

With Feathers on Glass

SAMPLER

Also by Andrew Duncan

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With Feathers on Glass

Andrew Duncan

SAMPLE

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SAMPLER

“The concept was elegant, very light-weight, appealing to engineers, mechanically complex, expensive, and notoriously subject to random failure.”

—Jim Mahaffey, from *Atomic accidents. A history of nuclear meltdowns and disasters*

“It is customary for great lords that, when their families and kindreds multiply, their clients and their followers are oppressed, injured and wasted.”

—Mac Fhirbhisigh’s law

“Painting on glass, what is that? Is it art, is it kitsch? Is it craft or amateur art, artistic expression of an era or cultural wealth in decline? Is it an area that is worthy of analytical, art-psychological, research?”

—Wolfgang Schwarze

“Coptic art has one other thing in common with that of the Celtic and Germanic tribes; all were content with the minor arts – the creation of anything large-scale was beyond their scope. It is significant that this later style did not come into existence in Alexandria, the centre of late Hellenistic civilisation. The forcibly imposed Hellenistic art was buried under the popular art in which the masses expressed themselves without caring about the disapproval of the authorities.”

—Ludmila Kybalova, *Coptic Textiles*

SAMPLER

PAINTINGS ON GLASS

I don't know how long ago this happened.
The packs are of glass
Pedlars are humping them to your home,
The mesh of retail winds up lanes and through woods.

Cold tints realise a stiff design,
Plain enough for a village art. A line drawing sent down,
Held up against the glass and copied.
Catherine, Martin, Teresa and George.
Playing-card ships and fair-haired Magdalens,
Kind fustian gentlemen knit the Peace of Westphalia.
A pane opening on painted leaves,
Simplified processes through simpler pictures.
I wish these pictures were better

Four winds like four maids sighing for a ribbon
Blow the ships towards their distant shore.
Four rigged ships splashing foam.
The ship that Pharaoh rode
Has yards of date wood, sails of cotton.
Seven bright mirrors turning on twigs of a tree
Seven fruits in eyes of seven birds
Seven moths on mottled bark seven coloured birds fallen to earth
Seven drips of milk on velvet seven drops of paint on seven beetles' wings
Seven tints of ground river pebbles, seven close shirts of clay
Seven cold fishes' throats swallowing, seven apples being washed in wine.
They are missing the features that are hard to draw.
The brain conducted by the eye in a dance of, well, slovenliness
Forgets the ideas that are hard to see.
A stone stuck through an anvil
Seven full glasses bobbing down a stream
Seven vines twining seven tendrils

Seven swatches of fabric steeping
Seven swallows eating bees on the wing.

Seven devils clinking glasses, seven woven houses of wattles
Seven dewdrops shining on eight links of chain.
Seven ounces of nettle flowers
Seven mice grinding flour from grass-heads.

A ship of winewood
Waves of wines in hulls of casks,
Weighed down with cambric and lawn
With linseed wrapped in a linen shirt, hemp seed in a canvas sack,
Metal ash in a wooden bowl,
Seven sunbeams beaten in a bag.

A ship of dimmed crystal
Under a cargo of porcelain and birds' bones.
Seven bullion buttons on blue serge backing,
Binary sevens get in the way.
Seven stock situations asking for formulae
Seven films of mould on seven jam pots
Seven skulls of seven horses telling out foreseeable events
Seven twin motifs of Flemish origin.

An old song. Dull likeness of great subjects
Pooling at the bottom of a cultural slope.
Coloured saints in a flat field.
Maybe I could design tattoos?
I don't know how long all this lasted.
I came back to where I was.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE STATE (EMPIRE-MEMORIAL-PROJECT)

1

300 AD

shipping trades Saxon pirates
nesting south of the Gironde PROCOPIUS,
bases insecure from the landward side
not wet enough sell nine captives on as slaves
sacrifice one to the sea-god
pouring the hot into the cold
binding with words what is never silent
pleasing with gifts what gives us goods
we open the closed into what has no closing
we close the woundless and boundless as a wall around us
Shuffling in step

