

Long Shadows

Twelve Poems

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Ken Head lives in Cambridge, England. He has been a teacher of Philosophy and Literature and lived for many years in South-East Asia. His poems appear regularly both online and in print, recently in *iota*, *Thieves' Jargon*, *Obsessed With Pipework*, *Dark Sky*, *Ink*, *Sweat & Tears*, *Static Movement*, *Purple Patch* and *Non-Euclidean Café*. He has been published in three previous editions of *Snakeskin*. This is his first e.book, all of it new writing.

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One-Man Band

Not a blade of grass, not a shrub or tree
for miles. Where you play's outside a shuttered
house with scabby walls in a run-down street
too stricken with neglect for any cash
its people might still have to come your way
and yet you smile as a group of youngsters
crowds around you and toes begin to tap.
Whatever brings you back here year on year
when you could be lining your pockets
on the boulevards? Are these the tenements
you lived in long ago? Are there spirits
here that haunt your heart like seabirds calling?

Wild

Outside the posh jeweller's in the market square, his back
to the displays of necklaces,
earrings and watches so expensive their price tags are left
lying white side up,
the little old man with a leprechaun beard and weathered,
wizened face that gives him
the look of an ancient pickled walnut under the whiskers
is trying his hardest
to prove he doesn't have a clue how to make music from
the kazoo he's busking with.

What's most striking about him, though, is how scrawny
and tiny he seems.
Even under all his layers of clothes and a battered trilby,
he still looks barely big
enough to shoulder the backpack and bedroll he's stood
against the shop wall.
Passers-by are laughing, maybe because he looks drunk,
maybe because our town seems
awash with men and women like him hunkered down in
doorways, eyes terminally dull.

Not that his are, although they don't really start paying
attention until a police van
arrives to cart him away to a night shelter with a vacant
bed somewhere and he
stares while the coppers rummage in his pack and check
his pockets. The home-made
blade, stubby and thin as a sliver of ice, is set into a haft
with a thickly taped
grip just right for a man's hand. When they uncover that,
his eyes flash pure wildfire

Intimacy With The Dark

for Gyula Halasz

Two working-girls outside a cheap hotel
patrol kerbside, keep their eyes peeled,
watch each other's back the best they can.

Leggy strippers from a club down the street
walking nakedness home to bed
divvy out tips, reckon up pain and gain.

At Suzy's place, the lights are out, the front
door's locked. Madam's word is law,
there'll be no more tonight at any price,

except for Brassai, chain-smoking Gauloises,
who never photographs by force
or traps a girl inside his box of night.

None So Blind

Guide dogs at their feet, two charity collectors
with the patience of saints sit stock-still on foldable
chairs in the middle of the station concourse.

Blank-eyed commuters chasing time, weighed
down with laptops, mobiles, bags and trailing iPod
cables touch Oyster cards ritually in and out.

If they paused for the moment it would take
to drop some change into one of those offered boxes,
would they stumble, lose their balance, fall?

from: **Bedrock**

3:

Nothing's more important, the picture asks
you to believe, than what tugs your heart-strings:
two sad-eyed, straggle-haired little girls,
arms round each other's shoulders for comfort.

Wearing grubby, washed-to-death pinafores
over hand-me-down skirts and clompy shoes,
their unsmiling gaze says it all, the rest's
only out-of-focus background, a blur

of tea chests, bits and bobs, bed-frames propped
by the door, a paraffin stove, four chairs,
a washstand, things you'd hope might keep the wolf
from the door, two men loading a handcart.

Release

for M.Y.B.

Three o'clock on a drear December night,
rain driving hard off the back of an icy
gale, rattling impatient talons against the glass.
Going by in the street, signs of life still,
a muted sloosh of tyres over wet tarmac,
engine noise, guttural, a throaty motor
bike, rider head down, fighting the wind.

So much oxygen, his mouth tastes dry as ash
behind the plastic mask that lets him breathe.
No wonder his spirit's singing bird has freed
itself and gone. He's felt its restlessness
with medication and machines too many
times to want to hold it back from the bare air.

from: **Bedrock**

4:

From a safe distance, because our nervous
guide doesn't want to risk going closer,
we stare towards the beach through razor wire.

