

Dark Mirrors

SAMPLE

ALSO BY GUSTAF SOBIN

POETRY

Wind Chrysalid's Rattle *
Celebration of the Sound Through
The Earth as Air
Voyaging Portraits
Breath's Burials
By the Bias of Sound: Selected Poems 1974–1994
Towards the Blanched Alphabets
In the Name of the Neither
The Places as Preludes
Collected Poems *
Uncollected Poems **

FICTION

Venus Blue *
Dark Mirrors *
The Fly-Truffler
In Pursuit of a Vanishing Star

ESSAYS

Luminous Debris: Reflecting on Vestige in Provence and Languedoc
Ladder of Shadows: Reflecting on Medieval Vestige in Provence and Languedoc
Aura: Last Essays

TRANSLATIONS

Ideograms in China by Henri Michaux
The Brittle Age and Returning Upland by René Char

* 2nd edition issued by Shearsman Books

** Published by Shearsman Books, 2025

Dark Mirrors

A Novel of Provence

Gustaf Sobin

Shearsman Books

Second edition
Published in the United Kingdom in 2025 by
Shearsman Books Ltd
PO Box 4239
Swindon
SN3 9FN

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office
30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB
(this address not for correspondence)

ISBN 978-1-84861-987-6

(eBook: ISBN 978-1-84861-990-6)

Copyright © 1992 by Gustaf Sobin
Copyright © 2025 by The Estate of Gustaf Sobin

The right of Gustaf Sobin to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by his Estate in accordance with the Copyrights, Designs and Patents Act of 1988. All rights reserved.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dark Mirrors was originally published by Bloomsbury, London, in 1992.

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Harris Sobin, Peter Ansin and Michael Ignatieff for their continuous support and encouragement.

G. S.

For my brother, *Harris*,
with love and lasting gratitude

SAMPLE

SAMPLER

1

On the last night of his life, Guy Fallows dreamt of pigeons. The pigeons, huddled in the lee of the ridge-tiles of a tall, stucco farmhouse, sheltered themselves – as well as they could – against a high, luminous, unabating mistral, overhead. One occasionally would flutter down into the dust-blown farmyard below. There, it would sprinkle itself in whatever water it found in any of the stout little basins, scattered about. The basins – troughs, really – gouged out of field-stone, reminded Guy Fallows, even in his dream, of so many grey, lopsided pumpkins. He looked on, fascinated. He felt as if he were attending a private show, an exclusive viewing of some minor, agrarian activity that could – at any instant – turn into something deeply significant. Yes, he thought, at any given instant, this flickering dream scenery could, without notice, take on a depth – an unsuspected meaning – entirely its own.

Now as he peered, a privileged spectator into that very dream, the same pigeon – shivering, bright white – rose up and regained its perch overhead amongst the speckled, red roof-tiles. There, it shook from its feathers the last, scavenged drops of trough water. The drops, spinning in perfect half-wheels off the pigeon's body, caught – incendiary – in the late afternoon light. For only the briefest instant, they seemed to freeze – in mid-air – like so many thin, vermilion needles. Then, just as quickly, vanished – as if evaporated – into the gathering dusk.

‘Guido,’ Guy Fallows whispered, called out from the depth of his dream.

‘Guido, Guido,’ he murmured, addressing no one really but the husked syllables of a name, hoping perhaps to call at least the name's attention – the empty vocable's – to the pigeons, perched on the roof.

There, facing northwards, with their white feathers ruffled, they shifted, one against the other, tense from what the wind, in Provence,

instils in each living creature. While one preened, another would tug, shove, squabble for place. Then, frenetic, as if directed by some common but thoroughly covert signal, they'd all, simultaneously, take flight. They'd rise, and – blown southward – scatter like seed. Like shrapnel. Gathering altitude as they did, they'd then regroup into a single cloud, obeying – it would seem – a single, imperceptible volition. Fallows, looking on or rather *in* upon this improvised spectacle, this endless filmstrip of flight and displacement, followed the birds as if they themselves might serve – like stars, or tea-leaves, or yarrow stalks – to indicate fortune. Might, if read properly, give Guy Fallows a sign, a tiny, overlooked, even arcane indication – on that last night of his life – of some yet unsuspected reprieve.

