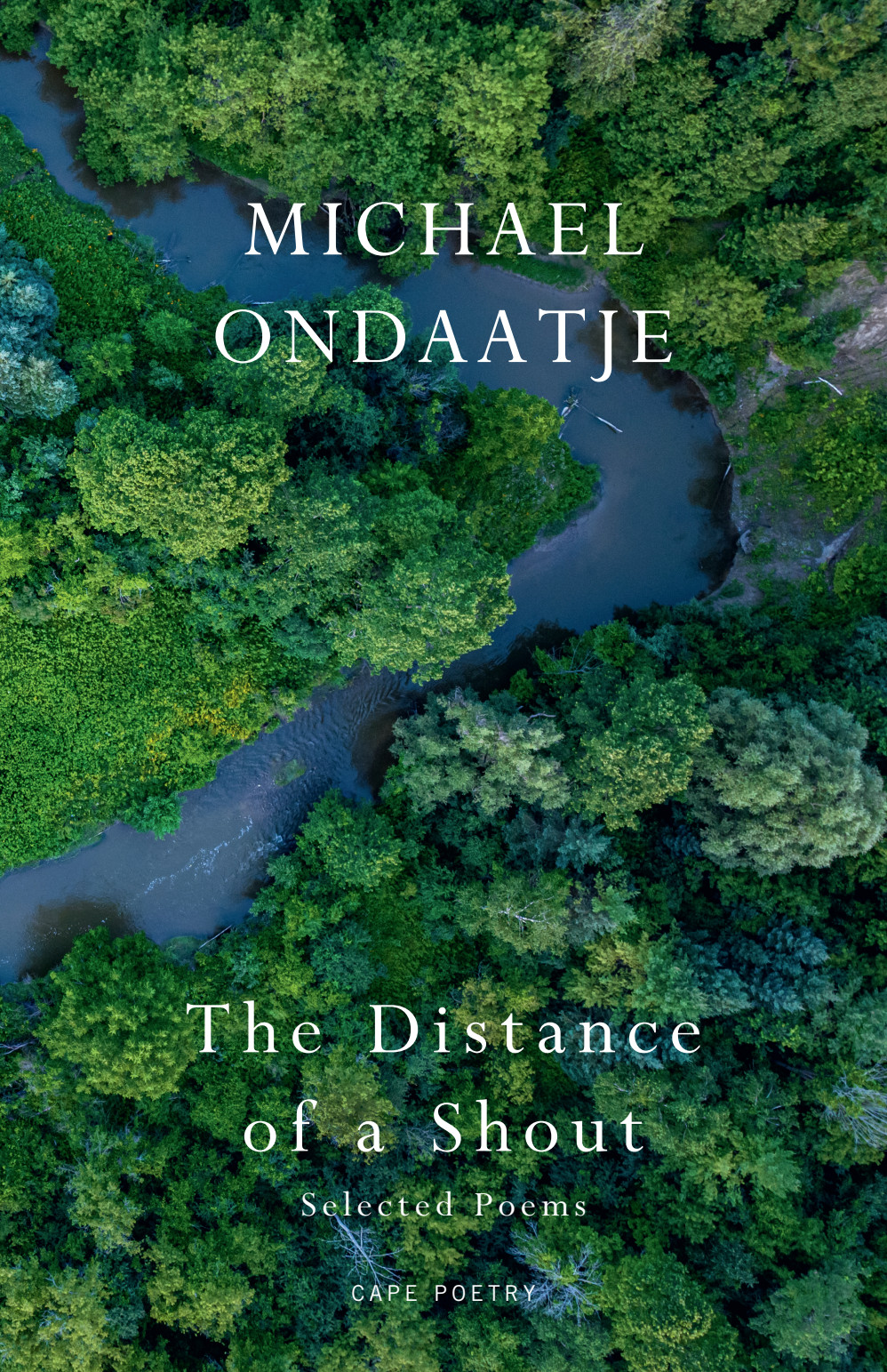


An aerial photograph of a river winding through a lush, dense forest. The river is dark and reflective, contrasting with the vibrant green of the surrounding trees. The text is overlaid on the image in a white, serif font.

MICHAEL
ONDAATJE

The Distance
of a Shout

Selected Poems

CAPE POETRY

THE DISTANCE OF A SHOUT



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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

POETRY

The Collected Works of Billy the Kid
There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do
Secular Love
The Cinnamon Peeler
Handwriting
A Year of Last Things

PROSE

Coming Through Slaughter
Running in the Family
In the Skin of a Lion
The English Patient
Anil's Ghost
Divisadero
The Cat's Table
Warlight

NON-FICTION

The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film

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THE DISTANCE OF A SHOUT

Selected Poems

Michael Ondaatje



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Along with years of thanks, this book is dedicated to Stan Bevington of Coach House Press and to Paul Thompson of Theatre Passe Muraille, as well as the essential communities they created for so many of us.