They use inner tubes or home-made oil-drum
rafts and this is where the current drives them.
If they're lucky and don't choose a moonless
night to cross, a patrol boat might find them
before the sharks. Some survive, but flotsam
and jetsam here are the stuff of nightmare.

Those who make it in one piece are sent back.
Amputees follow when they can travel.
Freedom gets more expensive every day.

Another Place, Another Time

Too hot to be anything but peaceful today,
the sun-baked street with its trawl of sleepy
afternoon bars and coffee-shops threatens
nothing worse than sunburn or a parking ticket.

Plate-glass storefronts glitter, concrete whites out, looking
anywhere beyond the cool meniscus
of your beer dizzies the mind. People wade
through shimmer as if it were the sea. But where are you?

Down on the corner crouched beside the bren,
spent cartridge cases pinging off the ground:
young philosopher, student of virtue,
applying theory to your life with hand grenades.

Common Enemy

Mitrovica South, 2004.

Across the street, maybe four
or five car-widths away, the sign
for Broja Market, giant black
letters on a panel of sky-blue wall.

Under clouds of tear gas and smoke,
people packed in thirty deep
all stare the same way, barricade
the junction with their bodies.

The road's flooded. Somewhere
a water main's fractured.
Trashed cars going up in flames
don't rate a second glance.

From the market to the other
side of the road, a lifetime's journey.

Winter Collection

Pricey boutiques, jewellers' shops, expensive
chauffeured cars a pavement's width away,
it's a glitzy street despite the weather,
the vista of filthy, gritted snow
already rutted with hieroglyphic
lines of tyre treads tracking out of focus.

At the end of the road, where perspective
becomes possibility and it's hard
to be confident about what you might
be witnessing, a line of trucks, people
climbing aboard, being guarded by men
with guns who look as if they know their trade.

How long do photographs have to wait
for morality to catch them up?

New Normality

We wake up dry-mouthed, fearful, to yet another insecure dawn. Mist has spread across the hillside overnight. Only the blurred tops of the tallest trees are visible, black-green poking through the grey underfur of a morning still holding its breath for sunrise.

Feral dogs snarl in the woods beyond the electrified perimeter fence. The only road out of the compound winds slowly uphill to a checkpoint at the top, where armed policemen wearing black leather jackets and permanently heavy-duty frowns maintain an endless watch.

From our window we see an overcoated figure, bag slung from one shoulder, trudging towards the barrier. Familiar with the procedure, he stops outside the guard post, assumes the position while they frisk him, waits for his clearance to be checked, for permission to begin another day.

Bygones

In a poky office at the back of the shop, a man with white hair is shredding paper, heaps of what look like invoices, bills, letters, all old as the hills outside his window. *Having a good clear out and not before time*, is how he describes what he's doing, while the shredder grinds and ribbons of paper slither into the black plastic binbag he's rigged up underneath to catch it all. *Should've done this years ago, but you know how it is. Took retirement to make me shift my stumps. Don't want to be leaving anything for the taxman to find, do I now?* He taps his nose with a stubby forefinger and grins as he tells me to look around because everything's got to go.

Massive, leather-bound family bibles, some with rusty metal locks still clamping their covers shut against the world, all stacked anyhow along one damp wall among piles of magazines with photos of glossy, well-permed Monroe blondes on their faded covers and sagging shelves of who-dunnits, bodice-rippers and sci-fi well past its sell-by date, the kinds of reading cheesed-off holiday-makers fill their days with when they're marooned by bad weather in those chilly cottages they rent for their annual fortnight of wishing they'd stayed at home or gone to Spain.

Like all those unopened bibles tucked inconspicuously away in the world's hotel rooms, some seem dumb, but copper-plated carefully into columns down most of the mould-spotted flyleaves are lists of names and dates going back two centuries. Here and there, scored severely through in heavy black ink or meticulously ruled out with a straight edge, a name's been removed, forfeited forever for some unforgiven, unforgotten happenstance of life from the roll of all those others he or she had lived among for however many hard-won years they'd had, as if the firm conviction used to be that moral judgements outlast those who make them.