Now, blown over a thicket of dwarf oak and aleppo, the pigeons vanished into one of those wastelands called, in that region, a *gorrigue*. Fallows – suddenly – felt at a loss. The very agents that had animated his dream had just as if volatilized. Like so many ephemeral spirits, they'd vanished. (Hadn't they, in reality, disappeared altogether, Fallows might have pondered. Within the Provençal landscape, weren't pigeons now nearly extinct? Hadn't they become, along with so much else, as if vestigial? Relics of a lost economy, a dilapidated order? Guy Fallows himself might well have remembered how ten, twelve years earlier, every farmhouse, every *mas*, had its dovecote. And, from whichever direction one approached that *mas*, one would be greeted by those white, fluttering bouquets. By the muffled thunder of all that wingbeat. He'd always been amazed, in fact, how so much brightness could rise, buoyant, over those low, sombre farmhouses where, even at noon, the shutters would be fastened shut, and wine, darker than the vaulted cellars in which it was kept, would be drawn off in a trickle that more resembled some narrow, uncut length of black string, or thread.)

Once again, they'd returned. Wings tucked forward, tail feathers fanned, the pigeons entered, in Guy Fallows's dream, an orchard of flowering cherries. The trees, suddenly, glowed even brighter. It's spring, Guy Fallows whispered, astonished. Thank heavens, it's still only spring, he added, as – white on white – the pigeons (like so many game birds in some medieval fresco, illustrating abundance) glided beneath the orchard's low, overhanging branches. The branches – in the heavy wind – bobbed and heaved. On them, the blossoms, like so many white coral bracelets, shivered with each successive gust.

‘Guido,’ Guy whispered. ‘Look, look, it’s still spring,’ he silently exuded. ‘Still only spring.’

Each time Guy evoked Guido’s name, the pigeons – the dream pigeons, that is – flew, it seemed, even faster. It was as if their metabolism itself had been charged by the simple enunciation of those two syllables. As if, instantaneously, the mere mention of Guido’s name had pumped life, and massively, into their very system.

Climbing now, they flew – an octave unto themselves – against the violet-grey ridge-line of the Luberon. Here and there, a stone village, like a lost chord, lay perched upon its rock outcropping. Or occasionally the gaping wound of a lime quarry – like a white fracture – would show itself against the deep and sombre folds of the long mountain. Guy Fallows realized that he was being treated, in his dream, to a sweeping panorama of that part of Provence he’d lived in now for over twenty years. That, on the last night of his life, the pigeons were guiding him across the landscape of his very own memory.

Now, banking in a slow half circle, they came to settle one by one – in a young wheatfield, just before him. The wind marbled the surface of the wheat silver, brushing it smooth in so many long, dissolving swaths. There, the pigeons strutted and pecked, strutted and pecked, their ruffled heads just visible over the top of the seething grain.

‘Spring,’ Guy Fallows continued to whisper, utterly amazed. ‘Time, there’s still time, Guido,’ he went on, marvelling at his own good fortune. Exulting, from the depth of his dream, how he’d managed, at least, to postpone the irreparable.

‘Yes, still only spring.’ And, just as he said this, the flock, startled no doubt by a sudden gust of wind, took flight once again. They arose as one, then – dragged by the mistral downwind – flew in a tattered formation southward. Guy Fallows followed them in his dream as far as Lacoste (*his* village, he liked to call it) and to the terraces, just below, where beehives glinted – in the late afternoon sunlight a flat, acid white. There, just then, the pigeons began to circle.

‘Guido, Guido,’ he whispered, trying to call his attention, perhaps, to some detail in the landscape: to the beehives, perhaps, or the castle of Lacoste – de Sade’s – standing as it does like a gigantic, cracked molar on its hillside. ‘Guido,’ he called out, addressing no one, in fact, he’d ever known. No one, materially, he could have ever encountered. For Guido, Guido Stampelli, had passed away long before Guy Fallows had arrived in those hills. He’d died, in fact, over forty years earlier, leaving neither

offspring nor property; leaving nothing, in reality, but the signature of a few, scattered farmhouses that he'd built with his own hands. But stables, tool-sheds, a fountainhead – here and there and, most of all, a *pigeonnier* he'd reconstructed for Marguerite St Chamas that had so thoroughly captivated Guy Fallows's imagination that he'd made of Guido – of Guido's name, that is – a kind of grace word.

