

Ahead of Us

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DENNIS HASKELL

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The things we shrink from are the things we make poetry out of.

Peter Porter

... all that we love will escape us sooner or later, and
we cling to it as if it should endure eternally.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

i.m. Rhonda Haskell (1947–2012)

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CHANCE

CHANCE: A CONVERSATION

Chance, I know that my chances
of having a conversation with you
are slight, at the very best, I
know it's no use taking exception
to your presence, but what on earth
are you doing in this life? Your place
seems so arbitrary; and
if we could sit down together
I know the talk would be hopelessly

haphazard, since love could lead swiftly to gardens to garbage,
a line of poetry might read
"kohl adrift more she role ti dah".
There are those sure your heart belongs to Dada
but you know its heart belongs to you.
So around the world we'd go on a
marvellous, maddening, richly frustrating excursion
in which go is only occasionally distinguishable from woe.

Some think you are not the ultimate
in godliness, which you find a glorious test;
you who know no meaning know meaning best.
Only when we get to death, in
which you see you have a role, we part company.
You say, "In the end that's the subject
which is for you, but is not for me".

NEVER

The surreal numbers flicker like
eyelids, 100 kph, 150, 200,
the nitrogen-filled tyres now
more skittering than turning, whistling
to the ground like a fingertip touch
at parting, 250, then suddenly
we are clear out of this world,
its scattered lights that had stood
above us at intersections, tending fragile
corners, lonely doors, now patterned
crazings on a glazed painting. Cézanne
was correct – there are only two
dimensions: them and us. And here,
above life, there is nothing
we would wish never end
but the never of ending.

THE GIFT

Small clouds flock outside the window
like phlegm in the sky's throat
that we fly into, hoarser and hoarser,
the engines coughing above cut outs
of paddy fields, deep olive green
plantations intersected by water,
and dry strips of land, where men
and women work: nature is being
put in its place. Lower and lower

until we are being whispered about
by destiny, or chance. We hang
dangling at speed, in fragile air;
but today luck chooses us, the
headlines will escape our names, we will enter
the miraculous serenity of procedures,
of routines, all our fear buckled up
in a gift of banality, of schedules
that even we will quickly forget;

then the rumble and crack of wheels
on the ground, hooked by gravity and
weighty again. The most valuable
elements of our lives are hardly noticed.
Now the sun's gleaming off the wings
and we're heading homeward in the light
at last unperturbed by its luminous
and utterly ordinary silence.

FRENCH POEMS:

LA CATHÉDRALE NOTRE DAME

What would Our Lady, or anyone's, think
as uncaring crowds swarm past
her buttresses, and flashbulb lights
far outnumber the flights
of prayers? An amplified male alto
soars like a linnet through the Gothic aisles,
unquestionably glorious. Stone everywhere as if
to keep the earth out. A brilliant father offers
confession in French, English, Italian, Japanese.

Jean Verdier, Jean Juvénal des Urse sleep
secure in their improbable faith, in
this belief museum, amidst circular
candelabras of devotion, their
deepest 'truth' barely flickering. Yet
uncertainty is a kind of grief. The cameras assert
a dearth of ideas. People exit, troop off
to the awful Tower. Bones seem stronger
than belief, yet they also rot in earth.

REMEMBERING JEAN MOULIN

Remembering the scarf-necked, firm
and almost smiling face of Jean Moulin,
I looked at the statuesque,
almost imperial Arc de Triomphe,
turned and walked with a few
thousand other hurrying, dawdling,
window-gazing, free and fanciful faces
along the vision-wide boulevards, the
expansive paths of the Champs Élysées:
feet and cars and motorscooters,
and dead, wet leaves; Peugeot, Swatch,
Louis Vuitton tout en or, Lacoste
beside Fouquet's grand brasserie,
Galeries des Champs and the Galerie des Arcades,
Sephora's infinite rows of cosmétiques,
Les Comptoirs de Paris, while Yves
Rocher offered nature for a price,
a literary collection mentioned
"Les Écrivains et la Mélancolie".
Whatever's wrong with them
Club Méditerranée will take you away
from the Mediterranean, the paradisaic fields,
the peck-peck-pecking green-necked pigeons
where your purse or wallet speaks
its triumphant Esperanto, and
lights are strung out in the trees.

[Jean Moulin was leader of the French Resistance during World War II]

AFTER ROISSY

Having endured what no-one could call
a good night's sleep, not half a night
but at least some, I lumbered towards Liège
on a slow country train. More sleep
than you, My Love, would have had
after quitting Roissy Airport,
Paris glittering far below,

and I calculated the minutes when
you must have stumbled
off the plane, and gone straggling
through Changi, your head
tired, your eyes struggling open,
ankles swollen, your legs
enjoying being legs again, the
muscles stretching, the blood
starting to flow freely. Outside,
a chimney belching great
gouts of smoke, as from
an old train, white cows
head down in lush grass,
a potholed track down which
two women push infants, ragged
clothes strung out on a ragged line.

