

Peter Philpott

Also by Peter Philpott:

The Bishop Stortford Variations (Great Works Editions, 1976)

What Was Shown (Ferry Press, London, 1980)

Some Action Upon The World (Grosseteste, Leeds, 1982)

TEXTUAL POSSESSIONS

Three Sequences by

Peter Philpott

Dammit these words are making faces
At me again. I hope the faces
They make at you have more love.

WS Graham,
from "Implements in Their Places"
New Collected Poems

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IN THE PRESENT HISTORIC TENSE *A Serial Poem of the West*

Alcmaeon says that men die because they cannot attach the beginning to the end – a clever saying if you take it to have been meant loosely and do not try to make it precise.

(pseudo-Aristotle, Problem 916933-37,
from ed. Jonathan Barnes,
Early Greek Philosophy [Penguin, 1987])

I OF THE WEST

1

On the grey beach
Men hammer madly at
The talismans of a lost past
Unknown but believed in
Compulsively shattering
The secret's not released
But broken.

Purchase and achievement spread it
That perfect find repeated
As the miracle of commodity
Swopping it if lucky
Colour postcards of the stars
The piledriver hammering
Red rusty walls
Against a glass-green sea
Bright under the breakwater
Sucking and pulling stones
Until the town and all the people
Lost as the dinosaurs and the ammonites
No one wants to find us

Our secret will be safe
Unbroken inside concrete boulders
Red soft pebbles of bricks
Old worn glass and slivers of plastic
Spreading out and losing themselves
Against the grey black sagging cliffs

In the town of the old men
 Quiet and friendliness
 Grow in little gardens
 Bright flowers around the lawns
 Red bean-flowers climbing at the back
 The soft fruit murmuring to itself
 Under a flawless eggshell sky.

This whole thing hurts:
 It pushes in, soft
 Furnishing tucks caught and pinned
 With great care, love and neatness.
 The pins are those
 That murder saints and insects
 Silently, quietly and like a friend
 Under this flawless soft blue sky.

It hurts because it is inevitable
 Irresistible, slow and unwanted
 The whole body tumorous, or
 Swathed in black bugs, while tea
 Cups clatter and soft voices reminisce
 In rooms pumped out of air.
 The sky is still blue.

In the town of the old men
 The old dogs, old food, old houses
 Old words drift like aphids
 Sparkling in perpetual sunlight
 And settling, now welcomed
 Into their places, quiet
 Friendly and wanted at last.

3

And at this place
Flocks of jackdaws
Like a plague

Telling us messages
Over and over
Like the waves

“You can’t win
You will get old
Die like everyone else”

These wise birds
Live everywhere here
Like the people

The town and
The bare rocky valleys
Like gorges, dead lakes

Where the river fell out
It dried
Piled like rock

Ruins and legends
All false, impossible
Like we knew

What the birds tell us
Eyes black beads in white
Like automata

Or like some
Wisdom burst out
A dreadful warning

Black bodies flying
Into night, sky
And sea

4

The familiar green world
Beyond the hill opening
Into heaviness, old lawrentian words
Sprouting up and pushing
Fecund, heavy and burgeoning:

The familiar green world
Beyond the one we know
Tread upon but opening
Behind it
Here, now

The familiar green world
Beyond
A child's picture
Of the wild world
Opening out around

The familiar green world beyond
Any one spot
Only comings into growth
And dying in a dance
Opening to this

Familiar green world
Beyond

The bus promised Hardy country
Slow and dirty, faintly melancholy
With the abandoned air of all public things

Distant views across also possible
Drifts of time and vapour allowing
But never a visit:

The buses stopped before the heights
And you were lost in a dirty town
Returning always to the familiar haunts

The nearer edge is the safer
Can't undo what is cut, not cut except
Nightmare fantasies.

Going back to the familiar green world
Beyond the familiar green places
That aren't the world but a world

Haphazard and torn, unconvincing
And boring as posters in buses
With the abandoned air of all public things

6

The road runs between water
To the horizons grey reflective skies
Like nature's way: something vast

Impersonal and beautiful, regular
Predictable as language, reflective
Meaning too that underneath

It's not the sky but muddy grass
Punctuated by consonants
We all know this

But love the infinite sheens of surfaces
All you need for reflection
Can't stop it or understand

Meaning like water
Doesn't go away
But slowly returns

Can't keep it out
Stretching
To either horizon

We inhabit old films
 Black and white westerns glimpsed over the sundays
 Family entertainment
 The latest british film
 Patriotic, stiff and half humorous at least
 Deprecating fatally itself and us

Everything switches from under to overplay
 Like mad relatives
 Threatening impossible people Dad works for
 Teachers seen out of school
 Like travesties of the real people they are
 Threatening or helpful
 We also inhabit

And shops that don't exist
 Grocers making up orders
 Drapers and ironmongers
 Quiet respectable places
 Where you were known and
 Everyone knows you as the bell
 Rings, a real bell

Like the sound of the fire engine
 Everyone gets out to watch
 The double show:
 Getting to it
 And then it rushes off clanging
 But it won't come back
 Stuck in the memory

A faded land
We all really inhabit
Make it our own
It gets to know us and to love us
Each detail
Unless lost or broken
Slowly reappearing
Sharpens

Parts hazy or insecure
What is a screen memory
And how different from what you are told
Was so?

Imagine a field flooded and iced
No action as dangerous as skating
But the pleasures of walking and breaking

The ice bubbled, cracked and refrozen
Filthy with mud and grasses
Sheets of it covering the fields
Is this

Real or a trick? The ice
Fractures, cold dark fluid under
Welling up and recovering.
It freezes

Then vanishes
The next day.

The wind in the willows
Sliding in from the north
Invariably painful, cold

Playing among ruins
Abandoned refuges
Little hills above the floods

A slight natural advantage
Insufficient to stop
The wind or people

Abandoned towers
Settlement traces and hearths
Swept over just by the wind

Moving the withies
Cold enough to bring pain
Cut to the bone

Abandoned stones
Broken beams and engines
Looking out

Over a conquered country
No reason to stay
The places were left

For the floods and the wind
And the slow abandoned decay
Twisting structures like memories

Blown about like
A field of withies
Under the wind.