

PATRICIA DUNCKER AND ANNE JACOBS

‘Les Fenêtres: To Guillaume Apollinaire’

with Six Illustrations by Anne Jacobs

PATRICIA DUNCKER is the author of four novels, *Hallucinating Foucault* (1996), shortlisted for the IMPAC award and winner of the Dillons First Fiction Award and the McKitterick Prize, *James Miranda Barry* (1999), *The Deadly Space Between* (2002), *Miss Webster and Chérif*, (2006) shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize, and two collections of short fiction, *Monsieur Shoushana’s Lemon Trees* (1997), shortlisted for the Macmillan Silver Pen Award, and *Seven Tales of Sex and Death* (2003), all of which have been widely translated. Her critical work includes *Sisters and Strangers: An Introduction to Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (Blackwell, 1992) and a collection of essays on writing and contemporary literature, *Writing on the Wall: Selected Essays* (Rivers Oram, 2002). She is Professor of Contemporary Literature at the University of Manchester.

ANNE JACOBS was born in Birmingham, her mother was a picture restorer and she learnt about painting from her. While her mother delivered paintings to dealers, Anne spent most of her adolescence in Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery amongst the Pre Raphaelites. She studied Art History at Oxford Brookes, Fine Art at St Albans, and has always worked part time for Oxford University, painting and exhibiting in London and Oxford. She did eventually move on from the Pre Raphaelites but still has a nostalgic fondness for them.



## LES FENÊTRES

Travelling, dreaming – this space that is neither secure nor structured, like the chaos of airports when all flights are cancelled. We sit watching the sunset from the departure lounge in Kuala Lumpur, from red to green and all the yellow dies, then darkness over the jungle, and we are here sealed away from the heat and night cries of the birds. On the crest of that bald ridge where the forest, liquidated by roads, drops back, we see a stream of lights, feeding the city. We will send a text message home, for here we are stranded in tropical dark, unable to sleep or talk, waiting in the unsafe space. I am lying on my back in the curve of an iron bench, looking up, when I see birds skimming the glass canopy above, hurtling the length of this great girdered cave. I strain my eyes to see them until the tears gather at the rim. I look up, up. You are watching the pretty girls in salwar kameez, sauntering past, pulling their wheeled bags. The young man slumped beside us, the snot flowing into his white silk tie. We try in vain to get some rest. I shut my eyes and the windows open.

Travelling, dreaming is the unsafe space. Bordeaux-Toulouse, four hours in rain on the motorway, the lanes sluiced by lorries. Nobody slows down.

## TO GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE

I always thought your name must be a pseudonym – no poet is so helpfully named after the God armed with the lyre, the God who is also the lawgiver, the master of oracles, the creator of courts. Flamboyant nonsense from Shelley, wasn't it, when he asserted that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. He's thinking of Apollo, the God of order and control; he's dreaming you, and your prophetic name. But he was the son of a baronet, one of the acknowledged legislators. I see him standing behind you.

What are the laws of poetry? De la musique avant toute chose. Your dream voyage ripples with the music of journeys – flashes, gaps, places half-seen, appearing in the windows and then vanishing. If you travel fast you see the world framed by ovals, squares, the rain on my car windows, the landscape misted up. And you lose concentration, glimpse blurs, misinterpret empty voids in the breach. I read 'Les Fenêtres' as a record of travelling, dreaming, aiming towards the light.

Translation is a gift, the way in which one writer best speaks to another, by touching those crafted thoughts, her cunning, his hand on the lathe. I close my hand around yours, which of us is holding the pen?





Je suppose que la route est en face –  
the dark hardening. See the hills  
blacken to your left. Agen, Moissac,  
the hiss of rubber cruising the flood.  
Nobody else slows down. In the  
dark to my left two white horses  
galloping, a spider work of drops  
woven across the fading light. I  
lower the curtain of glass and there  
are the horses, keeping pace with  
the car, the sound of soaked hooves,  
churning the mud. You flick the  
electric switch, the window slides  
shut and the horses vanish. My  
wipers describe a great curve of  
water racing down the body of the  
car. We surge unsteadily forward  
into the storming dark.

