

by the same author

The Brown Parrots of Providencia

Who Goes There?

Mrs Power Looks over the Bay

Gas Light & Coke

Fergus Allen

*Before
Troy*

B *editions*

for Joan, Mary and Liz

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[Reckonings

Misguided

Sir, sir, you have just boarded the stopping train to Quetta,
the express to Lahore is standing at platform eight
and is scheduled to pull out in two minutes exactly.
A porter will transfer your heavy luggage, but hurry,
the coaches are crowded, the express is never late.

I made it, and now the irrigated plains of Sind
pass without looking for notice; my eyes vaguely wander
over land thinly crusted with salt as though with frost,
over hard-up villages, the raj surveyor's bungalow,
a river crossing under threat from the stream's meandering.

As we thunder and clatter over a girder bridge,
buffalo passing the time of day among the reeds
can't be bothered to lift their heavy skulls from their musings
to see us on our way. Beyond them vultures reluctantly
lift themselves off a carcass as the train recedes.

Someone called Aziz is telling me of his misfortunes,
but he is looking for sympathy rather than cash,
and that I can provide. Across the aisle an enfolded
person I take to be female, like Mrs Aziz,
eyes me intently over her modestly raised yashmak.

The land rises around us, the locomotive gasps
as we forge through juniper woods and climb to a plateau
and a half-naked universal child runs and waves
when we pass in our grimy unlubricated carriages.
Aziz nibbles green chillis to make himself sweat.

They'd told me I was setting off for the sacred mountains,
where the souls of parrots would erupt from the acacias
and nights on an unyielding charpoy would be rewarded
by a kindly bearer bringing cornflakes in the morning,
but of all this I see no sign. Where are the Himálayas?

What I see are thorn bushes and clouds of dust and faith,
whose invisible followers know that they know better.
We trundle for hours across the next thing to a desert
before the brakes discipline our wheels, and here we are
steaming slowly into a station that could be Quetta.

In the Polder

Broedermans, with his pale eyelashes,
Shouted up to me from the polder,
'Hey, mensch!'

I was up on the dike,
Morose and not much liking Broedermans,
Whose short hair was like harvest stubble.
I don't know why, but his red face

Put me in mind of butchers' shops
And their selections of cooked meats.
There he was, hoeing his root vegetables
In the dark soil, as though his future
Depended on the extirpation
Of all living plants without permits.

'Get the goose quills out of your hair!'
I shouted back in bloody-mindedness,
Not caring what might be the case.
'And wipe your bottom with a dock leaf,'
I went on, meeting expectations
Of what was looked for from my folk.

A seagull sniggered overhead,
As always the North Sea existed
In a random slappy way, deadpan
About its regrettable history.
Steeple rose somewhere in the background,
Seeking attention but not getting it.

All in all contentment was absent;
I turned my mind away from Broedermans'
Private life and personal habits
As one might arrange not to see
Things ugly, unkind or malodorous
And tried to think of art and nature.

But Broedermans wouldn't let up.
Because of one Sumatran grandmother
My skin is wheat, my eyes are jet
(No shortage of happy girlfriends),
So Broedermans shouts 'Hey, tar-baby,
Come down and earth up my potatoes.'

I bust a gut, I pulled my thumb
Figuratively out of the dike
And the North Sea came to my aid.
I screamed, 'I am a Vanderwerken,
You shall die, soon, so very soon.'
Then I seized something like an oar

And as the turbid water gushed
Into the fertile polder, Broedermans
Floated up, shaking his blunt head,
Spluttering, and I rammed the oar
Down on his nasty skull and pushed,
And did it again, and he floated,

Waterlogged and out for the count,
So I pushed again to make sure.
'Hey, Broedermans,' I shouted,
'Now you can dive for your potatoes.
You were never my brother, Broedermans,
But I've slept in your double bed.'

Dying in Naples

Five storeys up beside an open window
With rags for curtains waving in the breeze
A blind radio is singing its heart out
To the tenement-dwellers whose washing
Flutters over the alleyway like bunting.

Not wandering but bedridden, philosopher
And excommunicant Scarpio, sacked
Without a pension, lies in semi-trance,
Approaching death. The music holds the reins,
Guides the visions sitting astride his chest –

Those strobe-lit figures that caper and yelp
As the palpitating tempo drives them on.
Where was the state of lazy sensuality
He had looked forward to, but also feared
Might clash with his awkward eschatology?

Peering through rheum and floaters at the casement
He just makes out the mountain, wisps of steam
Wavering above its rim as a reminder
Perhaps of what is stored within the mantle
And the chthonic deities he used to worship.

In Morocco

Down the dim tiled passage to the street door,
through reeded glass I see the fluctuating
form of someone in a jellaba passing
towards the medina, afreet perhaps
or a figure from Blake's prophetic books,
gowned, on its way to spiritual excess.
The street is silent, the seagulls have turned in,
the sun has been shot down over Atlanta,
the lighthouse sends out a familiar message.

Drop-outs and aliens are into drugs,
but sober virgins – Fatima, Hanane –
are at their laptops, asking the ether
to bring them assignations, mates, romance,
and answers flow in from the wilds of Islam.
So who is kidding, who speaks from the heart?
Their mothers joke and laugh, and overhead
there's flapping and a trying out of wings,
where the white storks are planning to depart.

Before Troy

I rested under an evergreen oak
And casually scuffed my shoes in the dust,
Empty espresso cup cooling beside me
With a sugar-loving fly making enquiries.
(Of course it might have been an acacia,
But no, no, I think it was a holm oak.)

So I sat quietly under the holm oak,
The dregs of the stimulant at my elbow.
Music of sorts emanated from somewhere,
Twangy, with an attention-seeking rhythm.
A dog I'd have called a pye-dog in India
Sidled around, keeping a slant eye open.

It was hot, sitting there under the ilex,
Staring at the hotel across the square
Where the rowdies had started on their drinks
Though the alcohol had yet to kindle.
My dusty shoes moved a bit to the music,
Though half-heartedly, blood not really stirred.

Hey! from the top floor and its shutters smoke
Writhes up and flames symbolically flicker,
And out of the doorway runs Helen wailing
With the rowdies rising up after her.
'Alexandrus!' she screams, and bares her breasts.
Growls from the rowdies. Then everyone stops,

Including the man with the video camera,
Who's been walking backwards in front of Helen,
Eye pressed to the viewfinder. Someone shouts –
Whereon they all relax and take it easy.
A make-up girl powder-puffs Helen's breasts,
The rowdies giggle and order real drinks

And, subito, the music is cut off.
I linger on under the evergreen oak
At what is now established as my table,
The fly ventures a landing on the rim
Of my long-cold but sugary coffee cup,
The pye-dog settles down beside my chair.