

Peter Riley

READER. LECTURE. AUTHOR.

Three groups of poems.

A new text.

READER

Short autobiographical poems

Harecops

Grace and honour
descend the hill

Seeking the human heart
brushing aside the wasps

And folding that knotted
academy in clay hands...

•

Our front window looked out two miles
over pasture and woodlands thick
with the sheen of equity, that eschews
greed or fantasy, its pale emblems still
shelved at the field edges and tending
to fade into earth. We held onto this
optimism. We sank our trust in
curtained arbours of a stone house
and formed a child, who guided us
through the dark stores.

•

And two miles away was a great ridge,
a dark green mass strung with white stone walls

At its highest point an ancestral grave,
a circular fate capsule of long stones.

It was always there, though the light
came and failed.

White stone messengers
pierced the night and

Focused the day, calling
to the mind, calling to the cupped heart,

Calling together the kind forces
that hunt us to death.

Macclesfield

Mislaid purpose coated
with grime and stuck in a nest

Of hill shoulders.
Little red tractors

Buzzed round the
heads of the town

And the dark brick alcoves were
always waiting, you could

Cowl yourself in one and
belong until you stank of oil.

The question was: did you care, did you
want more than good being?

If you didn't you rested even
as the evening sun-

light sat on the doorstep with its
feet in the street and you crawled

Between the slates and stars and kissed,
blind to all except detail. If you did, you

Worked the circuits, calling O,
Baby, don't you want to go...

A provincial voice has
total age or falls to scraps. We

Took our purpose by the hand and
led it out of the factories and shops

Into the nation.

Denmark

Denmark
was entirely my own fault!

I like to think I retained
a flake of grace

By the squint-mirrors and
winter glades

The kindness hiding
in the passing measures

I like to think
of you, now a lost name

Who brought my straying spirit
to its term. I lost all sight

Of you, but gained a northern pebble
to hold against the paling sky.

And I think I did
eventually achieve

A sexual friendship that would have
turned New York green.

Bolehill

I shall never forget the grove
and the grassy mounds

I shall never forget you
fighting me on a pillow

I cannot thank you enough.
When the snow came

It melted (when our
tears came they

Hardened)
and ran down the fields.

Egbert Street

A name becomes hearted
and sustains life.

Somewhere between loss
and gain, in that

Narrow climate
the flower succeeds

That grows now
in the garden here

A castle
against relatives.

Pastorale

Listening to Schubert's songs
sung by Robert Holl
It becomes obvious

The hunter's call in the forest
is the tenderest thing we know
is the thing that tells us

What does it tell us?
We are an always,
like it or not, that

Is what we are. We
nourish our hunger

Hastings

Our virtuous acts
remain with us

Everything else has vanished.
It doesn't matter

How little remains: the soul,
a tiny part of the body

And there were cats in the window.

High Lane

I wandered the fields and woods
waiting to be called back

Into someone's life: the hand
on the shoulder and

The teeth on the neck:
lie back and be taken or

Escape and kill.
I took a bus to the city centre.

•

Coming home late at night in the dark
walking from the station through the old mines

I glanced up at the hunting lodge on
the horizon and cast my affection forward

Against all caution to that cage, believing
the most logical things on earth to be

The most sensual, tears
in my eyes, knowing the prize

Was not mine, well, such is
passion or day.

Through Woods and Fields

I would hunt you
to the end of the earth

And the beginning of a song
by Schubert

Listening for that call in the
forest, meaning

New life. And the boat
on the lake meaning death.

Nicholas Moore

I repeat, the heart, the
hart in the forest

The white one I shall
pursue that forehead for

Ever and don't care how slowly
it comes closer and closer,

That heaven to this hell.
Then it is hale and clear

And clearly us, together
in the (end) clearing.

Irish Drones

All those chanters
all faring well enough

And along he comes, what's
his name, Willie Clancie, Billy

Pigg, not Irish either and
plays as if

His heart's cut in two.
It isn't. Somebody's is.

Maybe it's mine, the
listener, maybe it's us.

The as if
is a long contemplation of the sky.

What the fate capsule told me

The hunters' call across the valley: us
is what they're after

And can't fail, in the end
we are theirs, and they take us.

Then the horn calls them back
and the quarry rises,

White against the green hill, and turns
towards us, heraldic creature with open arms

Compaction of ore and bone, living and
breathing creature at the end of a life.

Our virtue stands before us, there is
no further pursuit. Note also

The perfection when a face
is distanced from its moment.

Golden Slumbers

To reach you I would bar the fields
and turn the ores into the stream

I would occupy the eyrie of my failure
far into the night night after night

Until the ancestral bones
formed a nest for my patience

In which I would sit and couple the numbers
of my life without regret

And remember with uncertainty the world
in which we were and not,

all our loves in vain.