2

Belisarius nicator *decaying but liberate*
offered the Goths up in arms the choice:
Sicily or Britain *great-space-ordering*
vino tipico and peppers fried in oil *splashing gold*
rolling seals off the slipway *rich with corn*
an apanage with charter *under salt and snow*
rain and darkness *landed heads of lineages*
realm and language *crime and the civic solution*
a rose without grapes

3

The Recruiting Office *stiffly charging*
Corner of Ballard's Lane and Tally Ho *I live there*
A window spread with model soldiers
painted up with colours and chevrons *the IRA*

the oglaghs shot him dead one morning
he didn't have a gun *plastic barrels upwards tilt*
a three-dimensional surface an inch high.
A furtive demonstration of mouse prestige
drawn up undistracted unalarmed

4

a squirrel displaying on a branch
vexed
to see a squirrel displaying on a branch
because of all my beautiful things,
thirty trees in a stand I do not leave

5

She said that the nation-state was
a bad game, a deteriorating
symmetry of threat, over thousands of moves.
Stuffed figures of the dead leering on the boundaries.
Sacral goods-chambers in ashlar hulls, of initiatory glee. Boys
longing for weapons. Memory twisted to enjoin murder.
Males seduced by males with the flash of an arsenal.
A new psychic organ and the institution of an elite,
other groups pushed into 'flat ground', outside the secret.
Concentric bands of collusion coloured with uncommon words,
treasury scrolls moving ancestral presence.

6

Baeda *root of title* tale
like canaanites Britons soaked in sodomy and
place Easter at the wrong date *banished from their homes*
Saxons steered by the hand of the Lord *who grants sovereignty*
cultic homosexuality a matter of the elite

for a cavalry tactic called the trimarcisia
Languishing in the fens and on the rocks
on gull-white islands and in high wastes
without families or land lamed by abiding longings
lurking where regret has its home *lost in broad heaths*
The undivided right of division. The fore- of all successors.
Butcher grounding of blood-right. RYHTFAEDERENCYNN
The lassitude of vassals.

8

īsīg ond utfūs
from Elbe, Weser, and Schelde
barley seed between wood and stars
shallow craft on high seas
upheld only by what has no memory
skimming deep shafts breaching at Arctic and pole-star
three days of slipping stayed by rails of water
across the glimmering darkness and fastlessness
out of sight protected by their slightness
an oceanic drift sweeping the steaming-fires
grasping at marks in the spectra of rippling smoothness
wool-clad, ash-strake hull on an open palm.

mystery breaches around a westward loom
where mist, shoaling, and tide-race let them by
a slowing where the sea turns sweet
Humber, Welland, Orwell, Blackwater
skills of geosophy from the keel upriver:
a village site on clay above a gravel vale
with a well. There to ground and disembark.

9 *project for a monument to the classification system*

(A manorial roll with names of tenants, their tenements and yearly obligations, interleaved with a dole application form, filled in with education, skills, and work record)

(A bronze model of the mouth's space shaping separate phonemes) A scaled volume to show the organ that forms judgments of people, a spatialisation of a virtual sensory map, where nuances become adjectives; governing readings that order situations; the searcher for appropriateness. The question, who is that. Hidden in plain sight. Owned by a few. Invisible bearer of the visible; the stake of collusion. A text with every character blurred by water, to signify: a body without organs.

10

I invite a team of Chinese sculptors to redesign the Royal Marines chasing the Divine Fists through the gardens of the Summer Palace in raised relief (1900). Frozen hallucinations on the Mall by the Admiralty, stilled shared space, pliant and retentive; where we ask what is essential? what is heightening? Where what shifts nightly is teased to look more like itself. Referential spaces where the visible modelling of clay became the stiffness of bronze; where on the face of it the cowardice of the nationalists is signed but not the ownership of railway-shares.

Figures passive of a passing phantom
discontinuous, pompous, extrapolated, untrue,
steadied by a story shared and owned.
The faithful weep or simply fall over.