★

The Distance of a Shout is also dedicated to my older brother, Christopher Ondaatje. We both had lived lives that were uprooted when we were sent — each of us solitary in our early teens — by ship to different schools in England. A decade later he would make his way to Canada alone, and then a few years later he bought me a ticket and persuaded me to join him there, so giving me the essential gift of a new life.

Before leaving England, he had introduced me to the pleasures of books and music, especially jazz. And for years at parties he would bring out his guitar and sing a Hoagy Carmichael song, ‘Huggin’ and Chalkin’’, and when he got to the last verse I would join in with him.

Thank you for everything, Christopher.

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BURNING HILLS

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LIGHT

for Doris Gratiaen

Midnight storm. Trees walking off across the fields in fury
naked in the spark of lightning.

I sit on the white porch on the brown hanging cane chair
coffee in my hand midnight storm midsummer night.

The past, friends and family drift into the rain shower.

Those relatives in my favourite slides

reshot from old minute photographs so they now stand
complex ambiguous grainy on my wall.

This is my Uncle who turned up for his marriage
on an elephant. He was a chaplain.

This shy-looking man in the light jacket and tie was infamous,
when he went drinking he took the long blonde beautiful hair
of his wife and put one end in the cupboard and locked it
leaving her tethered in an armchair.

He was terrified of her possible adultery
and this way died happy to the end.

My Grandmother, who went to a dance in a muslin dress
with fireflies captured and embedded in the cloth, shining
and witty. This calm beautiful face
organised wild acts in the tropics.

She hid the milkman in her house
after he had committed murder and at the trial
was thrown out of the court for making jokes at the judge.
Her son became a Q.C.

This is my Brother at six. With his cousin and his sister
and Pam de Voss who fell on a penknife and lost her eye.

My Aunt Christie. She knew Harold Macmillan was a spy
communicating with her through pictures in the newspapers.

Every picture she believed asked her to forgive him,
his hound eyes pleading.

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Her husband, Uncle Fitzroy, a doctor in Ceylon,
had a memory sharp as scalpels into his eighties,
though I never bothered to ask him about anything
– interested then more in the latest recordings of Bobby Darin.

And this is my Mother with her brother Noel in fancy dress.
They are seven and eight years old, a hand-coloured photograph,
it is the earliest picture I have. The one I love most.

A picture of my kids at Halloween
has the same contact and laughter.

My Uncle dying at sixty-eight, and my Mother a year later
dying at sixty-eight.

She told me about his death, the day he died
his eyes clearing out of illness as if seeing
right through the room, the hospital and she said
he saw something so clear and good his whole body
for a moment became youthful and she remembered
when she sewed badges on his track shirts.

Her voice joyous in telling me this, her face light and clear.
(My firefly Grandmother also dying at sixty-eight).

These are the fragments I have of them, tonight
in this storm, the dogs restless on the porch.
They were all laughing, crazy, and vivid in their prime.

At a party my drunk Father
tried to explain a complex operation on chickens
and managed to kill them all in the process, the guests
having dinner an hour later while my Father slept
and the kids watched the servants clean up the litter
of beaks and feathers on the lawn.

These are their fragments, all I remember,
wanting more knowledge of them. In the mirror and in my kids
I see them in my flesh. Wherever we are
they parade in my brain and the expanding stories
connect to the grey grainy pictures on the wall

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as they hold their drinks or twenty years later
hold grandchildren, pose with favourite dogs,
coming through the light, the electricity, which the storm
destroyed an hour ago, a tree going down by the highway
so that now inside the kids play dominoes by candlelight
and out here the thick rain static the spark of my match
to a cigarette
and the trees across the fields leaving me, distinct
lonely in their own knife scars and cow-chewed bark,
frozen in the jagged light as if snapped in their run
the branch arms waving to what was a second ago the dark sky
when in truth like me they haven't moved.
Haven't moved an inch from me.

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D A T E S

It becomes apparent that I miss great occasions.
My birth was heralded by nothing
but the anniversary of Winston Churchill's marriage.
No monuments bled, no instruments
agreed on a specific weather.
It was a seasonal insignificance.

I console myself with my Mother's eighth month.
While she sweated out her pregnancy in Ceylon
a servant ambling over the lawn
with a tray of iced drinks,
a few friends visiting her
to placate her shape, and I
drinking the life lines,
Wallace Stevens sat down in Connecticut
a glass of orange juice at his table
so hot he wore only shorts
and on the back of a letter
began to write 'The Well Dressed Man with a Beard'.

