

## Year of the Dog

Selected as one of the country's Next Generation poets, shortlisted for the 2004 Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year and named by the *TLS* as one of the best young writers in the country, Tobias Hill is one of the leading British writers of his generation. His award-winning collections of poetry are *Midnight in the City of Clocks*, *Zoo* and *Nocturne in Chrome & Sunset Yellow*, all available from Salt. His fiction has been published to acclaim in many countries. A.S. Byatt has observed that "There is no other voice today quite like this."

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# Year of the Dog

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CAMBRIDGE

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*For Xandra*



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## London Pastoral

There's something I've wanted to show you. Here—  
between derelicts:  
a bomb-chink of brake-lights.

Ice? More? Just say when.  
Open the corrugated paper  
of these lung-machine blinds;  
sun slides across the floor,  
contained as yolk-skin.

Unlock the mortice-lock and pause and swing open  
wide windows. Seagulls on the curry-house  
scream of distance with the voices  
of illegal aliens. Hold onto your fluted glass.

I wanted to tell you something:  
for three nights now a bird has sung  
in the road trees. A water song.  
The neighbours are complaining; no one  
knows what species the bird is. No one  
even sees it. Pools coupons  
titter against chain-links. Chip cartons  
scuttle past time-delayed,  
time-locked shopfronts. Then the bird  
starts to sing.

You'll hear it with the window open,  
even when the first rain gathers  
to a downpour, hallways sweet  
with the residue of road-tar.

Then you can grin, or watch me grin,  
at woodpigeons in wet weather  
sat in the road trees, suffering  
damp white collars. Like divorcees,  
not looking at one another.

## Close

The cockroaches are rain-skittish.  
They run like condensation  
from foundation-cracks, stumble and flex  
their wings. One flies like a stone.  
Grandmother Kamate, pickling white radishes,  
claps the beetle to her breast  
when it falls there. She mutters, tuts  
at the sky. Wipes her loose skin  
with a Kleenex, shoes her grandchildren  
outside. Tightens her house-kimono, then  
opens her *Lucky Strikes* and smokes.

Outside, I sit uncomfortably  
by Mr Kim's Nissan, watching  
the grandchildren wrestle and sing.  
Aeroplanes are disguised as thunder,  
thunder as the slop and buckle  
of rain in buckets of clouds  
waiting for a door to open.  
Dogs yip, echo  
like dophin song. Cicadas  
rant small raindances. The smell  
of pennies and oysters,

electric. Rain; always gives me  
that howling feeling. Times to check  
my watch, bus timestables, or  
wire Mr Kim's car and drive,

air so close to tender skin  
it comes alive, and just behind,  
rain creeping like an edge of char  
across pages of maps and horizons.

## The Mosquito's Opposite

Such a brilliant weapon  
spawned from the dull clay-cool of a water jar  
or from an oil-lacquered puddle.

Improved to its place like a stone  
in a sea. In a ring, faceted. A brilliant thing.

Its blueprint, scribbled in amber,  
is unaltered. The conceived form  
near-perfect, never improved upon. The line  
surer than Picasso's circle, fine  
as a shark's teeth, a flatworm's gut,  
the unbreakable fractal of a fern.

The vibration of its wings  
figures in dreams as the whine  
of a dentist's drill, the songs of glass  
and the air-raid siren, or  
a small child weeping. Alone  
and the walls listening.

There's almost nothing to it. Blood,  
no heart. The broken drift of legs  
under the rubber stomach, where  
the forms of life less familiar  
latch and grow towards release.

Permanence and its opposite:  
the host, the virus antigen

shifting from face to grotesque face  
down in the heartbeat of the blood.

