

SAMPLER

Collected Sonnets

Also by Gavin Selerie:

Playground for the Working Line (Ziesing Brothers, 1981)

Azimuth (Binnacle Press, 1984)

Puzzle Canon (Spectacular Diseases, 1986)

Strip Signals (Galloping Dog Press, 1986)

Elizabethan Overhang (Spectacular Diseases, 1989)

Southam Street (New River Project, 1991)

Tilting Square (Binnacle Press, 1992)

Roxy (West House Books, 1996)

Danse Macabre, with Alan Halsey et al

(Ispress & West House Books, 1997)

Days of '49, with Alan Halsey (West House Books, 1999)

Vitagraph (Binnacle Press, 2001)

Le Fanu's Ghost (Five Seasons Press, 2006)

The Canting Academy, with David Amnon et al (Ispress, 2008)

Music's Duel. New and Selected Poems 1972–2008

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Hariot Double (Five Seasons Press, 2016)

Gavin Selerie

Collected Sonnets

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Oil on Masonite

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Early Poems
/
Azimuth and after

1969-1986

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Physics

'Bloody' Roberts, we called him
in a desperate spell, cursing
as he matched our would-be Terror,
his iron skull and forearm
levered from a teak redoubt
ready to bawl or cuff
whoever dared, green or red,
block the scope of electron law.

What power and guilt arose in the gullet
when, trooping into chapel, we heard
how—crushed in a lorry's jack-knife
on the bend of a nearby hill—
our monster was dismantled
leaving nothing for us to know.

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Blue Vent

Where we came in the dark with vague directions
an endless road uphill then a bumpy track
into the valley, with ghost chimneys and the sea
a muffled roar—to pitch a tent, make love and sleep
the seagulls screeching as broken tin

wondrous morning the water turquoise the hillside
strewn with heather—gorse flowers yellow
round a stream cutting through to boulders, rocks
and a patch of sand

campfire song, man and pebble speaking a secret
between gaunt cliffs—and then the rain at 6 am
a gale to shift guyropes and poles, a lashing
that even the trench won't defeat, we must crawl
drenched and numb till sun reverses the flood

Trevellas Porth, 1969

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Translation

An oak armchair and red oriental rug, a candle
on the marble mantelpiece, a pile of books
by a closed door

the flame burns green then breaks into ruby specks—
I am something looking at myself, skull solid and smooth
as a peanut

its case opens and plunges up, a cloud silky white
that hovers over a vast plain

I hear the slow soft trail of her voice
that holds me inside, a bird a leaf a snake
in a glowing tract

each thing has its place filtered crystal or black
through the strands of our hair
as we let the go die and pass into other space

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Lyric Folds

for Celia Humphris

A branch presses on the glass, it's a phrase
from an old ballad where a rose grows
out of a lover's brain and the singer asks
does she know the face she dreams

a text carried to another shore
comes back as the moon
tinging a silk sheet

can't tell the meaning in reason, can't fathom
that blood in the stream

a jewelled electric darts
between curls acoustic, rigged
over bass, cymbal and snare

angel harsh her voice lingers and soars
chest deep to touch the sky

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River Map

Days melt into each other and it's always twilight
where the yarrow stalks are thrown
(I am the handle to be grasped I am spokes
burst out of the wheel)

she speaks piano and vibes
as the ceiling gauze turns purple
and a double-decker ladder
slides across the wall

lip to lip the bed floats—
a glossy record sleeve—fingers
in a pick-up head—the things' side
of it—are they letting us go

milk courses through you, a twisting tide
in the house beneath writes its baffled outline

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Wheeldale

Bilberry tufts
creeping ripe and black
beneath heather shade

burnt rainbow rippling
in an eastern breeze,
the curlew, a herdsman's harp

prickly furze a line of wake
to Raven stones
grooved over the gill

jaw to belly
with gurgle steps

Wade's causeway
a slab diagonal
leading won't say where

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The Line

Hugged the bracken ridge to Lastingham
and bent down in St Mary's crypt
with the needle jiggling

found interlaced serpents
and a hogback with a bear on guard

from this hollow squat I drank moments
of a thing on another laid

and went over Black Howe
and through the Bridestones
to Dargate Dikes in pine-raw solitude

saw them from there and couldn't
get away—globes or radomes
glistening on black plinths
in a far vigilanus whose secrets may leak

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Sheriff Hutton Castle

The craggy giant holds up one arm
brown sandstone from the hills around,
a northern thickness on the first moor-ledge
made gaunt from warring and intrigue

naked ground in the forest of Galtres
that you plunge down on from the upper road
or swing in on from the lower glassy curve,
proud lines dispersed as lonely prisoners
the court a farmyard with pigs and a haystack

here destinies were dreamed and fleshed
in a garland with flourishes and blots—
above the moat bagpipes droned a dance
tawny satin clung to bedposts
while harts and hinds stirred in the mist

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Rude Stone

I am come I know not how as seawood tossed
in a wrack fire on flood to press the saints
that would skeg this Gypsey Race

a bolt without a head fast I stand
the tall neighbour whose footprints tell
by clicks and gutturals how to dance
and carol breath missing in your pedal pipes

there was a ring of moor grit my fellows at spark
there were faces running through a filter-glare
there were juices in twined leaf fingers

our signal-yield at the sneered gate
is not of those wires or chimney-stacks
that climb off a lynchet on a gnawn grid
it's just the vibe of rock wedged slim in the sky

