

A Posthumous Existence

SAMPLER

ALSO BY NORMAN JOPE

POETRY

For the Wedding-Guest (Stride, 1996)

The Book of Bells and Candles (Waterloo, 2009)

Dreams of the Caucasus (Shearsman, 2010)

Aphinar (Waterloo, 2012)

Golyák és rétesek (translated into Hungarian by Zoltán Tarscay: FISz-Apokrif, 2018)

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A Posthumous Existence

Norman Jope

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CONTENTS

I. AN EERIE PEACE

Travelling Without Moving	11
More Beautiful Than the Moon	13
Famous for Five Seconds	14
Peter Pan Plays Hamlet	16
Once More at the World's End	18
Equidistance	20

II. DETONATED SKIES

Cast into a Trance	29
Faster Than Human Life Can Endure	30
Briefly, the Aegean Becomes Visible	32
Silent Blue	33
Table 12	34
Circumferrovia	35
Igneous Night	36
Vulcan's Detritus	37
Nightsmoke	38
Nosferatu in Saint Peter's Square	39
An Old Man at the Window	40
Umbrella Men	41
A Posthumous Existence	42

III. IN A THEATRE OF SHADOWS

Days and Nights in the Terrarium	45
At This Moment, to the North	53
Deposition	54
Confined to Barracks	56
Lucifer's Playground	58
The Capitulation of the Locusts	60
The Supreme Experiment	61

IV. WHERE THE RED ROAD LEADS

Self-Portrait As Franz Walsch	71
Celluloid Is Colder Than Love	73
Where Dreamers Drown Alive	74
A Silvery Scythe	75
Indecipherable Miles	76
Assignation	77
In Late Autumn	78
Two Miles High	79
Concealment	80
A Dead Man Climbs to His Grave	81
Seven Billion Reasons	82
Broken Flowers	83
Zeit	84

V. A FUTURE HOUR

Interior	87
Toxic Shock	92
Spectre on a Swing	94
Triumph of the Mundane	97
A Tightrope Laid on the Ground	99
Aurora	100

For Lynda, still officially European, with love

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I

An Eerie Peace

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TRAVELLING WITHOUT MOVING

I've come to rest on a Friday evening, nailed by rain.
A gale blows from the direction of Trafalgar,
bringing in nowhere's voice. Bereft of answers, I type.
There's nowhere to go tomorrow that will not be wet.
There's a city outside my window that I know so well
that I can close my eyes and navigate its streets,
moving from one postcode to another,
from the Dockyard cranes to the Sainsburys mast.
By taking it in over half a century
in four dimensions, have I turned it to spirit?

As if it had never been done before, I reel off street names.
(but I did it long ago). They bound from the A-Z like dogs.
On Ebrington Street, I see that Jeremy and Ché
are at the Bread and Roses and the Scientologists haven't locked up.
On Union Street, the clientele at Jesters are doing anything but laugh.
On Royal Parade, there's a crouching statue the size of Mount Fuji.
Need this be linear? And need I inscribe
a coherent course across the city? Not at all, I am free
to shift from one street to another, one postcode to another,
On Honicknowle Green, I summon the angel.
On Normandy Way, I sight the Loch Ness Monster lookalike
of the Brunel Bridge and think of the times I've crossed into Cornwall.
On Mutley Plain I get my hair cut. On Morshead Road, I collect my laundry
and place a bet that I know won't win. On Outland Road I put my head in
my hands
and long for the endless journey to work to end. On Looseleigh Lane
I search for bats on a summer evening, drunk with mellow twilight.

This is the freedom of the city. On one of the two Molesworth Roads
I say hello to my parents. On the other, I ascend to the Blockhouse.
At home, I return to my body and yet again realise
I'll stop moving when I'm dead and my ashes are at rest.
All this experience, where does it lead?
A Rilkean, angelic city builds itself inside my head
that I access on a Friday evening, nailed by rain.

There's no need to go out, to check that it's still there
when it is always there. I resist the urge to peer through the curtains.

