved too much. I haven't been able to establish the actual date of composition reliably, so they're not arranged them in some putative chronological order.

Typing up the handwritten or corrected typescripts of poems gave rise to a few hesitations. What exactly *is* this word? Did I really write *that*? Guesswork was sometimes supplanted by the desire to revise, with concomitant tremors of conscience. What do you do when your younger self was clumsy, awkward or just plain stupid? My attitude to an old poem (which is, of course, a *young* poem) has mostly been, as Oscar Wilde said of ignorance, 'touch it and the bloom is gone.'

Rimbaud's mocking account of the conflict of desire for sexual and/or literary success in an adolescent breast—*On n'est pas sérieux, quand on a dix-sept ans*—could be a snapshot of me at the age of seventeen. In Rimbaud's poem, a young man forsakes café life to brood over the young woman who has laughed at his poems. But then his poems do their work and she writes him a letter. Straightaway he returns to the life of cafés. '*On n'est pas sérieux . . .* Older, still amorous, still dithyrambic, and across-the-channel,' I coined the word *extrilism* to describe my pickle. An *ism* word would be just the job to validate the self-extrication of exile and all inexplicable extrapolations from that experience. Serious laughter, in other words. What other available poetic strategy could there be?

Consider a politician announcing a national tragedy. Gawp at his (it's nearly always a man) inadequately performed scenario of gravitas. The only possible response to the discrepancies between the suit, the clichés, and the disaster is the hilarity of anguish. Laughter reveals the

paucity of present day reality, throws ink at the sorrowing imposture of the lyric, and replaces the clichés of shadow-discourse with the names of things as they are: axes, bottles, carpets, doctors, eggs, feet, geckoes, hats, igloos, jampots, kukudus, lampposts, mistresses, nappies, octopi, penguins, quicksands, rats, sausages, tubs, underwear, violins, whips, ex-wives, yams and zoot-suits. If the names come at you systematised though the alphabet, so much the better; the alphabet is seriously unserious—a bedlam of displaced vocables. Extrilism lives!

No doubt one reason a poet writes is to be more like himself than he or she at present manages, and to be more like yourself, by a paradox, usually requires camouflage. Also, every poet comes to his or her own understanding of the place of poetry in the world—mine was/is that it must be adversarial. How many aliases would be necessary to conduct a surefire campaign? Here, jostling for expression, are a few of them: lovers, dentists, dwarves, aristocrats, civil servants, royalty, and pirates. Almost a big enough crowd for an uprising.

I want to dedicate this book to the memory of Dennis Enright, who published my first book. ‘We can’t call you J.H. Williams,’ he said, ‘they’ll think you’re a Welsh prop forward. Do you want to put the Hartley in?’ Gently, he helped me to sacrifice the many poems the exigencies of page length demanded. Up till 1982, the series in which I was first published in book form had had poisonous yellow covers. When the book appeared, Dennis sent me a wryly congratulatory message about the cover: ‘They’ve given you a pastel shade of blue.’ I don’t know what he would say, standing up there on Parnassus, of this book—but I do know I would brood long and hard over whatever it was.

JOHN HARTLEY WILLIAMS 2007

*Dark shoulders have stirred the lightning  
A girl's arms have nested the fire  
Not I but the handmaid kindled  
                  Cantat sic nupta  
I have eaten the flame*

EZRA POUND: Canto XXXIX



## Two Poems

(I)

Surely and slowly it goes:  
all youth to the marriage table,  
all honey to the gods.  
And old men tuck into their memories  
with beards for napkins and eyes for forks.

(II)

Change here for change here:  
the beer here is fair there.  
I can travel without fear  
to anywhere from anywhere.

From both sides of the flag, both sides  
are visible.  
Nothing, if you use your eyes, is  
divisible.

My inner compass can surpass  
any mere direction:  
the needle simply breaks the glass  
and stands up to attention.

## Greed for Life

Greed for life: it makes the soldier curl  
damp in the grass with a foreign girl,  
keeps our myths up there in heaven,  
keeps luck upon the count of seven.

Greed for life: it makes the clerk put down  
his pen and stare about him with a frown,  
imagining that peaks of great event  
will rise from boredom's flat extent.

Greed for life: the lover thinks he knows  
the pangs he has are simply those  
the sanctions of vicissitude decree—  
that pain will surely turn to ecstasy?

Or will those happy, small illusions  
fail before the paltry meal of life—  
the burned toast of a thousand sins,  
the sour milk of rage and strife?

No, no. When hunger mounts again  
against the daylight and the rain,  
what's failed once, what's failed twice,  
will keep the gambler at his dice.

Beneath his breath, there is a word,  
unfindable, that exercises power,  
does not declare itself, remains unheard,  
yet stops the clock, redeems the hour.

