

Glaciation

WILL STONE was born in 1966, and lives on the Suffolk coast. His natural habitat is coastal ledge, moor, churchyard and tower. A compulsive traveller to the European continent, Will is committed to finding a train which still has dividing compartments. In 1999 he gained an MA in Literary Translation from The University of East Anglia and published his first collection of translations from the French; *Les Chimères* by Gérard de Nerval (Menard Press). His most recent book of translations is *To the Silenced—Selected Poems of Georg Trakl* (Arc Publications 2005). Arc will also publish collections of long neglected Belgian symbolist poets Georges Rodenbach and Emile Verhaeren in 2009.

Will contributes reviews and essays to a number of literary publications, notably the *TLS* and *The London Magazine*. In 1998 he published a seminal essay articulating the genius and corresponding malaise of poet singer-songwriter Nick Drake. He now plans a series of essays related to Belgium and a first English translation of Stefan Zweig's travel writings.

Will's poetry has previously appeared in limited editions along with his original photographs. This is his first collection.

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WILL STONE



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*This book is dedicated to the poet
Michael Hamburger
(1924–2007)
in fond memory.*

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‘The glaciers creep like snakes that watch their prey, from their slow rolling on; there, many a precipice, frost and the sun in scorn of mortal power have piled: dome, pyramid, and pinnacle, a city of death, distinct with many a tower and wall impregnable of beaming ice. Yet not a city but a flood of ruin is there that from the boundaries of the sky rolls its perpetual stream . . .’

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

‘Mont Blanc—Lines written in The Vale of Chamouni’ (1817)

The Oaks

In May the oaks on the ridge thicken
strangely towards evening.
They begin to command, take over,
they rope in the hedgerows, they deepen.
When the flaring of the human subsides
the owl's amber eyes stare out
from the cage of contorted branches,
to follow the field mouse carrying corn,
while we slumber, the hunt goes on,
and in the morning
the dewy blooms deceive us.

You sit beneath their dusty branches
and calmly seeds parachute into your hair.
For once you might see with those eyes,
connect, rake over, receive answers.
But they are unable to signal.
Our worn out bellowings for meaning.
drift uselessly up into their canopy
and are snuffed out, saved from themselves
like the staggering flames of spent candles,
from the dream of some deliverance
that limps stoically in our wake.

Restoration

On palm-fringed paradise islands
over creamy sand and through
polluted surf the real ocean abandoned
this extinct generation still plays on,
unaware that plans are in the final stages
for its obliteration. Brazen,
they dump their sacks of organs
by perfectly azure pools and poised
leap up from white springboards.
Beneath palms, confident in their wealth
they lounge, as they have always done,
lost in the lack, lured to the shallows,
all the effluent that darkens the earth
from the outflow of their shadow.
But above them unseen the moon's ice scythe
is sharpened, to the stars are handed weapons.
All the planets and terrifying expanses
of nothingness gradually synchronize.

When the powerboats stutter and their
engines stop,
when the flight is grounded and can
no longer take off,
when the barbecue coals refuse to glow,
when the maid fails to sweep the patio,
when receptions are abandoned,
and the guests' mail remains unopened,
when shoes left out are set adrift un-shined
on the dark canals of hotel corridors,
when the breeze lifts parasols and waves
begin to curl like great silver razors,
when the horizon's guillotine sweeps down
held in the vice of sea and sky
and untended children like heralds cry,
you'll know its not the end of time
only restoration.

Winter Light

All grey, the diamond glass
and distant estuary, mercury
that once crept into the cold snare
of land and stayed there.

No relief in the graveyard for souls.
An icy wind keeps the spirits
pressed to the clay, and hoar frost
ravishes the inscriptions.

But from the marsh the cathedral emerges,
and the first flame of gentle hymns rises,
an amateur choir, a feeble congregation
beneath the angels' powdered faces.

The beautiful gift of their decay.
Nailed there, saturated with prayer,
they bless the terrified birds outside
losing strength in the black hedges.

The Heart

At school they held it up in a jar
I saw the purple ventricles and aorta.
I saw the human heart passed along
in buckets stretching weedy arms
to end in a hiss of steam and sweat,
the sly contempt of flames.
I saw the valves, one with a kink
and felt the shape of that lumpen thing,
and heard the nervous statements of students
as the stainless steel sunk in.
I saw the heart fail or thunder on,
a flayed horse bursting through a copse
and hearts that wait in bone-armoured chests
I've seen them wave hopefully
like the silken tendrils of sea creatures swirling,
forever reaching into a dark green void.
And I saw people target the heart
and once in a cemetery I even saw one rise
somehow gasping to the surface.
But no one heard the cries or cared
when mercifully I smothered it.

Van Gogh's Room

Gutted cell
the skylight dominates.
Two long walls, two short.
An opening for the door.
There we linger I and the guide
where he came in each night,
eyes red from strain and corn dust,
sat on the narrow bed,
stacked still warm canvases
beneath, then sleep.
He bled grey one unnoticed afternoon,
bled from the wound
in under tree shadow that darkened
the delirious journey back.
The deep poppy red was blood.
The yellow a movement
the whispering failed to follow.
But now besotted fans file in,
they scale the winding stair
and shuffle there,
walk in walk out,
turn around, go back down,
convinced their hero suffered well
in seven different languages.

