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# Ahead of Us

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 tap 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.