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Off Road to Everywhere

Written by

Philip Gross

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PHILIP GROSS
Off Road to Everywhere

Philip Gross was born in the small slate-quarrying village of Delabole in Cornwall, the son of a wartime refugee from Estonia and the village schoolmaster's daughter. One of his poems for adults opens 'I was the son of the Duke of Nowhere . . .' He started writing poems and novels for young people after his daughter and son were born, and has visited hundreds of schools, reading his work and leading writing workshops. Now he is Professor of Creative Writing at Glamorgan University in the mining valleys of South Wales.

Jonathan Gross spent his formative years in Bristol, matured in Cornwall, and now lives with his wife and son deep in the nooks and crannies of mid-Wales. He studied Illustration at Falmouth College of Arts, and in 2006 he was shortlisted for the Times Canongate *Life of Pi* Competition. This is the first time he has illustrated writing by his father Philip.

Also by Philip Gross

POETRY FOR ADULTS

The Water Table (Bloodaxe 2009)
I Spy Pinhole Eye (with photographs by Simon Denison, Cinnamon 2009)
The Egg of Zero (Bloodaxe 2006)
Mappa Mundi (Bloodaxe 2003)
Changes of Address (Bloodaxe 2001)
The Wasting Game (Bloodaxe 1998)

POETRY FOR CHILDREN

Scratch City (Faber & Faber 1995)
The All-Nite Café (Faber & Faber 1993)
Manifold Manor (Faber & Faber 1989)

NOVELS FOR CHILDREN

The Storm Garden (OUP 2006)
The Lastling (OUP 2003)
Going For Stone (OUP 2002)

PHILIP GROSS

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Illustrated by Jonathan Gross

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For Jacob Ioan David Gross
and John Karl Gross,
great grandson, great grandfather . . .

. . . and for everyone in every class or course or workshop
who has played these games with me.
These poems are only a part of it.

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CAMPER VAN DREAMING

On the windows are stickers and flags
from everywhere:

from Florida to Loch Ness,
from Sun City to the Mountains of the Moon

and some that can't be true

(*Drongoolia? The Gulf of Zunch?*)
and parking tickets and

I ♥ any old thing
(*Skydiving? Goats? Bear-baiting? School?*)

on the windscreen that you can't see through.

The rainbow paint is flaking, hubcaps rusted
and the tyres are flat.

The door
squeals open — *crump*, falls off its hinges.

There are voices, laughter. 'Climb aboard!'

they call. There's a party in there.
'We're just about to leave.'

Where for?
'Off-road to everywhere! You'll see . . .

The last place on earth still unexplored.'

WHITE ONES

With small scritchety claws
and pink
shortsighted blink-
ing-in-the-sunlight
eyes that looked raw
as if they'd cried all night . . .

One morning they were gone.

On holiday,
says Dad. *Gone to stay*
with their friends
in the pet shop. And so I pretend
I don't know about the cage door
he left open. I try to ignore

the look on the face of the cat.

It isn't that
wakes me up in the darkness. No,
it's the scritch and the scratch
at the bars, those pink-eyed
lies. They're only little
white ones, oh

but watch them breed and grow.

PHILIP GROSS

DREAMS OF AN INLAND LIGHTHOUSE-KEEPER

ON THE BOAT MADE OF WIND

The hold is laden
    with scents you can't name,
a hint of other weathers, and the itch
        of desert sand, and bells, and butterflies,
            and voices out of lives and cities
                we can see but never touch,
            because this is the boat made of wind,
            and all we can do, we see-through crew,
                is fly. We have to fly.

THE BAD SHIP ANACONDA

has the soul of snakes
        just like its fork-tongued captain.
            It cuts through the waves with a hiss
or lies at anchor, every porthole
        watching like a stone eye. Then
            it strikes — part dagger-thrust, part kiss.

Or it swallows you whole,
down through timbers that ripple
and twist around you, squeeze, crush,
grind you to a paste, a powder
that the captain primes his guns with,
silent cannons that pound: *Hush. Hush. Hush.*

THE BOAT MADE OF SUSPICION

whispers over the waves.
The weather is doubtful. So are the shifty-eyed crew.
All night the lighthouse
gives its knowing wink. The gulls shriek with laughter
as if there was something they knew
and won't let on. The boat might be not what it seems.
Might be no more than a twitch
of the eyelids in somebody else's dreams.
And so might you.

THE BOAT MADE OF TEARS

is little different from the sea it floats on
— salty, with strange tides and currents,
both flow as and when they will.
        But, if you find yourself of board,
        don't be afraid. You'll never sink.
At worst, you'll melt into the whole
wide world around you — like the ocean,
wild and gentle, always moving, always still.