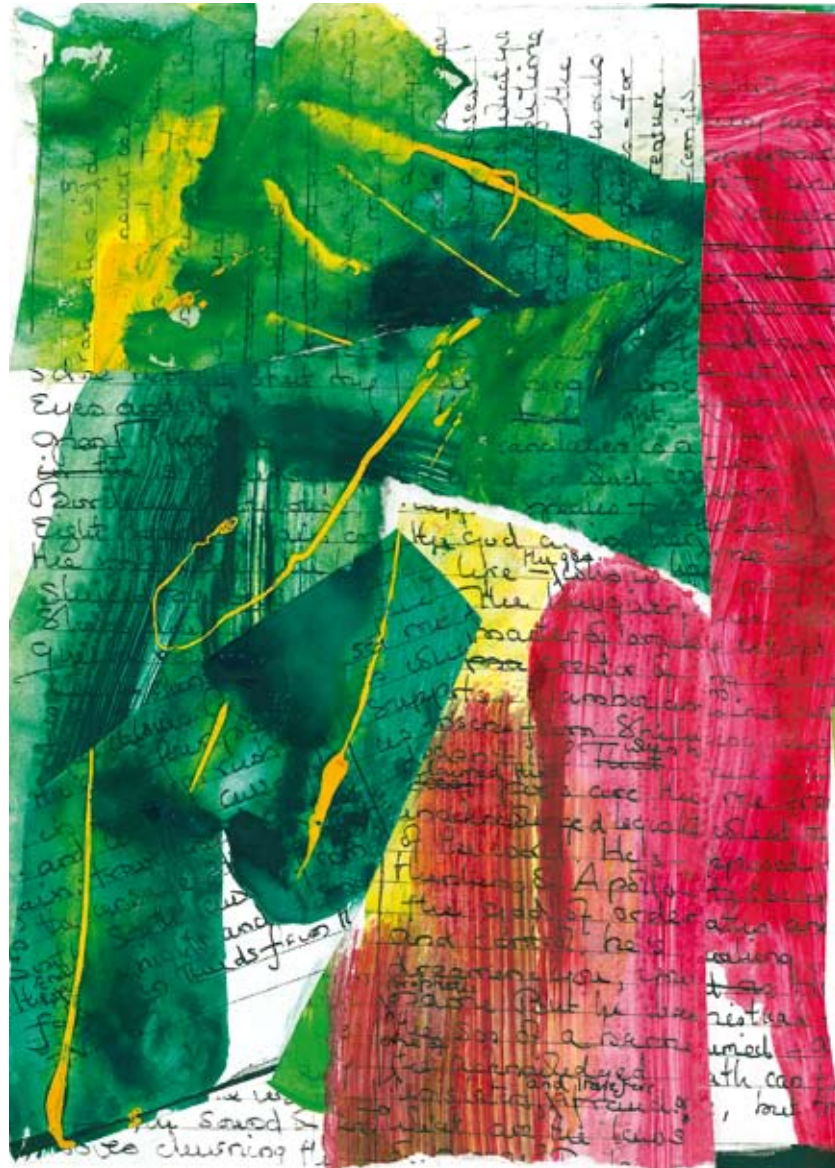
I open my eyes, greeting the  
freezing night. You are shaking my  
shoulder. We start at midnight.  
White light on the snow beneath our  
feet, sparkling diamond. You have a  
glittering can of de-icer clutched in  
your gloves. As I watch, you begin  
to write across the windscreen, then  
down all the windows, graffiti  
melting into poetry- étincelant  
diamant. Minus eight Celsius!  
Quick! Into the car! Your poems  
vanish in a warm rush of air and we  
are away again, travelling,  
dreaming in the unsafe space. Drive  
South, South, away from these  
endless white nights and the snow  
falling in thuds from the pine trees.

We argue about the cities-  
Vancouver, Paris – you bellow in  
my ear. Hyères, Nice, Menton – I  
scream back, creating a necklace of  
southern cities. I conjure trails of  
light across the harbours, promise

Translation is judgement. If your  
work is spindle thin or your bolts  
loose I will see it. Translation scours  
the text like a searchlight. Riddle  
your ears, rattle your teeth! You let  
the music sing in your calculated  
gaps. I can play with your work like  
a score; you invite me to do it.  
Translation is interpretation. You  
are my starting point, my diving  
board, the irritable grain,  
demanding the pearl. Translation is  
a reply, the answer to the proposals  
offered by writing. Translation is  
discipline. Not every answer is  
suitable and appropriate. I have  
chosen to answer you with four  
voyages and I have asked you to  
come with me.

