

The Rest of the World

SAMPLER

ALSO BY NORMAN JOPE

For the Wedding-Guest (Stride, 1996)

The Book of Bells and Candles (Waterloo, 2009)

Dreams of the Caucasus (Shearsman, 2010)

Aphinar (Waterloo, 2012)

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*For Lynda, my partner in a thirty-five-year flight,
and for a soft landing to come.*

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Virtual voyages

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GEO-DELIRIUM

Succumbing to the temptations of Google Earth, I travel manically from place to place whilst, to my right, the view from the window remains unchanged apart from the flight of a chaffinch and the trembling of a bush.

From Prague to Patmos, from Plympton South Australia to its originating namesake, all journeys are equal. The cyber-plane takes off and, after moments of blur, one lands in the place that one has named as if for the very first time.

‘All this shall be yours’ he said ‘if you will bow down and worship me’. Greedy for the spaces of earth, I land in the rocky brilliance of Patmos and enter the Cave of the Apocalypse. There’s a white wall with a recess for the saint’s head... outside, the burning slopes that are still set in a sapphire sea on a February night, as if the seasons had become an irrelevance.

From Patmos I return to Dunwich via Sighisoara – a journey that would take a number of days, traversed in moments. I arrive – first scrambled then unscrambled – in a back street of stucco-fronted houses. The Transylvanian countryside can be glimpsed to the right. It is as quiet as when I walked that street over six years ago, but my absence taunts me as I move my mouse in the direction of the Saxon graveyard.

In Dunwich, I look for Sebald in the only street – a street surprisingly devoid of historical atmosphere, neat like a cul-de-sac in a suburb. Driving, or walking, or perhaps flying to the beach I find myself circling, panning the view and aware that, with a few strokes of the keyboard, I can return home... if such a concept still holds meaning.

NORDKAPP

Driving north on the E69 in a vehicle of air, I see that it is April. Despite this, snow covers most of the ground and what is uncovered is a ruddy brown tundra. On either side, there are views of distant cliffs and the Barents Sea deflects equinoctial light. The sky is almost metallic in its pale blues and pinks.

There is not a trace of life in sight, no hare, no ptarmigan, no midge. I pass through the checkpoint, beyond the superfluous speed sign that fixes my velocity, by law, at seventy kilometres an hour – but the speed of the connection holds me back and, as I advance, the landscape blurs into jagged pastel shards and Turner-esque washes.

Beyond the checkpoint whose red and white barrier is as incongruous here as an orange grove, playing Terje Rypdal's 'Rolling Stone' through my headphones, I register the cold with my eyes but not my skin. Impasto icings layer the landscape and wheel-tracks pierce them like *sastrugi* – up ahead, the Vilfred Pettersen hut is a flattened pagoda and the raised sphere of the Nordkapphallen is the captured moon of another planet.

Here the road ends, even though the music persists and Svein Christiansen's delicate drumming, all cymbals and syncopation, under- and over-scores Rypdal's guitar as the obelisk shines mutely and, at the entrance to the hall, the exact latitude of 71 degrees 10 minutes 21 seconds north is displayed in white on yellow.

I stand there for a moment, lost in contemplation of the uncountable miles behind me. I register the cold with my mind and not my skin, but it still exhilarates with its chill.

SEALS IN STROMNESS

for Roderick Muncey

In a smashed-up whaling station recessed into the corner of a city gallery, we watch sleet fall as we feel it with our minds. That is cold enough on a mild day in British winter, when traffic merges with the grunting of fur seals that have taken over the dismantled fittings and rotting furniture. They forage pointlessly across the shambled floor, or lie in shadows gaping like dossers. They arrange themselves in formation on the beach, beside a crumbling pier, watching grey surf as sleet's blown in. They lollop like Malone and the Unnameable. They move their bulk like cattle crossing a farmyard on the *puszta*. They investigate the wreckage like the Stalker and his companions. The world has ended and the aftermath is ruination, sleet on bare hillsides, an indifferent tribe of reindeer moving their sinews at the holocaust's verge.

We watch sleet fall, we stay for a second and third screening... amused and dazzled by the repetition. It is during the third screening that the salt princess appears with her retinue of short-term courtiers. She offers us a paragraph of her own interpretation but, no matter how eloquent her words, they are as nothing to the silence of the camera, the stillness of images that embody our extinction.

As if baffled by our indifference to her words, she withdraws her crocodile of eager families with the tart riposte – 'let's leave those guys to their fur seals'. But the seals were only the psychopomps. *There are still songs to be sung*, as has again been proved, *on the other side of humankind*.