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Black Charm

from Bald's Leechbook

And these are the virtues of jet—
when thunder crashes it does not scathe
the man who carries this stone,
nor can a demon stay where one is placed
nor poison harm he who holds it

Should a man be possessed by the fiend
and take shavings of the stone in liquid
what lies hid will become manifest

Against an elf or unknown enemy, take the same
in wine with crumbled myrrh and frankincense

Whether afflicted by disease or a snake bite
one who has tasted this potion
will soon be well
and gain besides a smoother body

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Skin Fathom

from the Exeter Book

The damp earth wondrous cold
first bore me in her womb

I know in my mind I wasn't worked
from fleece or hair by fine skill

wefts don't rule me nor any warp

no thread thrumming through strokes
no whirring shuttle shaped me
no weaver's rod rapped any part

worms that enable gold cloth
with fate's cunning didn't weave me

yet wide across this world
heroes will call me a crusty garment

SAY, if you're deep in brain-stock
and keen in wordcraft what my name is

Between Women, Between Places

Somewhere it was so, the heat within white walls
which marked our adoring, as now the hell-rout
flames beneath my hood—I cannot doubt
her brown legs dancing, an aroma that calls
from wine bottles, a jug of steaming coffee
in the night's interior, almost a shout
to Monk's pure fingerbeat turning about
under the rose, above the red door and pillars

Acorns, berries in my hair, nuzzling the ground
I want the graces which make morning possible:
her breath and glance with companioning nibble,
pleasure, purity and beauty—between the sheets
in rich timbral language as growling traffic greets
a dream cavalcade, the huntsman and the hound

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Flete

Under someone mostly with flickers of day
the stamped ground is a mirror
twisting then straight in slimy shallows
you can meet an anchor three foot long
or arrow-heads, keys vaporous
from threaded juice sent in clots and rushes
a demon lurking or it might be a rat
down a brick barrel far from its twin head
in airy highland and meadow
where would drink a bird or a horse
but the years make fog brook turns to ditch
turns to drain that chokes even as scoured story
ties Battle Bridge, the Brill to Black Mary's Hole
so the bark-way keeps course where none rows

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Late Transactions

What ruin would you risk for a field of sheep
on a frozen rock in the ocean? You could let it go
and save the cost of supply, hold your fire
for a closer quarrel—in liquid desert there's no
profit but the name. A thousand souls, a billion
pounds won't settle the thing, it echoes
over leagues passed from the first navigator
prompted to land. Say it's trivial
with honour at stake, and *then* you'll stir
a breastplate armada speeding to intervene.
With an advert or two Gloriana takes her cue
listing notches in the nightly bite, pushes home
this lesson on penguin turf to break a body
many-headed, its benefit spun to waste

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Beauty's Hulk

A Rose is dragged from the deep, fifty foot down
in clay and cloudy silt—site of combat
to get back land or keep water open for wool
(the map still emits a muffled thudding)

was it the sharp turn as she went about,
a sudden gust of wind on the sails
or was it ports left open after firing cannon
or the shift of iron as she heeled

or was it a signal misheard, even disobeyed
or the weight of extra soldiers
or the demon current that tips such bulk
or a chance piece of shot from a nifty galley

she's a time-capsule ready to take on dreams,
a radiant nation in sludge that fights on for notice

(1982)

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Sweatbox

Dingwalls, 28 June 1983

Towpath, a cobbled yard and into the longhouse
do you want the stage or a drink
can't squeeze a monkey up the ramp

stop—here's the town cryer, is it the nation sinks
or some little boy blue with stabbing brass

every day every day I write a sheet
to score what turns you did, visible shivers
on a screen in the dark

big sister's dress ripples up the spine
something you beg should grind and whine

a ship pumped up with fidelity only the shell
will bring life back plates with a bilious
elegance say you wouldn't trigger

a sleepwalk can't stand up for falling down

Grove Reflection

for K. McK in the third act

Through the gashed floor she passes
it could be the wood where twelve years back
a badger and cubs climbed from their sett
to join our blanket clutch, the twigs and leaves
made musky under oak and ash
on a dim ridge, of all dates most magic

it's a different time as we hunt for silver trousers
in Hyper Hyper behind the caryatids
and walk home up Portobello Road, fruit piled
on the barrows with a man in a straw hat
tap-dancing by the giant teapot, grab a cassette
of the anti-ratecap rally—'come up here
and say that' or 'you name it they played it'—
and then go lie on the ledge in the western sun

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Chrome Nun

Armour-minded, she speaks as a knife
slipping silver through always I
and always who—the law/mother/school
just an adding machine

there's never a worst in performance,
you can talk to trees like Alice
or strip off a blouse to banish rain

never a chick, she'll stick out for no
and do it—a fractured bolero
with blue eyes calling the future

liquid piano like silk over black cloth
its lyric lie and fly pushing
the word can to find peace in a fever
garden, choice unclenched for a flick of state

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Onliest

Once you're on the road you're on it
between dry grass shoulders and telephone poles,
an arrow to a boulevard after woodshacks
curly in decline. Might be following
the last pioneer as a stockpile on the bank
waits to float and someone cries powder
beyond the feel of the room

Twenty-twenty-four hours with jabbing organ fills
and a bass fuzz. No place you've never been
has rose knickers begging for another classic,
pretend it doesn't bother as feet shake
the ceiling, cough it out with a substitute line.
A streak in the oil dish turns rider to beast
to wagon, spores projected to the next arena

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