Quand on a le temps on a la  
liberté. When you own time, you  
own freedom. That's what you  
never had – enough time. For me  
those are the most poignant words  
in 'Les Fenêtres' – for every extinct  
creature leering at us with extended  
jaws from its museum cabinet seems  
to shriek, 'Give me time, set me  
free.' And that is what our writing is  
supposed to do – enable us to  
escape our own deaths and go  
on speaking across time. That  
sophisticated friend to Heraclitus  
cried that the poet's songs would  
live forever – 'For death he taketh  
all away but them he cannot take.'  
But dear Heraclitus, you must not  
depend on me/ Or my compeers, to  
keep even one of them/ Singing and  
hearty for ever, or for long./  
Death can take away all your  
nightingales,/ And will do. When





PATRICIA DUNCKER

## On Writing 'Les Fenêtres: To Guillaume Apollinaire'

'Les Fenêtres' is a sequence of journeys, voyages into the landscape of the imagination. In my version of 'Les Fenêtres' I imagined four journeys which mirror those taken by Guillaume Apollinaire. The first was one I took alone from England to Australia via Malaysia in March 2006; I re-imagined the hours I spent delayed in the airport at Kuala Lumpur. Every journey involves delay. How can we use this suspended time? The second journey is taken from Fellini's *Roma*. The film contains an extraordinary sequence describing a traffic jam of holidaymakers returning to Rome in pouring rain. Beside and between the lines of traffic white horses are galloping, unremarked by the Romans besieged in their cars. The snow journey is one I take many times, indeed every year, travelling from Northern Europe towards the South. In this case I remembered a particular journey from Berlin to the South of France in December 1997, when I managed to outrun a giant snowstorm that followed me, sweeping down from Russia. The final journey to the Midi is the classic voyage taken by the writers and painters of Modernism. Matisse did his last, best work while resident in the country surrounding Nice and created the Chapel near Vence with his blue tiles and bold decorations.<sup>1</sup> Scott Fitzgerald and his intrepid band of drunken Americans in *Tender is the Night* (1926) invented the summer season at Antibes. Graham Greene went to live there. Nice, with its spectacular promenade, vast bay and gangster milieu, is a city full of personal significance for me. I set the finale of my first published novel *Hallucinating Foucault* (1996), in the mountains above the city and on the municipal beach by the harbour where the cement coffins still act as a breakwater.

Julia Kisteva's *Stabat Mater* was the source of my structure. In the 1970s many feminist writers toyed with this argumentative double structure, forcing two conflicting discourses to address one another. Sometimes the two voices are presented in ironic and subversive contrast: Verena Stefan used this method for one part of her novel *Häutungen*, translated as *Shedding*.<sup>2</sup> I was always interested in this structure, but felt that it was unworkable over long textual distances.<sup>3</sup> But my reply to 'Les Fenêtres' seemed to be the ideal place

to experiment. I wanted to write a rhythmic repetitive prose that was close to poetry and to address Apollinaire himself directly.

I wrote the first draft of ‘Les Fenêtres’: to Guillaume Apollinaire’ while I was travelling around Germany on a reading tour in September 2006. This is the draft that Anne Jacobs has used as the canvas for her colours. The modernists enjoyed the confusion of words and images occupying the same space, especially when the words seemed to subvert accepted sense. The element of play, art as play, is very strong in the experimental writing of the early twentieth century. One of the most attractive aspects of ‘Les Fenêtres’ is the silent presence of the other person. You/I is the dynamic embedded in Apollinaire’s journeys and I claimed that unnamed empty space for myself. I invited him to come with me. I am a guest in his text (all translators are guests in the writer’s text) – and so he became my travelling companion, my other writer, my intimate friend. Thus the left hand side of the text includes Apollinaire as the recalcitrant, subversive traveller, while the right hand side is addressed directly to him. Inside the dynamic of this writing I am his writer and he is my Muse. I wanted to present the I/You/We – Je /Tu/Nous – of ‘Les Fenêtres’ as a community bent on playing truant. Travellers and dreamers are rarely responsible people.

But there is another ghost/guest in my text, the other writer who haunts both my life and my writing, who has influenced me more deeply and directed the course of my life more thoroughly than I could ever acknowledge while she was alive. This is the poet Patricia Beer, after whom I am named. She was my mother’s younger sister. I know many of her poems by heart. She wrote some of them while I was sitting next to her; over forty years ago I watched her counting out syllables on the stone slab seats in the Arènes at Arles. I first travelled south, south, with her. For twenty years I saw her often, listened to her, recited her work, laughed at all her jokes. I was her reader. Then we became estranged during a bitter family rupture and I saw her for the last time in 1980. She died suddenly on August 15th 1999. We were never reconciled. And I have still never forgiven her.