'Look. Look, Guido. They're circling,' he whispered. 'Over there, just there,' he indicated. One might easily imagine that, even from the depth of his dream, Guy's lips must have moved. Must have rounded to the 'G' in 'Guido'. Must have pressed – dental – to the 'd' before entering the long, endlessly open suspiration of the 'o'.

'Just there,' Guy Fallows gestured to his near namesake (to what he might have called, in fact, his 'breath-sake'). 'There, to the left,' he specified, because, at that very moment, he could see that the pigeons were preparing to settle. Were lofting, almost motionlessly now, over that very dovecote Guido had not only reconstructed, but slept in – night after night – both as its architect and day-labourer, wrapped in a horse blanket and lying on whatever straw he'd managed to sweep together in that lower room of two rooms, designed, in reality, as a rabbit hutch and where, perhaps, Guido himself might have whispered to some such 'breath-sake'. Might have directed his anguish, the tiny, breath-bitten increments of his whispers, in the direction – who can say – of some absentee of his own.

Now the pigeons, in mid-air, seemed as if anchored. The oncoming mistral had grown so massive, so unrelenting, that the birds – held as if tethered in wind – had to calculate their landing, now, faultlessly. Once again, moving as one, rising altogether like a white handkerchief pinched, at its very corner, by a pair of invisible fingers, they climbed, and in the very same gesture – plummeted, relapsed, came to alight, almost daintily, on the speckled red roof-tiles of the dovecote.

Fallows, now, in his dream, saw nothing but white. But their white wings and fanned tail feathers as they entered into the endless, endlessly minor accommodations that pigeons make – one with the next – fluttering and settling, fluttering and settling as they do. White over white, white under and against and between so many flapping remiges of white, they came – in his closely focused dream – to form a wall, a solid rampart of white. Of luminous, white wingbeats.

Then, that very instant, the white as if roared. And Fallows, in response, rolled over in his sleep onto the far side of an empty bed. The

very same wind that had blown all night through his dream – keeping the pigeons aloft and marbling the green wheat silver – blew now, and forcibly, through that transparent wall that separates sleep from wakefulness. Gradually, Fallows stirred. Lying there, eyes still closed, he listened to the shutters in his empty bedroom rattle on their loose hooks. He began to distinguish, bit by bit, the sound the grape leaves made, brushing against the outside wall, from that of the flanking cypresses. For the leaves whispered, even hissed, whereas the cypresses rasped. He listened, astonished that the same wind that had literally transpierced his dream, shredding its way through that white rampart, was blowing, now, with perfect consistency, in the first dark light of dawn, just outside.

Guy Fallows, fully conscious, awoke now to that very day he'd spent so much of his adult life dreading. Certainly, as an artist, he'd harboured an almost speculative curiosity as to its true nature, but awaking now to that small dawn before him, he closed his eyelids in nearly the very same instant he opened them. He lay there now, and listened to his own breathing. Listened to his every breath. Then, testing that tiny mechanism whereby the eyelids open and close with such ease, such seeming autonomy, he opened them once again, and saw – across the tiled floor – his own body, reflected in the bedroom mirror. Wrapped in so many twisted, white sheets, the body, the bulk of his body, seemed to float – almost buoyant – across the mirror's full, unwavering length.

Guy Fallows, once again, closed his eyes, clamped them shut. And, as he did, he felt his eyelids – this time – bunch into a tight network of nerves. He lay there now in his own dark. He lay there – eyes shut – and didn't dare look.

‘It’s hers,’ he said.

‘Whose?’ Guy Fallows asked, somewhat impatiently. The two of them, several months earlier, had been hiking down a narrow footpath that ran – like a beige ribbon – through black ilex and glistening, knee-high clumps of flowering boxwood. Occasionally, a warbler, startled by their footsteps, would plunge into an even deeper thicket, just ahead. For the most part, though, the *garrigue* about them, as they themselves, remained perfectly – almost oppressively – silent. They seemed, in fact, to be walking in the very draught of that silence as they came now to a low, overhanging ledge, and spotted – just below – the tall farmhouse. It lay, obviously abandoned, in a sprawling, grey and rose coloured mass, overrun with bramble and dappled by the shade of so many broad, five-fingered fig leaves.