When you stepped behind
those slicing doors, reality
simply walked away. So I sit here and yet
step along Changi's carpeted floors,

past the resplendent orchid displays,
past shining perfume shops,
past iPod and CD players, beckoning
like insinuations of happiness.

Time goes on
no matter what we do or say,
and from my window
the twisting roads, the
crooked-back farmhouse roofs,
the cigarette-chimneyed towns,
and the long, flat fields
of Belgium
stretch far away.

THE TREES

It is a cloudy day when the light
does not seem ours by right
but only borrowed, and all time looks
much later than it deserves to be.
The land leans out of the window
at your elbow towards where a sunrise
of thought, of ideas, of understanding
should be. Trees mark out distances
like goals, and there are more of them
than your mind, or the light,
can hold. What are they doing there
to you? What are you doing here
racing through the uncontrolled landscape
of your life, all the stations
that will be given to you?
Near clouds clot the air and early
darkness is closing in like fear.

CHINA POEMS:

POEM BEGINNING WITH A LINE BY LI PO

“Our floating life is like a dream ...”

In 1775 Shen Fu, about Yün, their lives
already entwined: “I asked for the manuscripts
of her poems and found that they
consisted mainly of couplets and three
or four lines, being unfinished ... I wrote playfully
on the label of this book ... and did not realise
that in this case lay the cause
of her short life.” Beginning
Six Chapters of a Floating Life.

Tianjin, Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing ladies and men
by tens of thousands on tens of thousands
of bicycles, mopeds, motorscooters, motorbikes,
gauze their faces, handkerchief their mouths,
so many particles of dust and lead
pixel the air. The clouds ache, then
mud and uncertainty pour onto streets
while the wind swings its shrill seizures
all around my windows, nature’s opera
makes an immediate audience of millions.

And pausing over Shen Fu and Yün,
their lives afloat, I think
of our single lives, of last year, when
death almost swept you away.
In Hangzhou, Ferrari, Versace, Louis Vuitton
arc the magnificent West Lake,
obelisks of apartments arrow the ground

like headstones for the living.
As far as anyone’s eye can see
the small, ancient villages are being swept

into the prim nostalgia of history. Now
stinky tofu in the streets, Starbucks,
azaleas in flower, a traffic soldier’s shrill
whistle – ignored – the rush of feet
fills the street, and the next street, and the next, and the ...
Dodging battalions of legs, on pedals, flat to floors,
coming from a three-quarters empty country
the faces come toward me, staring straight ahead,
too many to think the “What if?”
of other possibilities.
I find it hard to believe in

individuality, that each gaze has
in mind fears, whispers, expectations;
Chinese count in numbers so enormous
they add up to anonymity.
No matter how many faces you see
there are always more, no matter
how many arms and hands you touch
there are always more, no matter
how many motorbikes and voices you hear
there are always more ...

And beginning here without you My Love,
surrounded, drenched in this dense, teeming life,
I feel as if the world itself were short of breath,
floating,
and all China a stretch of long silence.

AT THE MARCO POLO HOTEL

When Marco Polo went to Hangzhou, long ago,
he had beauty and bewilderment to go;
now he can rest in a hotel that tourism feeds:
it is especially designed to meet you all needs.

Located in the luggage desk, we provide you with
the service of transportation and savings for free.
We are not responsible for any loss or damage
while you are check-out. If you are stolen
call the police.

Satellite TV channels are available for details.
Please refer to your TV program.
The water from the gap in the bathroom
can not be drunk directly.

Café Le Mediterranean – It is located on the
17th floor. To enjoy the best beautiful
panoramic view of West Lake while
savouring typical local tidbits,
this is a real life.

Each floor equipped with modern Fire Prevention
System, Please does not move casually
except emergency.
Civilization does not reach for the sky,
neither do we.

No encounters with members
of the opposite sexes in the rooms that
is what the lobbys is for.
Guests are invited
to take advantage of the chamber maid.

Be prepared for danger
in times of safety.
We have only one earth, just like
we have only one pair of eyes.

And at every turning, then and now,
Marco's and your eyes
meet mischievous surprise.

TAPPING

My Love, that odd window knocking
you no doubt remember
I never heard
“till there was you”

is simply the tapping
of yellow-beaked Singapore birds
as they fly from scrawny cats.

I hear it nightly, that tapping
sharp in the air. You’ve gone and

all I hear now is clear and spare
as if everything stood outside me.

Sentimental Beatles songs I play
soar over flurries of cats and birds

– you once said the wish
to recapture youth, to tumble over
the cliff face of the past

“is the first sign of senility”.
In Singapore’s absurd, befogging heat

I want desperately to write you
a poem of the scrawniest simplicity

to tap and beak inside you,
flown into a language
full beyond words

from the flurry of my feelings,
from the pit of my life
where I am now,
as dumb as the animals.