

# SAMPLER

*A Country Without Names*

ALSO BY MARTIN ANDERSON

POETRY

*The Kneeling Room* \*

*The Ash Circle* \*

*Heard Lanes*

*Dried Flowers*

*Swamp Fever*

*The Stillness of Gardens*

*Black Confetti*

*Belonging* \*

*Snow. Selected Poems 1981–2011* \*

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*The Hoplite Journals I–XXIX* \*

*The Hoplite Journals XXX–LIX* \*

*The Hoplite Journals LX–LXXIX* \*

*An asterisk denotes a Shearsman title.*

Martin Anderson

*A Country  
Without Names*



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*Under Jui-yi Shan* previously appeared in slightly altered form in *Shearsman* magazine, Winter 2017/18. *Road to the North* appeared in the Winter 2018/19 issue also in slightly altered form, and *Flowering Midnight* in the Spring/Summer issue of 2020.

Cover image: Luftwaffe photograph of the September 1940 bombing of Thames-haven oil refineries. The inlet of Hole Haven (bottom left of the photograph) on Fobbing Marsh in the Lower Hope region of the Thames, where the *Nellie* in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was moored close to the Chapman lighthouse, is obscured by thick smoke; but not the rest of the creek meandering, in a north north easterly direction, towards the foot of Fobbing village.

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*In Memory of Campbell Matthews*

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*“In the 1920s British cellist Beatrice Harrison began practicing outdoors [and] nightingales ... began matching her arpeggios with carefully timed trills ... getting used to her they ... burst into song whenever she began to play. In 1924 ... the BBC [recorded her in her garden]. The duet was repeated live each year ... In 1942 ... the recording engineer hearing the droning sound of the beginnings of the Thousand Bomber raid on Mannheim shut off the sound ... A strange soundscape of menacing bombers and incessant nightingales singing ... in the midst of human destruction and violence.”*

—David Rothenberg, *Why Birds Sing*

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## Rock Star Celebrates Birthday at Exclusive Country House Retreat

Faint whiff of Grand Entrait, Clive Christian.  
Beside the helipad, lake and gable-ivy ripple.  
Subservient gravels crunch. The “proud, ambitious heap”  
greet another well-heeled group. Round the inglenook  
at dark babble of toasts under poster mock-up,  
*El Presidente*, of birthday host. Looking down on  
all the plunder, from Famagusta to Ferghana.  
Finial, pediment, alabaster frieze: the frozen flight  
from ennui. It’s dead and scattered parts  
cast in plaster, or bronze. A fixed expression  
of a rapacious age. History narrating profit with loss.  
Celebrity hedonists frolic amid its bric-a-brac.  
Reluctant, atop their leafy sylvan slope, to engage  
with what – head of walrus, polar bear, taxidermy  
of arctic night – beyond all wealth, privilege  
and power, might hold up before them  
a reproving gaze.

## Road to the North

“Homeward you think we must be sailing  
to our own land.”

Homer, *Odyssey* [X: 538-539]

I

Suddenly at the end of day, spectral tree blown  
against the window, my father appears before me, marching  
leading a shabby contingent of ghosts. They pause,  
and then, the sound of half empty canteens  
slopping at their waists, approach. I watch them, as if  
through a stirred-up haze of dust, fragments  
from a broken century, their laughter  
and song drifting, as they march,  
through time's porous and permeable borders  
into our own, dissolving all horizons  
and distances, shedding the dead weight  
of months and years, to appear before  
me, reinvigorated. Ghosts, feeding on my blood.

## II

I ask him how they managed to arrive, unscathed out of that gloom at the world's end. "Although we summoned ourselves" he said "we were loath to come back, knowing the way, that it would hold for us only professed guilt. But for pity of you, and to see you once again and warn you, before the clouds of darkness block, finally, any hope of return ... On the way by which we came, city after city, nothing but a heap of smouldering stones, smoke, soot strewn mosques, hospitals, bodies piled up on pavements, waiting. As if entire countrysides and cities had been offered up as burnt sacrifices to the god Mithra, their odours pleasing to him. An ancient temple to him preserved, parts of it, in the basement of the House of Finance which, as we came closer to you, we saw rising, all steel and glass, like a lance head flashing under cloud, tilting at the very heavens themselves. And all around us at night FIRE the sleepers in untold doorways and hauling, during day, bags stuffed with their possessions from bench to low wall to under a bridge out of the rain. Like those groups of vagabonds listlessly adrift roaming the turnpikes after their land was seized, their towns pulled down about their ears, centuries ago. Home is always the testing ground for cruelties we later export. In fading light we heard the clank of uncoupled cars in the goods yards and, from them, a low and muffled tune of despair. Its refrain rang in our ears, hour after hour..."