Greed for life: it makes the soldier curl  
damp in the grass with a foreign girl,  
keeps our myths up there in heaven,  
keeps luck upon the count of seven.

## A Cool Seduction

Lift he gets from looking swift  
into a girl's blouse, getting hard  
at that impossible gleaming  
curve, like a suspended fall, a view;

slipping to backchat while  
his cardiac hand arrests  
her white, unbreathing knee, thigh,  
sorting the flesh from the clothes;

her own cool eye elsewhere. She  
no doubt, would not take notice of  
Hiroshima, happening, perhaps happening  
in the depth of all the people she is,

discarding all she is, at last,  
from clothes to skin, unskinned—  
one shoulder bone of ivory,  
her soft but scornful breath.

“Did they do this to you, and this?”  
he asks. She looks with eyes of deep-  
ening grey and smiles a faraway reply:  
*Is this the mad take-over of the the world?*

## Swimming at Night

Lights out, the cars are squatting,  
queering up the night with radios,  
shifting soundlessly through all the gears  
of human flesh. Prejudice is back  
and lies and moonlight. Quickly,  
I strip, the wind's buff  
chastens eerily forgotten forks, my  
foolish legs are sharpening up their wits.  
I split, racy, to the water's edge,  
dangle, wave my arms and shout.  
Automobiles go bump without desire.  
I, outsider, ape, toss body, all  
into the water's gross deliverance  
and feel its cumbrous depths, the saline glug  
of eyewash in my ears and mouth,  
the bloop of nakedness that fills  
in every crack with drink. Aswim, I go,  
slurp the sea's placenta, feel  
with every stroke the turbid beast  
that throats me. Night-clouds pale  
casually towards the dark.  
The busy indolence of life  
evaporates. The moon's untethered  
globe swims up to take  
its silent witless place above, revolving  
over me forever over me . . .  
The agitated melodies of clifftop dreams  
dwindle with the cars, departing—back  
to brilliant laughter in the town,  
the camaraderie of bars. I've swum out  
too far, this distance from  
the body's anchor makes  
the disconnection scary. But liberty

in darkest places reigns, here beneath  
a leering cliff, in the sea's clutch,  
where toes no longer touch  
the squirming, sandy bottom, where  
intimately unconfiding tides  
are everything, and in between  
the sea and sky the land  
is just an all-confounding scar . . .

## The Jewel

We burgled the cat,  
two skin-clad thieves,  
    to steal . . . well, what?  
    two cautious selves . . .

We broke in naked,  
robbing and lying,  
    till your eyes looked  
    ah! sleepily into mine.

We said: "It's worthless,  
this jewel, this prize,"  
    and we laughed, senseless  
    amid our desires.

From each other we took  
each other! we said: "Steal it!  
    It's nothing but bother  
    to me guarding it."

And your body grew douce,  
your flesh like water,  
    wild and loose  
    my culprit, my daughter.

Now we have tasted  
love's hammer on each,  
    lie mortal, arrested,  
    caught in the flesh.

After the violence  
the silence fills  
    the vault of our presence  
    with brilliant jewels.

We became what we stole,  
the glorious swag,  
    *cracked our hearts whole*  
    *put the cat in the bag*

## A Little Greek Myth

Brilliant armoured Greeks, you pant  
for victories—treacherous epics!—  
Odysseys I too,  
a little out of puff. I'm too fat.

Penelope sings—the slackened weight  
of sensuality leans  
into her breast,      her many-  
suited body dawdling,      but

I travel and forget.      Clamour  
spoils Aegean stillnesses,      sailors bawl  
our sea-quick comradeship,      the  
heart pumps. We sail

and on the rock a naiad sculpts. The sea  
has ripened      to a shout.      I gasp  
out lives upon her shore,      a catch of fish  
jumping      mad for her embrace.

Soldiers, wife, children      I desert  
to know the Hydrades—absurd!—  
whom flesh and rocks entwine,      the breathless self  
and its intolerable amours.

# The Sexual Aquarium

(Gare D'Austerlitz)

Great fish slither beneath the water  
and the world rots to pieces.  
I was standing in the station listening to  
loudspeakers, when her sexy fingers

tickled my back. *C'était le coup de foudre!*  
A picture of ideological villains we were—  
a chap with slick chops, a dolly with  
blind, straight, hair, speeding in a

coloured motor-car to egophilia.  
Zounds! I sank into your aquarium.  
Fish eat each other. I shall eat you.  
Listening for the train to *Orléans*,

going via somewhere and somewhere  
else, I was standing in all my life,  
like a puddle, feeling the roof  
weep about me, when two mad fish

addressed me from the bottom of  
seriousness. 'Do you wish to gape  
like an adage upon life? Or will you  
take this sexy French chick and

humiliate her?' I loved you like  
little bubbles rising in the coloured  
fish tank. Trains to stations. Me,  
slowly, also, as we all arrive and depart.

