

Speed & Other Liberties

ANDREW SANT was born in London. He migrated with his parents to Melbourne, Australia where he completed his education. He has subsequently lived in London at various times, including much of the present decade. During this time he has been Writing Fellow at the University of Leicester and, currently, at the University of Chichester. In 2001 he was resident in Beijing, China. He jointly founded the literary quarterly, *Island*, based in Tasmania, where by that time he had moved, and has worked as a teacher, copywriter and editor. *Tremors—New & Selected Poems*, published in 2004, was his ninth collection.

Also by Andrew Sant

POETRY

Lives

The Caught Sky

The Flower Industry

Brushing the Dark

Album of Domestic Exiles

Russian Ink

The Islanders

The Unmapped Page—Selected Poems

Tremors—New & Selected Poems

ANTHOLOGIES

First Rights—a Decade of Island Magazine
(with Michael Denholm)

Toads

Speed & Other Liberties

ANDREW SANT



CAMBRIDGE

PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING
PO Box 937, Great Wilbraham, Cambridge CB21 5JX United Kingdom

All rights reserved

© Andrew Sant, 2008

The right of Andrew Sant 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 2008

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Biddles Ltd, Kings Lynn, Norfolk

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 978 1 84471 347 9 hardback

Salt Publishing Ltd gratefully acknowledges
the financial assistance of Arts Council England



1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Contents

Alpha	1
Stanzas	2
The Sunlight Inland	4
Luxuries on Market Day	8
The Morning of the Funeral	9
Poem for the Refugees	10
Nike at the Megaliths	11
Mr Habitat's Home Policy	13
The Oxford English Dictionary	14
Crime Fiction	15
Snowfall	25
Mr Habitat While an Inheritor of Thomas Edison's Light	27
The Lemon Tree at 42° South from 52° North	28
China	29
Sydney Olympian	30
The Only Children	32
The Beijing Expressway	33
Jasmine in a Temple Garden	36
Exposure	37
Photographs of Shandong Peasant Children	39
Two Ways of Looking at Landscape	40
Lands of the Ants	41
The Landlord	43
Attitudes in a Possible Food Museum	44
Mr Habitat on Anger	45
Heat and Light	46
Loggerheads	47
Cold Weather	51
Voice Theory and Practice	52

Mr Habitat and the Protection Racket	53
Appointment	54
Classic Hit	55
Being Here	56
Long Wait at Quick Shoe Repairs	58
Saxophone in a Pawnbroker's Window	60
Mr Habitat in Public Places	61
Excursion, Delayed	62
Tasmania	63
True Stories	64
Other Dominions	65
Insomnia	67
The Banana's Republic	68
Abundance	69

Acknowledgements

Poems in this book first appeared in *Agenda*, *Antipodes*, *The Australian*, *Best Australian Poems 2004, 2005, 2006*, *Blue Dog*, *Critical Survey*, *The Dark Horse*, *Famous Reporter*, *40° South*, *Island*, *The Manhattan Review*, *Poetry London*, *Poetry Review*, *Quadrant*, *Said the Rat!*, *Southerly*, *The Times Literary Supplement* and *Il Tolomeo*.

'Photographs of Shandong Peasant Children' accompanied (and appeared on the poster for) the exhibition *Children—Photographs by Hu Min* held at the One World Art Centre, Beijing, China.

I am grateful to Asialink and the Australia China Society for facilitating a residency at the University of Peking, China, and to the Royal Literary Fund in association with the University of Leicester, UK where I was Writing Fellow 2003–2005.

Contemporary civilisation differs in one particularly distinctive feature from those which preceded it; speed.

— MARC BLOCH

Alpha

In the beginning, there was never
a getting away from stretching
and backflips—propulsion. Daily
the astronauts dreams are stranger
by far than weightless cups
and plates lingering at 28,000 kph,
the earth's curve set
pristinely in it's birthlight.
Now the crew want it hot or cold—
China, Europe, the States
seem foamed for a shave
or photographed for a brand,
far from the longed-for descent,
the plan, after delivery, to feast
on air in fresh Khasakstan.

Stanzas

1

A can of Dulux is thrummed
by a home decorator till he gets
the urge to jemmy it open
and make the drab room look new . . .

2

the room that, way back, was a zoo—
tigers, elephants, monkeys
visible after dark with the flick
of a switch, and mother calling

3

till they simply stared down from posters
and the room was huge with story,
the one about the king whose cold
touch turned everything to gold.

4

So far out into the night, sometimes,
the moon at the windows
illuminates the carpet, the walls
darkly squaring up to the future

5

and some kind of intention—
like a new stanza, a fly
buzzing this way and that with the zeal
and urgency of an eraser,

6

making the room a passage through,
not an enclosure, as is supposed;
the furniture at the furthest limit,
always, of what a room can do.

7

The man with the roller and paint
now out there too; and who can know,
later, windows half open—rhyming—
who will visit and when or why.