THE BOAT MADE OF HAIR

stands in the garden of the barber's shop.
He has been building it for years
with the sweepings-up from all his customers,
black, white, ginger and grey.
He plaits them into tiny ropes, then hawsers.
Nothing, he knows, is as strong.
                One day
his ship will launch itself, through rain and spray,
onto the high seas, and you'll see him
on deck, cutting straight for the horizon,
away from this greying old back street

where it's glum blokes' heads,
not sails, he has to trim.

THE BOAT OF PURE MATHEMATICS

needs no engine, no power, only
        calculation, like a gull's flight
straight down the line of its gaze
        at the battering storm
that could pummel it into the waves.
        The gull hangs, quivering, calm, calm
            as the cross-hairs of a rifle sight.

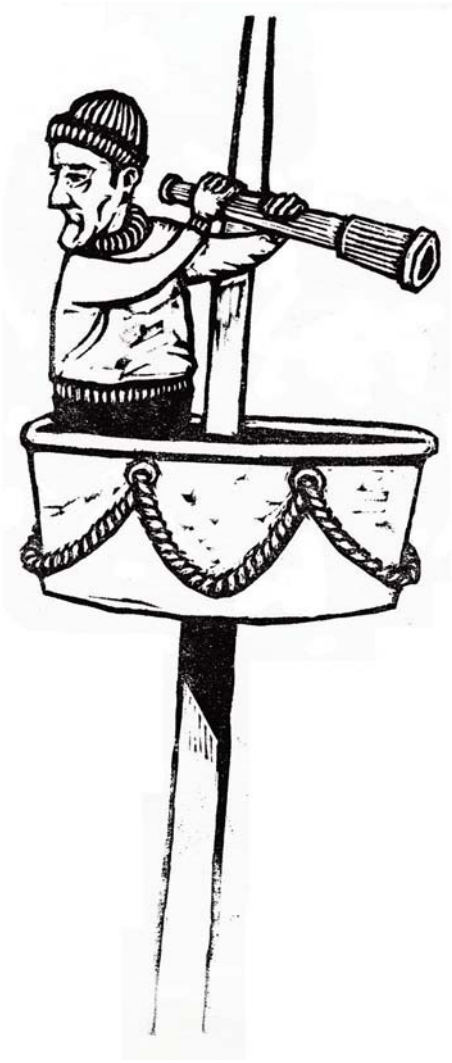
THE BOAT BUILT ON STILTS

is posh-particular,
        almost too well-bred to touch
the common water.
        My grandmother used to eat
new-fangled food she wasn't sure of
        with (she said) *long teeth*.

So this boat twitches over the world
like a pond skater, wincing
when the slick pool's surface
puckers,
sucks and clings
to the touch of its delicate feet.

ON THE BOAT MADE OF SECOND THOUGHTS

the crew keep gazing homewards
(even the steersman)
as if, oh,
each of them had dropped something
overboard — maybe his heart,
his soul —
as if he could still see it, bobbing
in the wake, or paddling off,
the way
rats do, who've seen what's coming
and jumped ship
and they never look back to say why.



THE BOAT MADE OF STARDUST

. . . from another world
might be ordinary dust in ours.
Pity the poor sailors
plunged down cracks in sofas,
hacking through rug-thickets
hung with cobweb drift-nets,
under floorboards in an netherworld of mould.

No good now, their magic powers,
no *with-one-mighty-bound-they-were-free*.
No such luck.
But the tales to be told:

dust-devils dancing round them
in the whirlwind of the hoover,
the clang of a flip-top dungeon
then the screech and grinding of the bin-man's
truck . . .

and if ever one gets back to write the history
of their shipwreck on the dreadful shores
of Ordinary . . .
well, who'd believe him?

THE BOAT MADE OF POEMS

sings and hums and talks and whispers to itself.
        It never sleeps.
It groans, it shudders to the rhythm of the waves.
        Its timbers creak
in the language of every port it has put into —
        the backchat, the patois,
the babble, the Babel, the smuggled rich lingo
        of each dockside bar.
But hush: don't tell the captain or the bosun
        or the loosely rhyming crew:
                there's really nothing to it, poetry,
just air, hot air and paper, oh, and skill
        and love and hope, between them
                and the deep dark silent sea.

PHILIP GROSS

HIDE

at Loe Pool, Cornwall

Oh the hard of the stone and the soft of the rain,
the new of the green and the old of the grey,
the wrapped-up-and-snug of the might-have-been,
the huddle and shiver of here today . . .

Eaves drip with slow
at the pool of Loe
as the lowdown evening slinks away.