11
guarded intimacy
to straighten from a shock

precision at
the clash
of two moving bodies
draining motion

if a thrust
couched in the shoulder
pierces too deep
it unseats; steadied
by a crossbar

to decorate
the pivot soothing
equilibrium:
knight's pennant

12/
a stray streak of the deselected where
the keeled craft few strakes above the North Sea
found another island without field boundaries
covered in apple and hazel trees
without lords, without property
where the sea was calm, its water sweet and clear

ALL THAT CRAWLS

I don't know how long this will go on.
I'm going to talk for a while
It's going to involve archaeology and languages.
There is a matrix of captured data, and you can connect
any two elements, right here, in your home.

This place is called Arnold.
It has four poetry shops and nil tattoo parlours.
OK, I made that part up.

This place is called Ian and Sylvia
So today I went for a walk out in the meadow
Up and down the Hobbucks
An untended public space, the quarter that they left
Of the old common grazing, around the Howbeck.

You don't remember me.
I began all this not far from here
About 45 years ago
At the readings series at the university in Loughborough
I listened but I wasn't quiet for long.

I saw time as a tunnel of light converging on me,
A lens catching rays from distant points
And for the past forty years
Time has been a train of light moving away from me.
The house is on the hill above Mapperley Tunnel,
And the rail line from Gedling colliery to Daybrook.
There's an old mine-working down there too.
Unstable geology over the tunnel roof,
Not to say, what's still holding up after 50 years of closure.
All the tales about kids cracking an entrance hatch,
Funnel-poured down the ventilation shafts,

Getting down onto the trackway, aren't true,
A myth about safe return from the reefs of darkness.
Is the horizon down there? the knot of blurring rays?
A glint of split coal, lensing fossil light?

This is Nottingham, edge of,
I'm reading Wayne Burrows and Matthew Welton.
I don't have to work any more,
All I have to do is to talk and keep myself warm.
Who is to gainsay me?
A man without a manager
Is like a river full of fish.
A river flows across its own valley,
Funds a field of reeds.
No, I'm not going to do what you want.
A boat moves securely up a backwater
Where thatch grows up over the stream.

Are you there Kelvin? Or bicycling around Brussels,
On a sofa? I got this idea from you.
Out of it, how are you filling in the time?
Your name is from *kelefin* and means thatched river
In the language St Mungo spoke.
Kentigern. Vortigern, Cathures. Solid dactyls.
Kelevin, don't lose that syllab!
A language that came here by boat,
That's my tool of trade;
Another coastline would have left us a different language.
I turn over a log and seek words for all that crawls.

80% decrease of invertebrates in 30 years.
My garden is now dedicated to arthropod havens
A feast of rotting logs and pollen heads.
I am watching the dandelions bloom
So many suns with noons and dusks, in their aperture,

As a gift for the bees. The stalk *drooped*
When the bumble-bee landed on the blazing yellow head.
The science is difficult but the insects are keen.
Birds and wing-pollinated plants would vanish with them.
We can start with ants and slaters,
The ragwort isn't doing so well this year.

I steal dead wood.
Niches where it is dank and dark
Shelter for eggs, fodder for infants,
Coops for the winter. The honeycomb
Of dirt, rotting, discolouration, crawl spaces
In plenary breakdown. There is a grub
Clinging to an elderberry
Eight feet in the air, in the hedge
Before fledging as a moth.

In the strike they warmed up with nettle soup,
We ate nettles while nettles was good.
Lush stalks spiring, liking broken ground, old diggings.
No, I'm not going to do what you want.
If there are no bees we will run out of nettles.

Taken out of line, raised off the ground –
Began to rust *almost instantaneously.*
Voices on the air are like pollen
That left the branch, four decades ago,
Lifted by this idea or that.
Theory doesn't become the past without compaction.
Dispersed by breezes, stricken with frost,
Dust in a rainy sky.
Flickering in and out of hearing,
In the downfall of Grand Projects, hoping
For a pattern to capture us. A field of symmetries.
I am no longer at the surface.
Most of us disproved the ideas we acted out.