That night while my Mother slept
her significant belly cooled
by the bedroom fan
Stevens put words together
that grew to sentences
and shaved them clean and
shaped them, the page suddenly
becoming thought where nothing had been,
his head making his hand
move where he wanted

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and he saw his hand was saying
the mind is never finished, no, never
and I in my Mother was growing
as were the flowers outside the Connecticut windows.

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LETTERS & OTHER WORLDS

*'for there was no more darkness for him and,
no doubt like Adam before the fall, he could see in the dark'*

My father's body was a globe of fear
His body was a town we never knew
He hid that he had been where we were going
His letters were a room he seldom lived in
In them the logic of his love could grow

My father's body was a town of fear
He was the only witness to its fear dance
He hid where he had been that we might lose him
His letters were a room his body scared

He came to death with his mind drowning.
On the last day he enclosed himself
in a room with two bottles of gin, later
fell the length of his body
so that brain blood moved
to new compartments
that never knew the wash of fluid
and he died in minutes of a new equilibrium.

His early life was a terrifying comedy
and my mother divorced him again and again.
He would rush into tunnels magnetised
by the white eye of trains
and once, gaining instant fame,
managed to stop a Perahara in Ceylon
– the whole procession of elephants dancers
local dignitaries – by falling
dead drunk onto the street.

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As a semi-official, and semi-white at that,
the act was seen as a crucial
turning point in the Home Rule Movement
and led to Ceylon's independence in 1948.

(My mother had done her share too –
her driving so bad
she was stoned by villagers
whenever her car was recognised.)
For fourteen years of marriage
each of them claimed he or she
was the injured party.
Once on the Colombo docks
saying goodbye to a recently married couple
my father, jealous
at my mother's articulate emotion,
dove into the waters of the harbour
and swam after the ship waving farewell.
My mother pretending no affiliation
mingled with the crowd back to the hotel.

Once again he made the papers
though this time my mother
with a note to the editor
corrected the report – saying he was drunk
rather than brokenhearted at the parting of friends.
The married couple received both editions
of *The Ceylon Times* when their ship reached Aden.

And then in his last years
he was the silent drinker,
the man who once a week
disappeared into his room with bottles
and stayed there until he was drunk
and until he was sober.

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There speeches, head dreams, apologies,
the gentle letters, were composed.
With the clarity of architects
he would write of the row of blue flowers
his new wife had planted,
the plans for electricity in the house,
how my half-sister fell near a snake
and it had awakened and not touched her.
Letters in a clear hand of the most complete empathy
his heart widening and widening and widening
to all manner of change in his children and friends
while he himself edged
into the terrible acute hatred
of his own privacy
till he balanced and fell
the length of his body
the blood entering
the empty reservoir of bones
the blood searching in his head without metaphor

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BILLBOARDS

My wife's problems with husbands, houses,
her children that I meet
at stations in Kingston, in Toronto, in London Ontario
– they come down the grey steps
bright as actors after their drugged four-hour ride
of spilled orange juice and comics.
Reunions for Easter-egg hunts.
Kite flying. Christmases.
All this, I was about to say,
invades my virgin past.

When she was beginning
this anthology of kids
I moved blind but for senses,
jutting *faux pas*, terrible humour,
shifted with a sea of persons,
breaking when necessary
into smaller self-sufficient bits of mercury.
My mind a carefully empty diary
till I hit the barrier reef
that was my wife –
 there
the right bright fish
among the coral.

With her came the locusts of history –
 innuendoes she had missed
 varied attempts at seduction
 dogs bred and killed
 by taxis or brain disease.
 Here was I trying to live
 with a neutrality so great
 I'd have nothing to think about.

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Nowadays I get the feeling
I'm in a complex situation,
one of several billboard posters
blending in the rain.

I am writing this with a pen my wife has used
to write a letter to her first husband.
On it is the smell of her hair.
She must have placed it down between sentences
and thought, and driven her fingers round her skull
gathered the slightest smell of her head
and brought it back to the pen.

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BEARHUG

Griffin calls to come and kiss him goodnight
I yell ok. Finish something I'm doing,
then something else, walk slowly round
the corner to my son's room.
He is standing arms outstretched
waiting for a bearhug. Grinning.

Why do I give my emotion an animal's name,
give it that dark squeeze of death?
This is the hug which collects
all his small bones and his warm neck against me.
The thin tough body under the pyjamas
locks to me like a magnet of blood.

How long was he standing there
like that, before I came?

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