## Waiting

Before morning I'm waiting here,  
drinking green tea by the red door.  
In my pocket there are keys,  
two pens, one emptied. One of the keys  
opens a box in England. In the box  
is my grandfather's microscope,

with iris-valves that wink and dilate  
like snake-eyes, and chipped glass sides  
of a sexless baby's head  
small as my watch-face; a foetus —

this is irrelevant. This is  
relevant. The night sky

goes down behind Wu's Viking Grill  
And Beer Hall. Clouds move  
like mountains. I wait.  
Across Seven Stone Children Street  
the fishmonger's son carries tuna  
by the cheeks, hooks up crabs.  
He looks them over with the care  
of a potter. Sour ash

lifts from the icing factory.  
I scribble margin-notes. A bloody rash  
of water spreads from the butcher's door.  
The match-scratch of the first cicada  
ignites the sun. By twelve o'clock

it's a cymbal-crash  
in the high branches. My knuckles crack, hands  
on the page, waiting to cut  
the ventricles and heat of noon  
with the tremor of a pen.

## In the Rooms of the Plague House

When summer comes, no one is left  
to halt the termites' veiny roads  
before the bridge the villa doors  
and populate the shanty-towns. Nothing is felt  
when ribbed dogs fight  
for bones under the collonades  
and no one hears the bell-beetles  
stringing the dusk with telephones.

The inmates of the fine white house  
are gone. There is a rusty smear  
of blood the doctors would not touch  
where the last carrier was shot.  
The daughter, whose honey-black hair  
was striped as the hips of a bee,  
moves like fish-skin in the harbour.  
Phosphorescence haloes her.

Some of them died in secret,  
most were killed. Virus excites virus.  
Arrangements of flowers and salt  
were left inside the airless rooms.  
They hide the emergence of rot.  
The windows crossed and nailed shut.

Entropy gains momentum. Blood  
is split into constituents,  
protein, iron, and sold off  
to white ants and Red Admirals.  
The stink of ozone in the streets  
is overcome by the cesspit gas.  
The petrol-station creaks under  
the whisky-gold dynamite sun,

explodes. The white house is charred black.  
The rain steams and polishes it  
smooth as a cenotaph's granite.

Inside the multiscreen, left on,  
has fused the complicated script  
of circuitry behind the walls.  
A lithium-cell radio  
reports the plague's progress North-East,  
the virus already global,  
a myth. Discussed but never thought.

The flower vases in the hall  
are Edo period and Lalique,  
nothing stolen. Nothing touched.  
In the infant and child ward,  
by trestles, convolvulus  
contract,

lungs fighting for breath,  
dustless as skin.

In the plague house  
the children wait for vaccination,  
sitting still, knuckles white.

## The Secret of Burning Diamonds

Bought from the marts of Amsterdam  
the city built on herring-bones,  
where emeralds dug in Ceylon  
gliterated and still smelt of oysters—

this one was the first to burn,  
a diamond ugly and flat—  
lusted as a cod's eye. The size  
of a black-olive stone, or so,  
smelling of mine-mud. Flawed at heart,  
the Jews of Rialto gauged it  
(their wives and daughters topaz-eyed),  
and wouldn't pawn it for a shirt.

Not for the rose-cut, that one, tough  
stubborn-ugly. Its chandelier  
hatchmarked with cracks and despite that  
the strongest substance in the world:  
diamond. A lock for alchemists  
to break. A Bluebeard's Door, a fear.

A courtyard in Florence. Lenses  
and barrels make a microscope  
bigger than siege-cannons. The jewel  
under the glass, set in steel.

On the clothes of the audience,  
a whiff of morning markets, sweat  
and pomanders. Cedar, olives,  
with branches like green bronze. The sun  
rising. Noteworthy men, thinkers,  
waiting to vivisect their God  
under the momentum of light.

Apex. Strengthening in the lens,  
a rift of noon. The diamond  
smokes —

wonder! The prince or the Dauphin  
whispers profanities. Hisses  
of proofs and miracles  
and the crack of an atom,  
the dam-burst of flame —

a miracle. The purest jewel  
reduced to dust.

# A Year in Japan

## JANUARY

The newspapers, chained to the rack,  
could be today's or yesterday's;  
I cannot read what day it is.  
I sit beside the hotel clock  
and watch the certainty of time.