## Hamlet Unbound

Ladies in the stalls are moved to tea  
and tragedy, nibbling at a piece of cake  
while Lear storms. 'Just one lump, please,  
not two,' then on to fair Cordelia's demise,  
followed by the king . . . 'Alas,  
I do think Shakespeare was a godless man.  
His plays are somehow . . . hopeless.  
Life is not *completely* black.'  
The army knots its thick-roped, nine-tailed way  
across the boards. In darkness Hector holds  
a lustrous shield aloft that glitters through  
the building: only bricks and mortar after all.  
'This theatre's *awfully* cold. The people  
in the ticket office really quite *abrupt*.  
So *many* foreigners, I'm sure  
they cannot understand a word.' Petruchio  
weds Kate, she's tumbled there and then,  
kaleidoscopic skirts fly up, her legs  
are white and pliant as  
complying beauty opens blazing lips to verse.  
'She is quite *pretty*, I suppose, though rather thin—  
it seems to be the fashion nowadays.'  
And then comes Falstaff's unpacific troop,  
their courage suppurating boils  
till with his laggard-loving tongue young Henry  
pricks. The boils subside. 'It's strange  
how Falstaff seems to dominate the play,  
he's so unworthy of the Prince. You know,  
it's fortunate one doesn't understand  
that punning. It's really rather crude.  
Oh, this is poor Richard Two, his death  
is really quite affecting. Let's hope  
the bar has not misplaced our order.'  
The plays conclude, the painted demons lurch

into the wings, the voices moulder  
in the gilded cornices, deposit dust  
upon the cherubs' wings, the ladies leave  
to feel cartharsis in a homeward taxi—  
banish fiction, banish all the world

except . . . there's Hamlet, lonely on the stage,  
his shoulders shrugged with pain to feel  
the actor moving in his bones and muscle,  
a brash and inconsiderate tenant . . .  
The audience reflects: 'He's not been so well done  
since Stratford '58.' Hamlet shakes his head.  
Faced with choices more perplexed than being  
either absolute for death or life, his  
unrestrained and bitter words invent  
soliloquies no audience will hear:  
'Ophelia, did she go mad just there?  
God knows I can abuse. And those  
who sit attentive in the dark and listen . . . ?  
Do they catch the whiff, the stink  
of Gertrude's loins, greasepaint floating  
down into the stalls? Can they hear  
the termites ticking in my wooden brain?  
My father, penned up in this purgatory,  
jailed by spotlight in this scented hall,  
his soul condemned to histrionics like myself—  
do they suppose his ghost is just a trick?  
And when they see me gut Polonius,  
his aphorisms drip behind the curtain,  
what stain do they think *that* is  
spreading slowly out across the stage?'  
He stands and paces up and down.  
His laughter blasts the sparrows from the eaves.  
The theatre crumbles to an iron skeleton,

its gilded roof is opened to the sky  
and unrehearsed amidst the desolation  
the Hero catches at a frozen voice  
and turns sardonically, his ear cupped  
to seize a final, petrified request:  
*If I could have one in the second interval.*  
*Yes, thank you. Only one lump, please.*

## Heathrow

The jets astride the raindrops  
whine decrescendo over tiles.  
Glow-worm Baby, home to stardom,  
money, fumbles with her seat.

Flashbulbs simmer. In their houses,  
deep in consternation, thinkers  
worry at the facts and start  
from reverie—their trousers round their knees.

The cars wash over Westway, lit  
with other purposes, salient  
desires. A million televisions puff  
'Our Island Story'—darkness falls,

and Glow-worm Baby, making news,  
allots the jostling cameras each  
an intimacy bright as hell:  
*So glad to be here! Back in good old history!*

On the Royal Wedding of Princess Anne:  
November 14th 1973

*The kingdom of crown and ceremony,  
embodied in its magic flesh,  
marries here, weeping,  
full of religion, the people's fear . . .*

We are people or gods. It doesn't  
matter. Triumphant, come among you,  
raising my hand,  
I do not see you. I also fear.

Our kingdom is governed with  
game and ritual, complicated strokes.  
Now I shall try to smile  
at the great growl of your approval.

God and his words utter themselves  
reverently between us. My piety  
will brook no obstacles. We marry  
in sumptuous cloth and stone.

The music we had every reason  
to be uplifted by, brilliant hounds  
of organ and trumpet, scattering  
the abbey darkness into rags!

Wailing joy upon my body,  
you felt yourself within me: object  
of spiritual bliss. Such games. They  
*hallow me. Keep me amused.*

We are ordinary people.  
You should see and touch our ordinariness.  
I shall fulfil your famishment.  
For you, my hymen will bleed.

