

Justin Quinn

**CLOSE
QUARTERS**



Gallery Books

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*My land is lost in yours and yours in mine
and everything we say is in translation . . .*

A SHRIKE

About noontide I haul
the plastic, glass and paper up the street
to containers lined against a wall
standing in the heat.

Huge burdocks nod and sway.
The stitchwort comes up from the pavement's seams,
the stonecrop from a trace of clay.
The firebugs move in teams.

The tarmac gives a bit;
the bleached concrete doesn't, chipped here and
there,
and ageing harder, edged by grit,
dazzling with its glare.

A shrike has found its balance
perched high upon a pole beside a crow.
It shifts and readjusts its talons,
crouches, then lets go.

And then for all they're worth
I reel back to the contracts and the chores
that hold me tight upon the earth
spinning on its course

as that bird flies away
from our arrangement of concrete, steel and glass
over which every day
thousands of shadows pass.

MUSÍLKOVA

1

The man was shot two bridges up the river,
an NKVD spy at work in Prague,
the German occupation hardly over.
His job was propaganda and intrigue

and contact with the local Communists.
It's hard to say exactly just what turn
events will take or what the larger costs
of his corpse on the pavement in this yarn

I'm reading in a café two bridges down.
The novel unfolds brilliantly across
the entire continent, Prague merely one
small detail worked into the larger canvas.

The characters reduce themselves to print
when I shut the book and put it on the table.
Their world though is right here. I could walk round
to where this Russian bunked before the trouble.

They leave the oddest gaps within my day.
The coffee on the table has gone cold.
I watch the river flicker gold and grey
past the streets where he was never killed.

2

One August evening out with you. Clear sky.
An art-house film theatre in a courtyard.

Apartments from the '30s stacked up high.
We had a glass outside before the start.

My smoke went floating up into the air.
A man came out onto his balcony
and lit a cigarette and drank a beer,
his cat beside him waiting patiently.

The pleasure of the evening was intense —
a sweetness of the air, the light, the glass,
light-headed in the sky's expanse.
Incredible to think that this would pass.

3

On Saturday evening I ride the bus
from our burb into town in rainy weather.
My nose in a book, completely oblivious,
one dream distracting me from the other,

from this, from what you might call public life:
hip to hip, eyes staring straight ahead,
the loners, lovers, the quiet man and wife,
alive with glances and small shifts of body weight.

A TV actor gets on at one stop
and everyone tries and fails not to look
at his real skin and hair, his clothes, his cap,
the obvious script he takes from his backpack

that will project him on so many screens —
an hour's distraction from all this right here.

The bus swings down Musilkova and rounds
onto the home straight. Two minutes and we're there.

4

Named for a local doctor, executed
in 1940 for his work in resistance.
Whether he was recruiter or recruited,
whether he placed bombs or just gave assistance,

is hard to find out now, or why he joined
when most other people were dragging their feet.
Suddenly no options left. A single point.
Led out into a yard. Became a street.

SEMINAR

beginning with a half-line by Evan Rail

I carry America into these young heads,
at least some parts that haven't yet got there —
Hawthorne's Salem, Ellison's blacks and reds,
Bishop's lovely lines of late summer air.

The students take quick notes. They pause or dive
for dictionaries and laptops, or turn to ask
a friend as new words constantly arrive.
The more they do the more complex the task.

They smoothly move from serious to blasé
and back again. I love the way they sit
and use their bodies to nuance what they say.
I lean forward to catch the drift of it.

When it's ended they'll switch back to Czech,
put on their coats and bags, shift wood and chrome
and ready themselves for their daily trek
across a continent and ocean home.