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MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN THE MOON

after Paul Bowles

'Where the music leads, I follow'
although it does not lead. It circles and swirls
until this evening is elsewhere.
I descend stone steps at the call to prayer
beneath a sapphire sky.
Seeking adventure and auspicious fate,
I court the whore in her tent, who pretends
that she's a princess *and* a constellation.
There are murmurings from the other tents
but, even now, I know where my wallet is
and my name remains on my passport.
What value resides in experience
when, in time, the mind goes blank,
its novas and starships vanished from view?
'Amass it nonetheless' say the sages,
'because you're helping God to be'.
I add to the archive with this woman,
showing her my wallet as I leave...
then kicking at her friends as I scale the stile
on my way to a rumpled, unmade bed.

FAMOUS FOR FIVE SECONDS

He laid down his horn for six years straight.
There were rumours of ground-breaking masterpieces
that he, too weary to deny, allowed to spread
through silent streets. Instead, he grew his hair
and perfected his limp. Across the ocean
there were songs of imaginary birds
that competed from treetops and clouds.
For my part, I seek solace in the amplified chaos
of Ax Genrich's guitar and, planning nothing
of importance at this dangerous time,
I beam myself down to a timewarp squat
in Kreuzberg, Schwabing or Altona
and search in vain for the amazing woman
in the knee-length coat in the Can video
from 1971. I accept that this is an excuse
for neither engaging with the themes of the day
nor researching the erudite juggernauts
of the prize-winning poems I refuse to write.
So Guru Guru chunter on, the drummer changing his mind
with every chord. And what of the future
they possessed, the thoughts they might have had
of 2016? It was scary even then
but did not include Facebook, Twitter or Snapchat.
The thought that anyone could *lift* a computer
would have seemed absurd. For six years, he festered
in his New York apartment, scoring coke
and entertaining whores whilst wishing
that his hip was still good. My obstacles seem petty
in the face of such frustration. Still, I imagine a world
in which there is nothing that I have contributed,
in which I can only listen and watch
and in which my passing leaves
not even the slightest attempt
to make my mark. And what, in any case, is silence
but a space in which the listener can be freed
from all definition? His masterpieces

are beyond decipherment and the birds of his era
are long since dead. I can only imagine the peace
that will prevail
when I am gone.

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PETER PAN PLAYS HAMLET

There are brief June evenings, when a new moon
appears at sunset over the cranes
to bulge like a foetus as nights give way
to even longer days that commence
in a restlessness of seagulls
in these litter-strewn back lanes.
My life has come this far
to an eerie peace, a ritualistic pause
where long-anticipated traumas
knock at the glass with ectoplasmic hands.
How soon before a crack, a shattering
and no quick return to an equilibrium
I know that I'll value more in hindsight?
Let time stop here, I pronounce
but am nonetheless bored. Outside,
the sherbet offerings explode
at the end of the murmuring concert –
there'll be silence in the early hours,
seagull squadrons mopping up,
a moment in which I'll stir
in need of a piss, with my prostrate
swollen and stiff. I won't look
at the bedside alarm as I return –
just curtains concealing precarious night.
I may come to die on a night like this
I think, but who may die
from the ones I love before me?
In later life, there's a surfeit of ghosts
and remembered bodies thirty years old.
I will lie there in crepuscular dark
that disperses too soon and leaves me awake,
reaching for an eye-mask in the summer dawn,
clenching dread like a second heart.
It's no simple angst. From the vantage
of my living room window, the city's skyline
is a wall that I cannot see through.

As I sit behind closed curtains I imagine
such a rapid night, that when I repair
to my east-facing bedroom, the dawn
will have mustered already. One more night
of my life's allocation would have passed
and I'd fall behind time by another night.

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ONCE MORE AT THE WORLD'S END

Plymouth, July 2016

Overhead is the drizzly sky
of a maritime city at midnight.
The nights are lengthening once more
as rain-clouds swell in the west.

I want for nothing. Rypdal's Rolling Stone
is in my ears once more.
There's a faint unease in my gut.
It's so hard to believe that anything mattered.

Britain slides away from Europe
like an iceberg destined to melt
into seven seas of bullshit.
I wipe my arse on the Daily Express

but in metaphor only
from a sanitised distance.
My mission now is to hide
like a bird in the reeds, recovering.

Rypdal's guitar sings out
as midnight approaches.
I remind myself, strategically,
that my pension's only ten years away.

How absurd is this life
that has taken no time,
that has placed me in this armchair
to keep vigil on a night like this.

Trump and Putin, Erdoğan and Orbán
hide behind my back and point.
My time's a time of exclusion and meanness.
I hide like a bittern in the thick green reeds.