This piece is based on a video by Simon Faithfull, shown at the Peninsula Art Gallery, Plymouth as part of the 'Landscapes of Exploration' exhibition (January – March 2012). This Stromness is located in South Georgia, not the Orkneys.

IN CORLEONE

Outside the Central Bar, a young man in a ski jacket keeps watch – there's something tucked under his arm but it's impossible to tell what it is. Beside him, a painting of three rustics adorns the bar. Each has something sharp in their hand but it's impossible to tell what from this angle. On the other side of the door, there's a poster advertising Il Padrino – a herbal liqueur in a long slim violet bottle. It's almost impossible to see inside and impossible to step through that door from here. Only a man in a bottle-green coat and navy jeans, half-obsured, his back to the camera, evades my curiosity.

Everywhere, as expected, the plasterwork is peeled and venerable and there's a worn-down balcony on every facade. There are very few people about at this time of the morning in the evening, as I glide from street to street on a milk-white vector. Up the Via Roma and back down again, to the Via Bentivegna, taking in the electric air, watching for signs of intrigue I am invisible – unlike the vehicle from which this footage was taken – scanning faces that have been thoughtfully blurred so that even the girls, on the poster outside the Solo Gioielli boutique, are as inscrutable as sphinxes.

In this day without a date, at this time without a time, I am unwelcome but nobody knows it – this is not a place, I think, that would betray its secrets without a price. I recall the hilltop towns I know and compare Corleone to Shaftesbury and Launceston, imagining the murderous mobs that they might have secreted under conditions of heat and poverty.

At an elevation of 558 metres above sea level, passing a stray brown dog, I exit by way of the Via Spatafora but the road is blocked by the disappearance of my possible route. Perhaps – given all I've seen – it's as well that I'm able to emerge unscathed with a single click of the mouse.

ON A ROAD NEAR MEZŐTÚR

The rutted road is reaching into the *puszta* on a January day. There are so many puddles that it would be possible to leap from one to the next, all the way down, without touching dry land. On either side of the rutted road, anorexic aspens are fixed in a wind that is also fixed – in this permanent moment, it is completely without force.

On either side of the road, there are also *tanyák* – isolated farmsteads – visible across wide, ploughed empty fields that the snow has either left or has not yet fallen on. It's mild for January and the *puszta* is brown, not white. There's nothing to be seen, neither beast nor bird, and the silence is absolute – only yellow post boxes break the monotony, and fly-tipped garbage like entropic flowers.

At the far end of the road, the footage gives out and a muddy track continues to who knows where. For this is where the eyes turn back. They swivel full circle, taking in the emptiness and muteness on every side. They are as homeless as probes from another galaxy – landing on earth at random, drinking in what little evidence there is at the end of a long and rutted road.

That muddy track might lead, across the Carpathians and the Ukrainian steppe, into the very centre of Asia. And that baleful sky will certainly lead to constellations that hide from sight – as if everywhere were near and simultaneously thwarted. This still life comes to life once more as I watch it, turning one more circle before heading back to my desk.

MOLDOVA

Fate propels me there, with my tiny pension and my neighbours plotting as I sit on the veranda of my cottage, in a village three hours' grimy-windowed bus-ride from the capital, and drain draught after draught of cheap wine like the doctor draining apricot brandy in *Sátántangó*. I will enter my eighth decade learning a new language with headstrong incompetence, a Rich Man from the West who is not rich at all and does not understand anything, who is swindled with justification by handymen with large families to feed, who is propositioned by women a third of his age although his erections, these days, are almost exclusively in the mind. I will be the perfect subject for a film that is never made as my friends send e-mails from the depths of Devon and the backwoods of freezing, pristine Canada, as I skype them on dial-up knocking over everything and staring into the webcam like a Seventies police sergeant giving his suspect the treatment. You, my lover, will be giving English lessons exactly a thousand miles to the east, as now, which probably places you somewhere in Kazakhstan. I will apply the usual forbearance as I learn to draw wood and chop water, then learn to learn from my mistakes – out at sunset, watching the clouds turn dark over vine-and-sunflower covered hills of the Moldovan interior, having no home but the death I still stave off at any cost, enjoying the flora and fauna and reading the books I stacked up in my more prosperous fifties. What innocence fate has in store for me! I think, contemplating this land that is named after a drowned dog in a fable, the poorest in Europe and the only one without a guidebook to its name... its shape the very shape of my fate, its undeserved failures my own, its wine the blood that flows in my veins. I can smell its cigarette smoke as I write and sense its undulations under my feet.