No love is in vain,
reader.

LECTURE

Five of six poems

Ego sic semper et ubique vixi, ut ultimam quam lucem, tam quam non reditur, consumerem.
Petronis Arbitr

In life a cave; in death a lamp to poets and doctors.
John Wheelright

I Wrote a Letter from France

Here I set my suitcase down
and swear by the twin stars that
triangulate our wars, the new
meadows open their doors at
evening's end, the soft sand
slides along the river bed,
the singing night birds
plunge their beaks into comfort.

War leans on the shadow's edge
where light pours into the ground
and slides through caves, the star
on the sole against succession,
anger locked at *bouches d'ombre*,
hope a flicker on the dark river.
I open my suitcase looking for a ring.

M. Haslam

Congress of twins that
lengthens the world
in a mournful music, send me
back to the bench but
keep me in that fold until
the amethysts fall and
we are sunk in generation.
Kit this pillow
in a fabulous lace of spittle.

Cross-gender

You entered me and that
point of you that means
real and future has filled
my emptiness with seed.
Now I drag in the moon's
path because I am
trapped in because and
there is a small light at my gut.

Glow Worm True Worm

Bright hyphen in the dark valley
between the path and the river,
I never even tried and the water slips
sideways, the little owls hop
from branch to branch in the dark,
living like us with what they aren't
and never will be. And the stars
pulse dryly to themselves, a steady and
irrevocable calling across date and
post, across floors and shelves of
goods across the merely possible
the synapse fires as if suddenly us.

But I always thought love was deserved.
I thought it was the earth shining.

Magdalenian

Hand stencils on concave surfaces at points of relinquishment. Hollow horses and bulging bovines. Desire, that claim on light between mouth and legs crashes day by day against the lens, it really is too late to 'phone. The last signature is set at *bouches d'ombre*: threshold of lower galleries containing running water, doors into the world's black fall. A headless snake on the banks of the underground river; management moves in the night in the dark back streets when everyone's asleep, relentless laceration of the unnamed. Speech blocked, broken membrane, casual and arbitrary deaths in a war for want. We cost it all in poetry, wild notes in our dark mouths, with the animals alongside stacked red and black, small flickering shades on the walls of the river, phosphenes in attendance overhead.

LECTURE NOTES

The original edition had another nine pieces. There were notes at the back connecting some of the poems in the booklet to pieces of music whose texts guided the composition, but, interestingly, none of these was among the five I retained, in fact they were precisely the ones jettisoned. The terms of adoration which dominate the texts of European Latin church music do not translate into terms of sensual affection, however wrought through vocabularies of terrestrial extent.

Quam tu pulchra es is not 'How beautiful you are'. The entity addressed can only be approached through an entire cosmography. It would be like rendering *Qualis est dilectus* (Forrest) as 'she is delicious' (which I didn't). The Latin inhabits a shortage economy, a world of unremitting self-sustaining work, it is *thin* on the ground, a narrow stalk, a companionship of necessary tasks. Even in the golden womb of St Mark's in Venice *Adoramus* (Monteverdi) is the plea of a tenuous and guarded contract. The body of *Ave Verum Corpus* (Peñalosa) is wood sculpture, its blood painted and varnished. At the end of *Lecture* the recitatives and carols of Schütz's *O bone Jesu* were cast as alternating global panegyrics and beer songs. But drowsy contentment does not in fact give access to the terms of justice in the world, it merely feels as if it does; everything seems to be settling into its place but the comfort is concessional.

The other glosses were of texts of Schubert songs, and they didn't work either. *Wie schön bist du, / freundliche stille, / himlische Ruh'* is closer to individual but would remain what Lawrence called 'chaste' even if it were not addressed to the stillness of evening, and I think this would be the case with almost anything European before the late 19th Century 'romantic' interiorisation of the constructional faculty. *Eins in andre gar versunken, gar verloren, gar ertrunken...* Each sunk into the other, lost, drunk with each other... *Dich unringend, von dir unrunge...* *Gar in Eins mit dir geeint...* "ringed in you, ranked in you, wrecked in you..." It is not the same, it is desperate and sleepy where the German was almost scientific. And the more we recall that bunch of Viennese playboys with their soirées and picnics and nights out on the town and that Schubert died of syphilis, the more it is not the same.

Some chippings follow, and a suspended sentence.

LECTURE: GATHERED STALKS

(Quam tu pulchra es)

Moorland sunsets on south-facing blackberries,
eels turning in the stream. Accuracy at last
but where to go.