‘No, maybe it’s not hers,’ the young man whispered, correcting himself. ‘Maybe it’s her mother’s. Yes, that’s it,’ he added, ‘it’s her mother’s, I’m fairly certain.’

Ever since he’d first learnt to talk, Andrew had expressed himself with what Guy Fallows qualified, a bit testily, as an ‘inveterate vagueness’. He didn’t so much define his thoughts as diffuse them. He let each and every phrase bleach, go edgeless, lose all precision whatsoever for the sake of a particular, even a distinctive sort of approximation. For creating, about his least remark, the mildest, most impalpable aura possible.

‘Whose? Whose mother?’ Guy insisted.

The young man concentrated on the narrow footpath before him. ‘Vic told me something about it belonging, once, to *her* mother, or perhaps to her mother’s mother, if I’m not mistaken.’ Then added, as a final qualifier, ‘It’s either one or the other, though. Of that, I’m nearly

certain.' He kept his eyes fixed on the ground before him.

Within minutes, the two of them had reached the outlying walls of the large farmhouse. Its low, dark, north-facing façade appeared as if masoned in ivy: in those wild veinings that – rampant – not only followed but replaced the mortar, running as they did between the grey, loaf-shaped field-stones themselves. There, exposed to the wind, only a few thin-slitted windows interrupted the wall's otherwise blind surface. Squat and somewhat cambered, the wall itself – as if wired in ivy – seemed twice rooted to the ground it stood on.

The other side was something else. Guy Fallows and his son came about now, and entered – through a basket-handle archway – its enclosed courtyard. Over them stood the tall, south-facing façade with its double tier of vaulted windows. Each of the windows lay flanked by an equally tall, exhausted pair of teal-blue shutters. All of it – windows, shutters, and the high, rose stucco frontage – stood as if facing (like some kind of discarded stage décor) the memory of so many spent, agrarian suns.

Crossing the wide flagstones of what once had been a threshing floor, they entered (Guy through one open door; his son, Andrew, through another) the long-since deserted household. Inside, in the sudden dark, each of them must have felt assailed by the place's utter dereliction.

Everything within (designed two, three centuries earlier with such rigorous intent as to its specific function) had fallen into total disuse. Nothing, any longer, served. Only the gutted volumes, occasionally, stood witness to the farmhouse's once flourishing economy. Wandering about as they did, they began to read those gutted volumes, those abandoned shells. They began deducing, or simply guessing, at the original use of each room, as – room after room – they passed through kitchen and larder, granary and stables, the immensely low, immensely long sheepfold, and then – just after – constructed one on top of another: winepress, distillery, and cellar. As always with agrarian architecture, only the smallest part of the farmhouse served human needs. And even then, such as in the small bedrooms upstairs, the walls had been pierced with deep pockets for supporting – eight weeks of the year – so many flat, cross-hatched lattices. On them, uninterrupted, silkworms once fed.

It was coming out of the dark farmhouse, however, and into the bright sunlight beyond that Guy Fallows first spotted the *pigeonnier*. It stood in the far, south-east corner of the courtyard, forming in fact one of the courtyard's extremities. A few broken carts, coloured *bleu gauloise*, lay casually propped about its base. Their handles, straight as iris stalks, only

added, it seemed, to the sheer thrust of the tower, its verticality. It didn't so much rise, however, as self-gather, self-accumulate – a perfect cylinder of carved stone – in a movement that Guy Fallows found both massive and immensely – inexplicably – weightless.

Intrigued and, perhaps, already moved, he walked towards it. The dovecote was built on two levels. Below, flush with the ground, a stout little door with a gothic arch led into what must have served, once, as a tool-shed, or chicken coop, or rabbit hutch. Another door, at the very head of a small, exterior staircase, and of the exact same dimensions, stood directly over it. Guy Fallows noted that – at that very level – the stones changed colour. They went from grey to blonde: from so many weather-worn, lichen-struck blocks to something pale, faintly golden, like bales of freshly shorn wheat. They did so without any apparent rupture. The tower went on climbing to form a single, harmonious mass, as if the entire structure had not only been conceived but executed in one effortless gesture.

'Quite something,' his son remarked, coming up from behind.

'Quite something,' Fallows agreed.

'Quite a surprise, too, don't you think?' the son asked. The two of them were standing about the base of the dovecote, staring up. A few clouds, blown by a light but persistent wind, made it appear as if the tower itself were moving – and briskly – across the radiant spring sky.