But naked you will never see me.  
Also you may starve, while I eat.  
The courtesy you show me  
must always bear your weight of loathing.

Yet now in my wedding hope, I tremble  
to see behind your deferential faces  
engines you have built  
that run without a human intervention,

pistons sliding as  
the flywheel turns . . . Above  
the clamour of the organ, I hear  
the roar of unattended instruments,

their gathering momentum  
of machines behind  
your upturned faces, watching,  
tightly packed within

this dark, uneasy shed.

## The Permanent Secretary to the Minister for Home Affairs Offers an Explanation

This is my office, these  
are my papers, this my desk, the chair.  
All life goes before me in orderly paragraphs.  
This is the satinwood box in which I keep  
O anything, and this my ruler,  
straight as a leap from heart to throat.  
Before the low table, a leather couch.  
If someone knocks,  
I put benevolence and trust around them.  
And photos. My wife glints sideways  
out of what she does not understand, or  
the children have understood it and paled into  
the milk-coloured weal, becoming part of nothing.  
Observe mahogany, the plush  
carpet, the darkened wainscot. That  
is a picture of cursing on the wall. This,  
I commissioned. Touch. The beauty of art  
is to leave one colder, distant. In the course  
of ordinary human flood—I work, merely.  
Affairs go plain and level  
under my writing hand. This, my cabinet  
of drink; and these, state papers.

At meetings I endeavour not to speak  
too often but turn my head toward  
the source of speech. In the net of government  
what worms therein is simply what  
has sprung therein. We do not fish.  
I hear the word 'leviathan', from time to time,  
a denizen of national deeps, perhaps, but  
we do not fish. This life  
is monsterless, although it pays  
sometimes to let one's thought amuse itself

where thought has nested. Too late  
my underlings will comprehend when  
I am angry; too late my loved ones  
when I am pleased. Nothing  
I predict will be the slightest help.  
I'd say events  
must overcome the common man; un-  
common men must tie the knots of fact  
and school the future. This,  
my myth, the coat, the coat-stand,  
keyhole, key that rages in  
the lock, the yellow dado's line  
against the wall, that draws  
its perfect horizontal round this room  
and round again  
until it strikes my brow, dead-centre.  
Of course there is omission  
of the senses' dumb configuration  
lest reason fail itself. The knot I tie  
is only harmless words, which means  
the blindfold prisoner slumped against the post  
is just a fiction (as he knew himself)  
and words alone, we know,  
created him. They equally ensure  
his failure will not be recalled.  
So let's dissolve that face  
before it might suggest  
the course of anything might be  
a better way, beyond the stars—  
some other branch of fate,  
that we must seal off. There is, you see,  
a great alternative. And I  
am it.

## Heroes

They drubbed fat women to music,  
played the lyre and kissed fat tits.  
A scalding sun fell hissing  
down between the sea's warm lips.

The sea-wind swollen sail walloped  
reddish air of maddened eve.  
Standing in the prow, the heroes  
made much ado of make-believe.

Stories held them, bearded, filthy,  
round the teller's wine-stained teeth.  
They listened, terrified, to tales  
so tall they dwarfed the tiny fleet.

They woke refreshed from awful dreams,  
the night's dismay all gone to shreds  
and singing went to silver breakfasts,  
feats of arms and sexy beds.

What storytime has now become  
is flickering and restless minds.  
Heroes only to ourselves, we stare  
into an ever-opening light that blinds.

## Summer School 1976

Squatting against the bookcase, knees  
drawn up to chin, you wondered if  
the act of pleasure was not overrated.

Summer days. The streets outside were  
freighted with the noise of trucks  
*en route* for channel ports, and we were monks

within a garden, walled, sequestered  
in an edifice of sun and silence. But in  
the toils of need our summer nights grew fierce.

We ate the food of our community  
which did not bind us. From the theatre's steep,  
we poised to dive into the speaker's voice.

Too knowledgeable acts. Did we think  
by listening hard and taking notes we'd find  
solutions and confront them? Deptford beat us.

New Cross rued our souls. Our seedling  
city grew from elsewhere, all affections  
nipped by frost of the departure date.

Squatting by the bookcase, drinking  
something, smiling to yourself, you looked up once,  
that certain way. What crossed your mind?

Now I wonder, had we turned our shortlived  
colloquy to something else, would we still  
be standing there upon the season's hazy ground,

the sky still arching over us, an endless blue?  
The summer died to clouds and rain. We took  
the mind's things home. Later they meant nothing.

Now I write to hold you in my mind,  
to recapitulate your voice, dark and earnest, the view  
that life holds summers yet before you.