The Sunlight Inland

1

After days of mean drizzle, low cloud
like a used rag smearing the windows, to go out
into sunlight is free refreshment,
a border crossing, one front step down,
clothes like sheaths loosening for skin
to bud on the streets. Sills with their flowerpots, gates ajar,
the buildings have arrived here, row after row,
so absorbed by the light no hinge gives an inch
to the longest shadow, the century that measured them.

Unless money, superabundant, illuminates
age to a developer, their persistence shines.
The length of the High Street bold graffiti extrapolates.
Balconies are like smallholdings to some families.

In an instant, light rinses and dries pale strollers—
through the parks, litter again, as if shaken out, stale.

Speeding clear of the coast, it's still hours
till the neighbour, the stubborn one, will ease
the car into a space on the street he sees freshly as his.

2

The congestion, the accident, rink rage,
and then, in the rear, the skater
trained in the tropics, St Moritz in the sun . . .

Ice in the right latitude,
the gun. He could reckon the Olympian
thighs of the pack, their speed leaning

into the Utah arena, before he left Queensland.
The deep chill of their streets; steam breath.
And surely this; he could hazard their grace.

From the line where, for the gold, the skaters
got set, ready and went, each could freeze
his ambition with a glance, the lad
who'd brought charm like his sunlight
inland to the Winter Olympics,
slow in their wake and, as surely,

handily placed as their skates
shaved fresh ice, the crowd pressing
forward to the edge of the rink.

He just had to wait. No one could blame
liquefaction—his tropical gaze—
for the collapse of the pack a long
second ahead of him, the derangement of legs,

and how he flew past them, and won.
The sunlight somehow redeemed him, in any case.

3

Geraniums, close to doorways, survive night air.
Monstera, frangipani on a terrace
might be invited to impress; early guests
when frost withdraws unfashionable
influence towards its north polar address.

Where canapés and fizz are mixed,
there's a taste for the tropics—

sunlight far-reaching across the continent.
A longing in gardens
for African heat on soft skin
like a text, evolutionist, its covers
unopened since autumn—

and for water, embryos' world
amid wealth, distant as the coast, yachts
anchored in harbours for the annual return.

The plants in privileged settings
thrive on attention, and get it.
Where they originated, the hotels,
the touts, and tours are ready.

4

Late afternoon, the day's warmth stored
in brickwork, a lone round-the-world yachtsman
writes for posterity about a landlocked country—
how as an overland traveller in Africa
he conjured for a woman, waves,
sheet lightning at night, turbulent
dark water then morning composure,
(after him, for others recurrently, he thought,
this being as close as we get to eternity).

In her hand, a creased photo of ocean.
One good eye to follow his longing
beyond rickety buildings, ruined hills
and the hum, under clear sky, of impending heat.

Her sea words, rapt immersion, in afternoon sun.

This sailor's escape—weeks inland to the west,
and to show for it, photos, village
close-ups of her faraway look. His limits.
Immediate views of a withered harvest.

5

The pink slipstream of a southbound jet, like a graze.

Dawn arrives in towns with parcels of light, tossed,
window-size, into houses; transports the gardens—
ground moisture rising through leaves.

Late spring has delayed them. Europe wakes;
seeds, raked into rows, germinate.

The warm length of the country, trippers'
cameras range against nature, detain
fugitive sun, deeply inland, out in the open.

Each vantage, foreground,
angle, an intake of breath

ninety-three million miles, and a car ride,
from the source, at last, of the fun.
Glossy prints showing off, days later,
how far into the heat-haze they'd gone.

Luxuries on Market Day

The market butcher who sells bargain chickens
in triplicate, finds early buyers
to multiply sales without any limit the long

street can reveal, supply like sunlight
as if it's endless. Three birds, the count
for a routed flock in a televised drought,

I figure, my eyes like a London fox's
on gut needs. Gratified as any city dweller
with a well-supplied refrigerator,

I've abundant leisure, window open, to gaze
as far as the road sweeper who contains
a rain of litter—or connect, like the aerials

and wires above, with imagined latitudes
on the pictured planet; my habitation
well extended into a distant country's

wilder politics, geology, influence.
The factory fowls are somewhere isolated;
sheds arranged like barracks, treeless,

clamour trapped inside like haywire electronics,
rapid thousands harried by an everlasting
Arctic summer. I place them near a grain

monoculture unlimited by clean horizons;
starlings, darkly rising; invaders seasonally
related. My bargain implicates me in this

and allied changes beneath strange skies,
forests nearly spent, reefs defiled by silt,
when from a coastal town the news is amplified.

The Morning of the Funeral

The Saturday newspaper, front page scanned,
he'll spread out liberally on the table later.
Right now, the washing-up with last night's
pasta sauce smears must be done; the hot water
foggling his reading glasses which he folds.
The wide kitchen window is a suitable height
for him but not his early-risen wife. Ajar, the garden gate.
Plates in the dishrack gleam white, lily white,
and he realises, suddenly, pausing, fork in hand,
he's not seen that so many lemons
have appeared this year on the hardy tree
as if some citizen has flipped a switch,
bright yellow citrus globes among
the deep perennial green. A blackbird
stretches, like gum, a worm. A knife
as sharp as the one he slowly wipes
might have a price—and now the rack is laden.
He checks the clock. If he doesn't iron a shirt
and go—some years since he's seen her—
he'll kick around the house, glance
at one or another mirror, and see
in so doing this would come at a greater cost
than resolution to pay last respects, poised
as he is now with a sharpened sense
of choice between two acts of hard self-interest.
He pulls the plug. The bird has won
its tug-of-war and flown. On the window, he notices
what's left of his concentration is his breath.