### III

He went on, measuring, carefully, his words: "Conscience, as we set out, compelled us to re-visit the very places where we had inflicted so much pain on others; not to relinquish to forgetfulness, by one ounce, the weight of our degeneracy. And to show you, in one broad sweep, both your inheritance and our burden. So we began where experience first indicted us ... Exhausted by heat, some apoplectic, we dropped like flies by the roadside, where they buried us. Our cemeteries marched with us, boon companions. Incised in stone, nameless – most too low in rank to warrant more than 'private soldier' – we were left behind; no loved ones who would come grieving for us later, on that road to the north, Uttarapath they call it, would be able to find where we lay. Wormsmeat. Slowly ingested and excreted; our boots laid with us in that night in case we might rise up and take again to walking..." And I thought I caught on the air, for one instant, the smell of stale sweat and moist leather, of scorching dust.

#### IV

Noticing the torn and scrofulous uppers  
of their boots, I pitied them; that, stirring out of Erebus,  
they'd had to traverse its smoke-filled chasms of  
vaporous, blood-soaked roads to reach us. "My son" he said  
"one need go no further than the nearest manhole and  
pry off its lid, to let the fistula's dark stream that's  
always under your feet, its rustling skin of vapours,  
escape: here; where lies are roared out loud, where  
the deepest vein of villainy is silence. The majority,  
disdaining the stench, slam back the lid at once.  
Few dare to linger over what so deeply offends  
their sense of who they are: saviour or destroyer?  
We are not, my son, what we so flatteringly imagine  
ourselves to be. But comfort makes cowards of us all.  
Let us continue, then, our blighted wanderings  
so you may better grasp our burden, your inheritance..."

“At the edge of desert steppe were groves of date palms. Dates and dung we called it: the camp. D and D. Knee deep in dates. And camel dung: some rolled their cigarettes from it. Little did we know what was to come. And in the evenings we fell about to yarning about our days together on the Grand Trunk Road. Said we remembered most the smells of spices and incense intertwined with dust. Not that they weren’t present where we were. But less intense, varied. Remembered the wayside shrines brightly bedecked, athrong with people. All that colour, farrago of activity. And then the stillness, and the silence after, in shadow under the banyan. Adoze at midday, when the sun was at its highest. Them – not us. Our boots marching, always marching. And the dhaba, the road-side eateries. Flatbreads crisping over coals. And onward it went, over fifteen hundred miles, broad and smiling. Old hands from those parts, with a smattering of Hindi, waxed lyrical (ah, nostalgia, it is a dish one never tires of eating) about the coasts, port-cities where their fathers settled and traded. Where, bunnias told them, even the parrots once spoke in five languages when the trade routes were open and flourished. But where, last century, when our presence became too much of a burden to them, all that remained were soot blackened burnt out bungalows and stations. And then gallows. Lynchings that went on for years. Every ‘nigger’ (one old hand mimicked the distress on the bunnia’s face) they came across strung up. Shot. Or bayoneted. Man. Woman. Child...”

## VI

“Years later, chest deep in water, waiting for the small boats to ferry us, ranged out along the shore, all I could think of was sand and the abandoned roads which, after we’d disembarked at Haifa, ran off into it, the settlements and villages which we pulled down without compunction. And those we left standing, bereft, without a home or food or means of subsistence, in their own country.” His eyes lowered upon his hands, as if suddenly they had become the seat of all impunity, transgression, and stayed there a long time, even after he resumed talking. “And even later still, many years on, after we had left that cold, grey northern coast, re-posted to another, warmer country, in their eyes whenever they met ours, in their pained look of scrutiny, I was reminded.” Again he stopped, again looked at his hands. “Of what?” I asked. “Of fear. In our own. That went unacknowledged. Of the order, months later, to burn. Burn all the crates. So many of them. Crammed with files. And to rake, and re-rake, all the waste, reduced, already, to ash. And to make sure nothing of it survived that was not “broken up”. Fear. Theirs, that gave the order. And ours. In a crateful of ash. So desperate to extinguish what, in all those records of organised violence and inhumanity, proved us inferior to those we slanderously depicted as inferior to ourselves. Fear. Of exposure, and of obloquy...”

## VII

Another of the regiment, flaxen haired, still with the cloud of an untimely death about him, who, with my father, had survived to reach the beaches where they stood waiting to be taken off, but who, weakened by fatigue and cold, had drowned before they could haul him aboard, spoke, in a lifting Antrim accent: "We were, like someone wrote, no more than uniformed assassins. Nothing we, or our leaders, did could atone for the misery we'd inflicted on so many innocent of any crime but trying to live in their own country ruled by their own kind. Fleeing, later, through the city where most of us would eventually embark, I stumbled onto the black cobblestones, tripped by a fallen wire. All the telegraph lines were down. Your father helped me up and I limped off, half walking/trotting and looking frequently back for any sign of the pursuer who, at that very moment, was doing no more, or less, than we had for untold years been doing – crossing the borders of a sovereign country in force to take and claim it as our own. And in some cases, where they wouldn't put up with it, exterminating them." He shivered. Then shuffled. Tugged his collar up... "In truth", my father concurred "it could be said that before we were the victims of those who pursued us, we were their accomplices, preparing the ground for the horrors that were to come..."