Oh the null of the view from the birders' hide,
the SHARON 4 GARY and worse on the wall,
the been-here-and-seen-it-before of thirteen,
the heartache by numbers in blue feltpen scrawl . . .

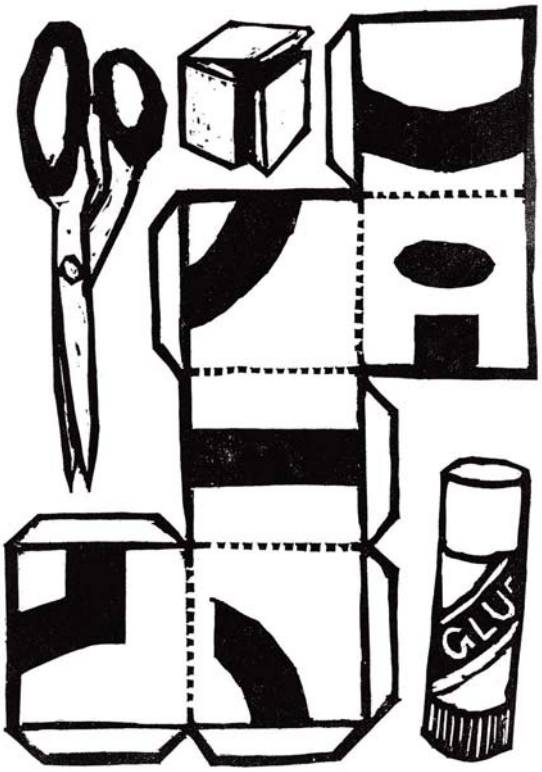
Spring aches with grow
as the pool of Loe
downloads its seasons' rise and fall

Oh the sharp of the swallow's flick out of the mist,
the blunt of the pencil, the smudge of the word,
the fact that I'm writing this poem at all,
the still-and-for-always of once-seen-once-heard . . .

The sky below
the pool of Loe
reflects on something that's occurred.

It's the yes of the no
in the hide of the show:
the twitch of the moment, or was it a bird?

for Roger Butts


GLU

LEFT LUGGAGE FROM THE LOST AND FOUND

Item: one crate of raw planks
nailed together, weather-worn,
sea-bitten, washed up. Flotsam or jetsam.
How long has it kept afloat, to come to me?
Inside . . .

> you'll find a sudden stillness,
> the reflection of the harbour light
> and laughter on the water, one last evening.
> Calm before the storm. We sail tonight.

≈

Item: seems to be a strongbox,
dented metal, strapped and braced —
not one right angle or one straight edge —
beaten out of shape by life but never burst.
Inside . . .

> if you could ever find the key
> you'd find a brittle powder-blue
> blown bird's egg, and a note beginning
> *Dear, I found this, and I thought of you . . .*

≈

Item: a box of mirrors.
Every way I hold it, the same face
stares back — now grinning, now puzzled,
now frowning, now blushing, now terribly pale.
Inside . . .

> who knows? What's so precious
> or toxic that it needs such high security,
> so many masked attendants, never
> sleeping — these massed ranks of *me?*

THE GOPHER'S TALE

(gopher: builder's junior assistant,
always being told to 'go for' this or that)

He sent out for 15-amp fuses.
He sent out for pizzas and glue,
        some inflammable gunk
        that said Not To Be Drunk.
He said Save me the dregs if you do.

He sent out for chrome-plated handles
and candles and vandal-proof paint
        and extendable legs
        and hard-boiled eggs.
He sent out to file a complaint.

        And I went, I went
        when he sent, he sent,
He might have been some sort of saint.

He sent out for prickly-pear yogurt.
He sent out for porpoise and chips.
        He sent out for gyres
        and tricycle tyres
and half-bricks and hamsters and whips.

He sent out for Lonely-Heart pages
and chisels to carve a reply.
        He sent for a peach
        and said Get us one each
and whatever you do, don't ask why.

        And I went, I went
        when he sent, he sent,
because well, he was that sort of guy.

He sent out for something surprising.
He sent out for three hearty cheers,
        a lathe-turner's bench
        and a back-handed wrench.
He sent out for twenty one years.

He sent out to ask what was happening
in Ecuador, Bath and Tibet.
        He sent a demand
        saying Don't Understand.
He sent out to place a small bet.

        And I went, I went
      when he sent, he sent.
Wouldn't you? There was so much to get.

And he never once came to the window.
He never once came to the door
and the last time he sent
Heaven knows what he meant
but he never came out any more,
any more,
though I knocked and I rang
and I called and I banged
no, he never came out any more.