The hotel ashtray-cleaner  
brings me green rice-cakes  
wrapped in veined leaves.  
They smell of fish and nicotine.  
Tokyo fills the window's frame.

The towers and the groundscrapers  
excrete vapour and in the rain  
a rush-hour of bicycles  
threads the stop-lights. The sky is grey,  
blank. A dead computer-screen.  
The horizon is fused with smog.

A Chinese girl with orange hair  
sits crosslegged by the TV.  
She channel-surfs. Monsters, baseball,  
game shows and samurai blend  
into montage, are suddenly lost  
in a tide-hiss of static snow.

I wake. Night. A chameleon worm  
of subway train turns gold and green  
between two love-hotels, burrows  
under a Coca-Cola sign.

The traffic's spine of tail-lights  
slows by the pinball palaces  
where neon dragons leap and dive.

The girl with orange hair is gone.  
The computer has come alive.

FEBRUARY

At six my rooms shake when the train  
rocks by. Its cables flash and sway  
before it comes after it's gone.  
Doors swing. The kitchen clock falls like a bomb.

I go looking for coffee,  
needing it, and not really knowing  
if there is coffee in Japan.  
Along the streets, shops are shut up  
behind locked grills till ten o'clock.

Only the all-night store's awake,  
spilling white neon on the lot  
where old men in white pantaloons  
sit and chat like radios  
in the half-dark, not listening.

Monologues on their past loves.  
The fishmonger opens for business.  
Lifts the skin off the back of a salmon  
with the skill of a killer removing his gloves.

I sit alone in the public garden  
drinking coffee from a can,  
enjoy its bitterness alone,

listening to the crickets' scratch  
like telephones in empty rooms.

## MARCH

For my birthday, roast sparrow  
and saké from a blue bottle.

Under the concrete viaduct  
the white dog of the carpenter  
barks into its own echo.

It's market day outside the shrine.  
Bruised arcs of prawns and ruddy knots  
of octopus. A steel plate  
of mullet heads. A wooden tub  
of elvers, flexing  
and reflexing.

Between the factories and maize  
the flowers of the plum ripen  
from sapling green to barest hint  
of blood. The hunchbacked women work  
among the figs, their hammer-blows  
a skip before the hammer-beats.

By city hall, salarymen  
throw rice at the tail-thrust  
and ripple of black carp  
in the frozen pool,  
echoes in a mirror.

APRIL

Noon. In its sleep the earth turns over  
with the ease of eels in a bucket;  
oily, muscular. Schoolchildren

brake their bikes. Beside the road a cockerel  
cocks his rusted plumes,  
goes on digging with his spurs  
into garbage. A farmworker  
leans on her adze, watches him,  
her cheek cuddling chewing-gum.  
Grinning. Clothes lacquered smooth with dirt.

My rooms shudder again, when  
the couple in the flat upstairs  
make love. Once in a month, almost  
without a sound. Face to the wall.  
He's unemployed. Before lunchtime  
he wakes. Lights up. Turns on the news.

A night, lamplit zeppelins  
roll overhead like harvest moons,  
advertising abalone  
and rice. I walk with eyes to the ground,  
avoiding cracks. Testing the stone.

## MAY

Spring in the rush-hour train:  
the ticket-man, sumo-fat  
and hurrying. The frills of his uniform  
confettied with blossom.  
Cherry in the hat-band, plum dark  
in the splendid epaulettes.

Sunlight blinks between the hulks  
of love-hotels. A pyramid, a Palace  
of Versailles. Balconies  
on the Garden Babylon  
backlit, ivy polythene green.

The businessman in the next seat  
reads graphic erotica. Holds the book  
in both hands. In each strip  
vamps and rapes, demons. Thick  
as a Shakespeare. He doesn't look  
at the girl in the seat opposite,

though I watch her, safely sleeping.  
Head back, and the sun filming  
her face. How the eyebrows are raised  
when she dreams. And beyond her, small  
in a landscape of water,

the flash of a kingfisher  
taking a clean kill  
like a lit crack in carnival glass.