Pigs

At dawn they come,
their watery eyes peering through slits.
The trucks lurch, their wheels
sink into the soft ploughed earth.
Then the pigs trot down muddy ramps,
snouts puffing steam,
mouths half-open as if laughing,
for suddenly they are free
to stand in the puddle meares
of their prison and slump down
in crude hooped huts of iron.
Soon the bare field is crowded
with bacon.
The ghetto proceeds unknowing
to its destruction.
In flattened straw fresh piglets
squeal and frolic.
Carefully the farmer counts them
and the sow looks up at him.
He slaps her flank in thanks,
then walks away.
Months later I returned.
The field is bare, freshly ploughed,
nothing remains.

Swifts

Powered by screams
and the black bat twist of their wings,
they slice through the insect cloud.
Heavenly dogfight, no quarter given,
the plunder ravished unseen.
Round they come again,
cyclists on a bend
clinging to their manic carousel.
The air cannot hold them.
The sun slips from their sleek
gunmetal backs.
They are gods.

Storm off Speke's Mill Mouth

For Paul Stubbs

They herd the cliff, the dark shoal,
spewing from their gunwales
the foiled assault, the broken surf.
Aroma of terror, hardening silhouettes
rising from the sea as if for shelter.
Wrecks, bellowing bestiary
shoved into grey coves
to be plundered of sanctuary.
Spume boils, undoes itself
under the heel of malignant cliffs
at whose top the mad hair of bramble dances
in the broom-sweep of a fresh squall.
Black axe-heads embedded.
These storm mockers plant their knees
more firmly in the moraine.
Helpless you stand above them,
held by the wind's strong hands.
Nothing before or beyond.
Only a lost shoe flattened on an outcrop,
the hair of drowned sailors, still knotted,
riding the foam.

Morwenstowe

Follow the seaward pull of the coombe,
check your high speed against
the buzzard's calm.
He steers above the sunken lanes, a king.
Stationary now, his shadow hook
drags through the lambs.
The monks once learned
from his anchorite toil,
they left the wildflower seeds,
the path, the stone step-stile.
Their voices still decant the wind
that worries the tower,
where Reverend Hawker stood in awe
and went to build his driftwood hut
above the rock-chunk clustered shore.
And peaceful there, far from men
wrote some poems.
He seized the storm and filled with joy
watched the elements
make room for him.

Trakl—The Oval Photo

Autumn, the return of empty tumbrels.
On the heavy anvil he laid his heavier head.
Between dense matter and the hammer
Blazed a grid of unseized stars.

When molten metal came raining down
Doomed ducks rose from a lonely pond,
For the final first time fully cocked
Boys slowly circled all the blood.

Approach of a storm.
Outline of a body in white chalk.
Warm winds whip up straw, gentle dunes
Hold spent lovers hard against the shore.

Like a swollen sack the body falls,
As resting gulls drift towards
Rusting jetties where late men saw
The extermination of all rational thought.

The Commander

On the Steppe in high summer
he was the commander.
His lean brown face rose from the turret
issuing orders.
Fattened on the fall of France and eager
his faithful men below obeyed,
their single panther sucked into
the field grey slick that swallowed Ukraine.
Now, a year on, he lies in a frost-lined pit,
mummified like a pharaoh in strips of blanket.
Calmly he watches a family of field mice
devour his blackened toes,
while outside they plant the hacked off horse's leg
as a signpost in the snow.
'Hölle' it reads, with a crude arrow pointing
whichever way the wind is set to blow.

Russian Fair Play

After they crossed the Oder
a band of Russian troops
captured an SS Scharführer.
In a bombed-out house stood an
untouched piano.
They sat him there and gave him
the following orders . . .
'Play you scum, but if you stop
we'll finish you off!'
The man then played for sixteen hours
until he fell exhausted
across the keys.
The Russians showed no mercy
and swiftly carried out their promise.
They dragged him from the ruins
and as his cramped hands clawed
at their filthy greatcoats
shot him.

Glaciation

After Shelley's 'Mont Blanc'

Once handed over by the deities to death,
we truly began to live, glacial.
Now, cut off in our ice holes
we listen to the creeping snout,
the slow cracking of human hearts,
lashed rafts almost submerged by pain,
that somehow are carried down
between steep walls of rock,
before whose primeval malevolence
the earlier explorer turned insane.
Birds cry out sadly as they wheel again
back and forth over the sucking abyss,
over the monstrous plaster limb of ice.
Here where firs are snapped like twigs
and huge boulders weigh their anchors
to set out on endlessly repeated summer nights,
or in winter when fresh shale and rock
peppers the dull blue ice, and wolves
drag tattered scraps of carrion about.
Against the waxing moon they unleash
their white snarls, then sated run into the forest,
the dark dust spaces, to sleep side by side
licking each others bloody faces.

And the huge cables quiver mournfully
on their towers, where in clusters
the little cars huddle together.
But they are lifeless, deserted
and all around tall firs sag with snow.
There is no way through.
Only the relentless flow of unseen rivers
in deep icy fissures, where the leathery bodies
of the ancients are strangely preserved.
Crows form a thicket on a lonely mountain road.
At the cars approach they rise with reluctance.
In the slipstream the fur of the carrion faintly stirs.
A hungry prey is hunted by hungrier wolves.
We do not see the kill, nor the ice move
and in summer's thaw leave its passengers
polished skulls in clear rock pools.
Vainly the climber hacks into the ice wall
and the explorer sinks his nation's flag.
Nothing remains of their inexplicable straining.
Only the ice moves, a snake slowed by feeding.
The ice moves and shackled, relentless,
slave winds groom her awful surface.