Poem for the Refugees

Not a position any would say they'd die for,
though shadowy movements might require

a leg up or a ladder's final rung.
The office with bright credentials, sun,

inherited shop or a backstreet house,
quickly banished since like migrant birds

they flee over waterless land and crave
status higher than the hasty graves,

lower than an exchange of bullets.
Whatever they dream about or expect

will long outlast reports that trace
groups camped near coastland, on their way

to spook night rooms lit by TVs—
nurses, cooks, someone's cousin with a degree.

Nike at the Megaliths

At the megalithic temple
in early afternoon heat
a sunscreened woman walks away
from her tour group, the tone

of the amplified commentary
slick as instructions to youths
on a sports field till,
at the perimeter, close to olive trees,

it's a slight irritation
like the last blowfly in a house
where for a reader her book
is a passport into immersion.

There, near the huge stones,
where to the right she can see
the continuous present
of the blue Mediterranean

it seems a small step
through light reflected off limestone
to see robed priests and linger
as if in 4,000 B.C., in the heat

of a primitive cosmology.
The clay women, swollen as loaves,
in their alcoves. Puzzle
of blood in the dust. What's known

of their rites? Her guesswork.
The woman like an ad for Nike,
slim, blonde, American,
has only minutes to be amazed

like an archaeologist who turns silent
in the presence of cave drawings
when, in torchlight, the active
figures somehow mirror him.

The arrangement of quarried stones
in the glare look to her
not like a ruin but seem
hoisted up, all of a sudden,

from the limescape. Dwarfed
she vaguely hears, again,
stray words from the megaphones
fade in and out, French then German,

wide of any cultural imagination
she's entranced by at Ggantija
as freshly as the sweat making
her bright summer clothes cling.

To return, like the caver, to the present
is a trek via the Enlightenment
through the many ages of humankind.
Her Nike runners are fit for it.

The sea shimmers and glints there,
a tabula rasa. She's recomposing,
with effort, her febrile life on the fringe
of the tour group, modernity

—the megaliths a gang of shadows, lost
cosmology protected from the olives—
when, as if conjured, a silent jet
splits the sky overhead, like a zip.

Mr Habitat's Home Policy

Insurance? I don't need it. How many times
has this house burned down? It requires no fingers.
Candles, flaming toast, illuminate its persistence.
Thieves lurk like a virus. The neighbours
are sickened by nicked equipment.
I'm immune; airy cupboards, Spartan rooms.
I go on tour. Acoustic. My song and dance
electrifies the wide-eyed passers-by.
A hail of coins, I'd like; a trickle makes me fitter.
I'm a survivor, made to last, a fifties radiator.
It figures; assessments freak at former houses,
trashed or incinerated. Have I made claims!
The premiums went through the roof like flames.
Now the odds agree, I've exhausted probability.
My new policy; full risk. No exclusions. Wars.
Sonic booms. Riots. Lightning. I'm clearly safe.
But I keep the photo albums handy, just in case.

The Oxford English Dictionary

The fruitful relationship
between his biceps and dictionary,
lungs and literary adventuring

—in and out of classy bookshops,
top end of town—faltered
with the twenty volume Oxford

he insisted on shifting to his shed
in a single go. The man's past forty,
and, sure, he can flex

a good vocabulary. But this . . .
At home, sun-blinds,
which he calls awnings, down.

The dog, with some polysyllabic
appellation, nearby. Subtract
the vocabulary of his hectic

explanation and, on the path,
he might with one book fewer
have had a chance. The neighbours

don't resist great onomatopoeia
when, as it's made, they hear it.
They have spine. His, stuffed (he says),

compels him to retrace his run
through fifty classics plus bedside Roget,
pausing, only now, for lighter fiction.

Crime Fiction

The suburb was cocksure recent, professional
class, double-brick houses, mid-height
eucalypts along the Beaumaris nature strips;
each garage emptied of a Ford or Holden

on day release up to the smoke.
Monday. The coarse yodels
of magpies announced one yard or another
along grid-like streets seized

by the Americana of a developer.
At 16 Florida, a breeze
off Port Phillip Bay frisked
the native ti-trees and stoic camellias.

The ding-dong doorbell announced the cop.
His hat was off when, around eleven
it was my turn to sing in the study.
He commanded the desk. I had my story ready.

Pen in hand, his eyes were steady.
The stuff he wrote, questions, answers,
formed part of my inquiry
when, like Chandler's Marlowe, I risked

a certain involvement in this case.
For the cop, it was pretty much open and shut,
on the previous day, the doctor gone, my mother's
body sent to the morgue, a duty done.

I had to become a tough dick for this,
or fake it. Adopt a style,
just to get by. For a flying start,
see off a wet tell-tale pommy manner.