

Nine Poems
Robert Selby

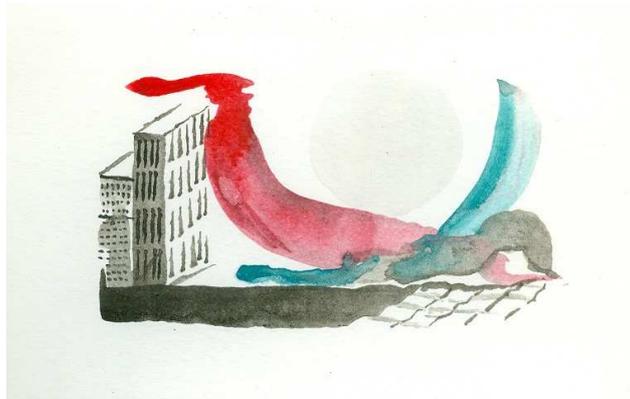
illustrations by Catherine Williams

Roster

I'm putting my pyjamas on
as you're slipping yours off
in the dawn of Hong Kong.

Pink light licks the skyscrapers
where you are. Here, I write
night's confessional diary

sleep-shy above the duvet,
as you apply green mascara,
fly into a new blue day.



New World Order

I think of you at the cosmetics counter,
the old you, dallying with mascara,

nervous for the flight attendant training
in Hong Kong, home of your parents' people.

I can see you now letting your hair down
at the skyscraper waterfront after long days

synthetically pert, your finessed smile
turning heads in quayside congee bars

like the noonday gun from Causeway Bay.
I recall Chris Patten crying in the rain

of the harbour at midnight's handover,
the rain caving off Charlie's naval brim;

see you, holding a mac over yourself,
exit a taxi at Hong Kong International,

a decade on, but the same island rain,
the desire to execute the inevitable

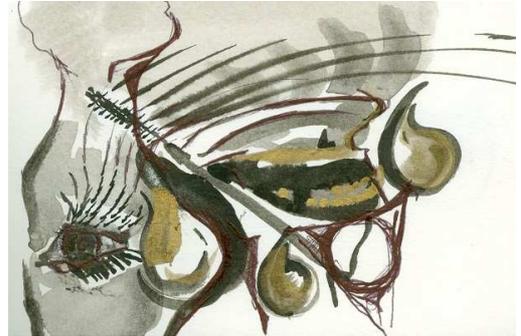
swiftly, to minimise the pain. In love,
as in leases. The night ties vaporised

in concertos of colour, Patten flew home
to a crowd of no-one, a jobless no-name,

his tasselled governor's hat crumpled
in a traveller bag, the pomp gone east.

You'll land and on the homeward drive
exude the unrest of the qualified,

the host body invaded, a new flag flying.
I'll be in the driver's seat, petrified.



You Were Always Practical

I noticed your nails
were varnished crimson-gore,
like congealed blood, but dark,
almost black: very Goth.

Though of course, I realised later,
you were always practical –
they were fake –
and you could take them off.



Airport Hotel Room

The jet stream has pulled back and rain
raps against an airport hotel
where triple glazing keeps a marathon
from drowning out the aviation.
A titillating jinker of headboard
confirms to other guests their own
inadequacy, informs room service
to leave the tray by the door.
Monkey legs and marble-smooth doll's legs
exchange dominance.

A rainbow arcs
a diminuendo climax to rain and sex.
The goblin green headboard sways to a stop.
There is crimson lipstick on a glass teacup.
A blazer hangs from a trolley case's handle.
There is the sound of draining water,
a news channel in a neighbouring room.
A ceiling receives two serotonin smiles.
Caught between a going and a getting there,
the glib world of termini glistens.
I get up to make tea, you take
a shower as your next flight beckons.



Airport Hotel Bar

I have a favourite mental picture
and you walk from the lift to become it.
It's all in the posture: back straight,
posterior out, chin a confident jut.
Trolley case trailing in your wake, you glide,
make eyes at reception flutter
as you return the key. Cathay's pride.

Do I know you? In some ways yes indeed.
I've seen your bare back in a bathroom,
your breasts in its mirror.
I've seen the bruises on your geisha legs
where passengers have hit with their luggage.
I've seen the inside of your make-up bag,
its supernumerary scented lotions.