(Adoramus)

Lorries rushing to the far limits of transport,
the alpine path in the evening, dark blue
in the sky, and Mercy and Peace
fall glittering to the plain.



(Wie schön bist du)

The lone star
wanders in the night fields
shedding silence, don't stop here don't
take your coat off.
The water wears the white rock
to a flower crust.



(Auflösung)

Go under, world, take
your layers of light with you
and leave us with our closed haulage depots
pricked by the moon.



(Die Mondnacht)

Out in the painted meadow behind the airport the stream sparkles in the night, bits of light fall from the leaves and the house tops fade into evening, sugar and fat before bed. Language through the night's broken spaces, notions of unreachable summations as the tenuous airships lift off one by one, heading for futures by the thousand. Where are you now?

Where are you now? How do you set yourself to the world or its night? Have you had babies? Have they grown up? If I could hear you what would you say? Have we left a wasteland between us that cannot be redeemed?

And somewhere they touch down. People seek their hotels and lie facing each other.



(O bone Iesu)

A kindness out of where we are, which desires many different things.

HEINRICH BIBER

Passion's proximity, passion's three-step
And you're there. If you're there
Be there, show pluck, walk in the
Streets of Laredo head high, danger
on the cuff and mortal precept.
Willing, I mean, to die for nothing
Since we do and have plenty of time.
In this light I couldn't
Love you more and scratch an elk on
The cave wall in five minutes flat
Because passion creates what it means
Out of thin air in red streams. And turn
To the bank as the moon shrinks
And the membrane tightens across
The mossy fields, the debris of our
Gain signed in passionless lymph.
Take your partner, harmonious nymph,
And treacle the earth without blame.
Out of my case I choose a clear name.

AUTHOR

I eat fire sometimes. But I have to control myself because my father taught me that even a chief's son is a commoner in other lands.
Chenjerai Hove, *Bones*.

In Manus Tuas

Gendering touch that gathers
and cups like a boat on the
rotting sea because I tendered

All I am to your safety. We are eye
to eye, heart to purpose, bent
forward in the western wind

That blows over hard and
blanched ground towards an idea
of work as shelter.

The children raised there will blow
this distance to anthills and hand
themselves to aerials

And hunt themselves to equity
in an under-tree light loud with one
mutual cry – of succession

Dying to a rich suture of the future.
Deep then in the oily mulch a
smouldering hope, a patient ear

To another's woe and a door behind the snow.
How it seals the film of spring,
where we ride forth in company.

Pure need scores the pavement
from sweet advert to lost face.
I know the mind is a final place

And a stone violently peaceful
to lie on, hidden in the grass
under the shadow of your arm.

The present becomes a gap
in fearful chance, older than
any church, hawk over the closed hill.

Lights consign the arcade
to a virtual offer, begging
in the street for sacrifice. I know

The tired are a fine people,
hands almost touch, almost turn,
hearts almost tread.

O memoria felice! Nights at the
star loft, days bound ahead of reason,
good measure at the trading station...

Slowly failure becomes an honourable nation
in which I wait for someone's arm, specific
hopes wind-borne onto rendzina,

Counting the miles towards home
while quieter waters leech the soil
and closer minds bow to the pavement

Tracing the future of mineral solutions
under the meadows and meadows
of desire.

So set in the failed traffic my vocation turns
as the tired turn, downwards, dark road to a
chip sandwich, weeping prisoner almost touched.

Voiced consonants buzzing through Suffolk
to a dark road white houses when I
knew the cost I had no language,

My death spread over the fens. Love
predicates a real future or
burns to nothing like a white leaf.

My hands felt like two balloons. Did you,
yes you did, see the great flocks
of Scandinavian wood pigeons and

Plovers in the ploughed fields, hundreds, in
slowly dimming winter light wearing
a question to be proud of, bending

To the day's end calling where is the
river where is the course of us
where is the bridging flesh?

Not here, nor worth knowing
in a society that reckons care
by tenths. The sheen of their wings

Makes a sea of the field
and a person's age is a grateful fact
sailing out on it with you

Sitting in a car in a dark road white
houses, bookshop open answer closed
fruitful company in a closing world.

I have to believe what the earth so
distinctly says. Settle noisily honourable birds
onto everyone's food.

Set to a hyaline edge the dawn
light spills heavy with milk. Over the
rim it spills as it is bound to,

Creeps among the grass stalks like a silent snake
as the rusty tank yells the lads back to slaughter
as they surely will on the chime of ten.

Yet it continues slowly and chromatically
mounting like a reasonable despair
that finds an answer in its own folds,

In the crests and commerce of
the shadowed fields its own voice
reaching to the upper tonic or

Scooping light to the soul's mouth while
the city clocks its advantages, turned
back to back with disdain, hand in pocket.

