

1975

Marketing

Rodney Pybus

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the final departing hoot in the Amsterdam dawn
from the Zyklon B Express, overloaded
with its cargo of fading yellow stars.

Time to read aloud from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,
but not too loudly. Time to laugh at the title
of Hildebrand's *Camera Obscura*, but not too loudly.
(For what will the neighbours say?)

Time to record in that red and white tartan notebook
tender aspirations towards the impossible—
a quiet life of another kind.

Pinned up Ginger Rogers and Ray Milland
still look down onto bare boards
with yellowing Hollywood smiles.

Greta Garbo looks prosaic here, and at home.

On a small map the Allies are still
advancing through Normandy,
very slowly.

A peculiar but not uncomfortable place
to struggle with growing up.
Up to a point.

For the war-time price of a Jew
five people can now inspect
this ineffective sanctuary.
Studying the photographs, the books,
the lay-out of the rooms
and the meticulous documentation of murder and betrayal,
crimes that live and move
through these unfurnished spaces,
some German tourists troop past.
Their eyes are not eloquent. Nor do they speak.

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In stately 17th century houses that lean together
above the water, graceful and various
survivors, women in windows show what they have
to sell. Red and purple neon signals through the afternoon dusk,
pointing men to the super-market whores. Perched on chairs
behind glass the women show what they have to
sell—a leg of silky succulence, a plump breast, beckon
the hungry to bed: another kind of shift-work.

Some girls wear their boredom like a negligee,
reading secondhand fading copies of *Real Romance*.
These ones are not so pretty. They don't look up
at passing squads of rubber-necking Yanks and Leeds United
supporters—men laughing to hide from their wives.
Tomorrow the tourists will be shown their quota of Van Goghs,
get pissed on gin, inspect the house where Anne Frank hid
from death, and empty their pockets for model windmills.
They will send home postcards of the Royal Palace
and the sunlit houseboat of the American Bible Society,
and say nothing of women who grin behind glass
day after contemptuous day, banking on flesh.

Andrew Waterman on Rodney Pybus

As, reading around in contemporary verse, I find my open mind beginning to glaze over at about line eight of too many magazine poems, I crush qualms that this reaction may be unkind or unfair by recalling Randall Jarrell's austere standard:

A good poet is someone who manages, in a lifetime of standing out in thunderstorms, to be struck by lightning five or six times.

A salutary rigour. Still, the work of one's contemporaries does have its special dimension of interest eliciting a spirit of approach modified from that one brings to the literature of the established past. One is not sifting for masterpieces: the occasional really magnificent poem discovered—"Waking Early Sunday Morning," "The Old Fools," "Funeral Music"—is a gift to feel grateful for, not to be expected. One may reasonably hope for pleasurable and stimulating poems, and poets, meaningfully of an age if not for all time. But the special additional concern one brings to the reading of the new is a caring for the living growth-point in the present of the art whose past glories matter to one, a caring born of one's commitment to the established, and indeed attesting to it; the academic who doesn't read contemporary poetry and fiction—he "has no time," it's "not his field," he's too busy putting up bookshelves round the house, etc., etc.—should not be trusted on whatever literature he does profess to judge.

Poetry is of course legitimately as variable in methods and effects as its possible purposes and authors, and I have no prescriptive axe to grind. But I do have some general sense of what I look for, and try honestly to recognise if present, in a new poem. That, in Johnsonian terms, it should in some perceptible way enable me "better to enjoy life, or better to endure