'Yes, quite a surprise, indeed,' Guy Fallows answered.

He had the impression, now, examining its girth, its successive ranks of perfectly matched, overlapping, limestone rectangles, that he wasn't so much *seeing* the stone tower, as *hearing* it. He was listening to the stones as if the stones, in their exquisite joinery, were sounds, and the sounds belonged to some piece of prose he'd always wished – and hopelessly failed – to have written.

Something, altogether, began to stir in Guy Fallows as he gazed at the dovecote. For if the stones 'spoke' to him, they addressed a part of his inner being he'd long since considered closed, as if sealed, impervious to everything but its own darkness. That part lay – he knew – like a hard, resilient core. A tumour. And – with each, succeeding year – had grown only darker, deafer, more malignant.

He needed to know more. Needed to know how something as seemingly incidental as an abandoned bit of rural architecture could 'speak', when virtually everything else in his own life had fallen into silence. He needed – first of all – to return by himself. To bring pencils

and notepaper, maybe even a tape-measure, and gather everything he could about those 'sounds'. Gather everything that lay, it seemed, in a resonant circle, about that whole, deserted work.

'Quite a surprise, quite a surprise,' his son kept repeating as the two of them, now, made their way home. On the narrow footpath back, Andrew Fallows was referring to nothing in particular except, perhaps, some abstract of his own making: of the afternoon, the air about them, and the dissolving (perhaps already dissolved) memory of the grey dovecote that went – at a certain height – straw blonde.

The very next morning, Fallows returned. All night he'd thought restlessly about the tower, about the *pigeonnier* without pigeons. Even in his sleeplessness, though, he hadn't so much seen as 'heard' it: 'heard' its illegible paragraphs, its mute chapters as if laid – in so many dense, hand-quarried blocks – into some totally transparent text. Yes, he was back, the next morning, and delighted to be so.

He took a whole series of notes, at first, on the facture of the work, on the material aspects of its execution. He measured, as well as he could, the dovecote's height and breadth, the circumference of the double belt-courses that ran – looped – about its entire girth. The lower of those two courses, with its delicately fluted gutter, was designed – he knew – to keep rodents from invading the dovecote proper, while the upper of the two served as a kind of circular esplanade upon which the pigeons might strut, or dry their plumage, or simply – as the English say – 'take the air'.

It was on entering the dovecote itself, however, that Fallows had his greatest surprise. He'd climbed the outer stairway, its steps worn smooth as marble and furrowed (both by rain and by sheer, human traffic) deep as the rockers on a child's cradle. Pushing the low, lead-panelled door open now, Fallows looked up. He found himself confronting not so much a structure destined for the specific purpose of bird husbandry, as the tiny, immensely compact interior of some miniature cathedral. For, lining the walls like the pipes of an organ, and rising, in even tiers, clear to the curve of the dome, stood the hand-carved pocket holes in which pigeons, once, had nested. Their droppings, in fact, a phosphorescent white, still streaked the masonry. Over this, as if sprouting from its raised piers, the domed ceiling – a *gloria* unto itself – hung like a floating hood. It lay braced by two, intersecting arches that – languorous as the petals of a lily – came to touch, and, in touching, to support a stout, octagonal keystone. Upon the keystone, in a somewhat rudimentary fashion, a

heart had been carved.

Fallows noted all of this meticulously. And, as he did, he wondered whether what he'd 'heard' in all that keyed stonework hadn't, in reality, been music rather than language. He was enthralled. He spent the entire morning taking what he called 'measure' of the place, knowing that to interpret so much silent dictation, to learn what the stones – the stone-mason – had intended, required, first of all, a material appreciation of the work itself. And the work, he knew, was something considerable.

He looked upon it, that morning, as the ill might look on some reputedly miraculous source. For Guy Fallows, who'd come to question – question and doubt – every aspect of his own existence, the tower stood – in all its splendour and simplicity – as something not only resolved and entire, but, perhaps, redemptive as well.

'Stone by stone, syllable by syllable,' he scribbled into his pocket notebook by way of counsel. It marked, in reality, the very beginning – the first words, the first gesture on that very first morning – of his life's last engagement. Whatever remained of that life would be spent, now, on elucidating that 'silent dictation'.