I've sweated in your ecstatic motions.
I've seen you individualise a tea cup
by drinking from it with a crimson kiss,
seen you rearrange bed sheets with a whisk
of the wrists. I've watched you memorise
the safety drill for your next flight
by sleeping like a baby all night.

I've seen you blossom from a duvet cocoon,
then felt your eyes set the day's agenda.
I've seen how you look shy talking into
a phone when someone else is in the room;
seen you eat plaice and chips from a tray,
paint your fingernails in the lachrimae
of butterflies. I've seen your panties strewn

across a room as after dormitory frolics.
In other ways I don't know you so well.
I have yet to see you in civvy dress,
or sit for a second, with nothing to do.
But when you spot where I am at the bar
and pull up a stall, ordering an Appletiser,
the vacant, decaf jet set are the none the wiser.



Christmas Market

I'm in Covent Garden wishing you were too.
I keep seeing things that would excite you;
Bavarian sausages to attempt, reindeer
to Pet on the Piazza, a fairy-lit street café

where we could sip chai tea and tease,
from each other, humorous festive memories.
I hope they lay things on just as well
in Hong Kong. I'm sure it's no less packed

with the underlying hysteria
that sweats off shoppers at this time of year.
You're buying presents for twenty people
without breaking sweat: a patient saint.

It's hard not to feel jealous of the couples
who, in sharing their shopping experience,
are driving each other to distraction,
reddened in impatience with each other,

or the opposite; fortified with mulled wine,
groping in a mistletoe-less corner,
harking back to the dens of iniquity
that frolicked here during the Regency.

You would love the moving light balloon,
the opera singer, the knickknack stalls
selling scented candles, myrrh perfume.
You'd be wide-eyed in your winterware.



Going Places

The future is from the east.
Chinese girls on the Tube, hosiered and heeled,
are clothes-horse conquerors annexing us
with a politeness long since forsaken here.

Languages of runic conservatism,
Cantonese and Mandarin cadence about the platform;
quick, like *I want you now*, whispered like foreplay.
They are tonemically finding their way,

like bats, in our Victorian dark.
There's always a place for history, but how shocked
they must be at London's transport antiquity.

But the Tube, stuck between stops, is a library
of happy faces, a slap-and-tickle of patient voices.
They know they are going places.



My Jumper at the Royal Academy

At the retrospective of Hammershøi,
it felt as if they'd seen fit to deploy
a loft cavity lagged with Danish snow
to create an authentic frigidity below.

Thus, I was gentlemanly.
Strange seeing it worn without me,
my jumper ascending the perspex
of the Royal Academy's new steps.

It leaned in towards austere interiors,
stood back, admiring plain exteriors,
tip-toed about the boards – as if dancing –
never blocking burgher from painting.

Then, it waited for me by the exit.
On getting there, I found you in it.



The Foreign Secretary's Residence

It was so hot in our room we opened a window
to hear ourselves think. On the sill,
flies in death throes buzzed like wind-up toys,
the same in the en-suite sink.

We took a turn for air in the grounds,
around the lake, the boathouse deep in disuse,
its purple door low in moss, perfect
retreat for poet or recluse.

The water, no more than knee-deep,
was an ornamental, Georgian notion
where man-sized carp stirred silt in slow motion,
pike plucked ducklings from flapping mothers.

Leylandii had suffocated wild flowers
on the fringes; concealed a walled arboretum
that, in the late Regency or Victorian,
perhaps provided moonlit sanctum

for illicit lovers, or long-dead governesses
scanning the waters for their own reflections.
Palms stood grey and gaunt, gifts
from envoys at long-forgotten summits.

On the far bank, in shadow, a mown path
weaved through long grass away from the water.
There we discovered what persuaded us
to go on no longer:

Gherkin-like goose-shit, ecstasies
of flies frenzied further by a magpie carcass
in a litter of ripped feathers, torso a fist
of bones. All the daisies were closed.

Back in our airless room, we went to bed
with each other, but the two singles pushed together
kept separating under our tepid endeavour,
so in the end we gave in, letting the night

open up sexlessly between us, to sleep
on either side of an ever-widening void.