Hand in blame. I can't exactly
unregister myself from harm as the first sugar truck
cuts across the fens one September dawn

Cold and faint cuts purpose from act
and state in all innocence. But the light
spreads, green and brown folded in water.

Chalk under foot. Domine libera
animam meam a labiis iniquis et
a lingua dolosa. Chalk under bone.

Spreads and means, turning home.

E Questa Vita in Lampo

Wrap the light in tendons and no one
can take it except finally. So the world
is darkened.

Daily darkened. *O blessed man,*
that the self flees into
a cave at your anger and the worms

The beneficial worms bite the white rock
to a soil, that holds the stem
of a marriage cup, future prize of

Written flesh – worth every drop too
for it opens and tints at the
start of love to the temperature

Of the globe and bears its illumination
from cell to cell unwrapped, casting
back from the body's reluctance a glow,

Small in reach that blasts fantasy inside
out. And the occasion of this release:
a single pronoun on the doorstep begging no

More than sustenance. Claiming no rights.
Starting no fights. Elegant in red
fur and blue tights.

Delphine

(extempore on a Schubert song)

To begin then if it is
 and if it is
what it does or
 not do here
or do there and do head
 to toe if it is.
For us, then, is it, alone
 worth it, is it
fading enough is it
 nothing enough, is it
doing and wanting and
 being nothing at all
or almost at all such as
 not wanting to stay in and
not wanting to go out, is
 that it? So it is
a not that binds
 and burns, but still not,
and finally withers.
 What indeed is the good
of planting rows of flowers
 and watering them if
what it all comes to is precisely not
 but what could hurt
and pleasure more?

Do It Again

It's automatic when I
Talk to old friends the
Conversation turns to
Girls we knew when their
Hair was soft and

whiter than star
heavier than sea

death white as glass
pass over me

Well I've been thinkin'bout
All the places All the faces we
Missed and then

O That Singer

You're fallen, the street at your throat.
Denial echoes under the palate as they
queue at the bank for promises, not

Believing a word. And you who believed
everything lie cast in a rail-side cot
blood-clot on the brain and a hawk came

And perched on the wire, beautiful thing,
preening its oily coat in red and grey
and the text of those unfolding wings

Was a cloud encumbered sky over
a measured plain, immeasurable pain, where
distant travellers greet the dawn

Eye to eye, hand to mouth
and never arrive. Never arrive
because the syntax is cut

Just where it opens where the
wooded hill cleaves in the wind. There
we offer pittance to your archive.

And we your friends, your very
loyal congregation set our hearts back
to the living light in the far shed for the hope

The day harbours, singing and playing.

Bar Carol

There are worse deaths than singing,
worse singing than death's.
Gently over black ever

Shifting water the wooden craft
Moves out. The newspaper
soaked in itself, sinks.

And the city back there, circles scripted
over the sea articulating light we
adore by rote and touched in the

Tainted fall of socialistic promises
like petals of death, sign out
with a blown shrug. The city divides

And sheds but the world waits for ever
the great curve of thought we
slowly sail round towards singing.

And love alone, untouched by ideology,
is a rare thing that the flesh
calls out and runs to meet. There they
stand, hand in hand, watching the horses
pounding the green field at the sea's edge,
green pulse at the street's end, always and
precisely that sundering coil of breath.

And love alone, without bonus, roars
in my ear the final score. Wherever on
earth we may be in the time and
measure left me I shan't dream or
anything but honour. And silly too,
forgetting the exact ground whereon those
two eyes bought my breath.

And love aligns the bruised letters offering
nothing to the future but itself, what it
purely earns. Snow brushing the hill,
honesty of the offered arm, daybreak over
the ruins of will. So the earth lightens
to a hawk's point in the sky and a silver
cup for the loser, as ever was.
Take it this parting prize this blow.

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Author.

Many of these poems were originally prefaced with dedications to artists and musicians, which are now removed. I list them below because some people who used this booklet for teaching found them useful.

In Manus Tuas. John Sheppard.

‘Set to a hyaline edge...’ Hans Leo Hassler

‘Voiced consonants...’ Syd Barrett (who I thought at the time was the author of the sentence ‘My hands felt like two balloons’).

E Questa Vita un Lampo. Janáček (The Adventures of the Vixen Bystrousky). Title from Monteverdi (which I thought at the time meant, ‘This life is a lamp’.)

O That Singer. Amédé Ardoin (Cajun accordionist)

Bar Carol. Schubert (‘Barcarolle’)

‘And love alone...’ Jack Yeats (Jr., brother of W.B. Yeats)

I’m grateful to David Bromige for supplying the correct wording of the Beach Boys’ song in ‘Do It Again’.