There is a curious symmetry in this relationship – for twenty years she was the writer for whom I wrote even though nothing I constructed or imagined was ever published. But for the last twenty years of her life when we never saw each other and were never in touch and my work was at last published, I ceased to write for her. I ceased to care about her judgement or her opinions. She no longer mattered to me. When I first heard of her death I was delighted.

I was still here and she had gone, gone forever into the dark. But now that she is dead, with eerie frequency, I hear her voice. I have even contemplated exorcism, so strong is her presence and that voice – so unexpected, utterly recognisable, appallingly close. She now returns in my writing. Patricia Beer’s later life was bourgeois, wealthy and respectable. But she had an ironic devil, unleashed in her imagination. Her writing – laconic, unsettling – was the best thing she ever did – this was the deadly space between us, and the best thing we shared.

The two poems by Patricia Beer that I have referred to in my version of ‘Les Fenêtres’ are ‘Female, Extinct’ and ‘Friend to Heraclitus’.<sup>4</sup> Both poems are about ceasing to be, not just dying, but being completely annihilated and destroyed. This was her greatest fear, that she would not only cease to be, but rest forgotten, obliterated, un-remembered, unread. I have this to say – both to Guillaume Apollinaire and to Patricia Beer. The *imaginaire* is a collective space. And as long as there are writers prepared to be readers, dreamers, *voyageurs*, content to live only on the dangerous edge of things, then you too will go on, travelling, speaking, dreaming, through the unsafe space of our *imaginaire*. This is where you belong. Every writer passes on their histories and memories, occluded in their words, the lost landscapes of the mind. This is our unsafe space, our best thing. This is the unsafe space where I live, write.

## Notes

- 1 See Hilary Spurling *Matisse The Master: A Life of Henri Matisse Volume 2 1909–1954* (Penguin Books, 2006), p. 448 ff.
- 2 Verena Stefan’s *Häutungen* was originally published by Verlag Frauenoffensive in Munich in 1975 and translated into English in 1979. *Shedding* (The Women’s Press, 1979), pp. 19–20. Julia Kristeva’s *Stabat Mater* was first published as *Héretique de l’amour* in *Tel Quel*, 74, (Winter, 1977), pp. 30–49. For an English translation see *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 160–186.
- 3 But see Stephen Knight’s brilliant *Mr Schnitzel* (Viking Penguin, 2000) which uses two quite separate stories to comment on one another through the main text and a mass of lengthy narrative footnotes, both of which are riveting.

- 4 Patricia Beer's 'Female, Extinct' appeared in her 1975 volume *Driving West* and can be found in her *Collected Poems* (Carcenet, 1988), p. 106. 'Friend of Heraclitus' is the title poem of the volume of the same name (Carcenet, 1993), p. 11.

## References

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ANNE JACOBS

## Commentary on Illustrations

The colour in Apollinaire's poem, the collage techniques used by his contemporaries, Braque and Picasso, and the translator's original draft manuscript are the main inspiration for these pieces. 'From red to green all the yellow dies'. The clear reds and greens associated with medieval manuscripts predominate in the pictures, linking the translator's handwritten manuscript (the basic material in the works) with the poem.

Patricia's handwriting has always fascinated me. Our friendship over the last twenty years has been conducted via correspondence. Handwritten letters, not email, typeface or text but ink and paper. Even though we both have email and text messaging we still write letters to each other and I could not conceive of a month going by without seeing her handwriting. I like the shape of the writing, its clear line, austere and determined. It is unchanging, where mine varies in its scrawl along with my mood and patience hers steers a straight course. I like the black ink against the white paper. It is nearly always black ink, hardly ever blue or another colour. I do not know Patricia as well as I know her handwriting.

In the translation Patricia talks about Heraclitus and questions whether art really is eternal, all that will be left of us. In reality everything fades or is wiped out, may become irrelevant, misunderstood, or too fragmented/illegible to be coherent. In the collages Patricia's manuscript pages become torn fragments, her clear handwriting unreadable, mysterious, a dead language. Only a few sentences and paragraphs are meaningful. They become marks on paper, patterns.