

The Day's Final Balance

Also by Peter Riley:

Poetry

Love-Strife Machine
The Canterbury Experimental Weekend
The Linear Journal
The Musicians, The Instruments
Preparations
Lines on the Liver
Tracks and Mineshafts
Ospita
Noon Province
Sea Watches
Reader
Lecture
Sea Watch Elegies
Royal Signals
Distant Points
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Noon Province et autres poèmes
Snow has settled ... bury me here
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The Sea's Continual Code
Aria with Small Lights
Alstonefield (extended edition)
Excavations
A Map of Faring
The Llŷn Writings

Prose

Two Essays
Company Week
The Dance at Mociu

The Day's Final Balance

Uncollected Writings 1965-2006

Peter Riley

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It should be possible to give all poems the title:
Reasons for Living Happily.

Francis Ponge: 'Raisons de vivre heureux'.

Prefatory Note

This book is a collection of pieces in many different genres between poetry and prose, which have never appeared previously in book form and many of which have never been published at all. It excludes the contents of *Love-Strife Machine* (Ferry Press 1969), *The Linear Journal* (Grosseteste 1973), *Lines on the Liver* (Ferry Press 1981), *Tracks and Mineshafts* (Grosseteste 1983), *Snow has settled ... bury me here* (Shearsman Books 1997), *Excavations* (Reality Street Editions 2004), *A Map of Faring* (Parlor Press 2005) and the selected poems *Passing Measures* (Carcenet 2000). It also excludes writings concerning the Llŷn Peninsula in North Wales, which are collected separately. Many pieces, perhaps most, have been altered in the process of transcription, some drastically. The contents of *The Whole Band* (Sesheta 1972) have been rendered down to a set of short poems included in the section *Floating Verses*. *The Musicians The Instruments* (The Many Press 1978) has been reduced to the 'Six Musical Experiences'. The unpublished set 'Northern Harbour' of 1972 had its final poem added in 2005.

A few "versions" from foreign languages are included, which should not be read as anything but derivative poems.

Peter Riley

NORTHERN HARBOUR

I.

Paled in matchless retract he has
fallen away from her to a valley
heavy with crosses who was
so trusted, and now estranged gives
birth to his mother on the distant couch
unnoticed, purple flowers
beside him nodding on their
stems as the world will have it so.
In what state or power he could become
kind he does not know, dismembered by
lotus ants for the sake of development
breaking athwart the green cleft and
occluded wavelength he thought he
want this pre-human clarity.

2.

But the image box was only on hire and once
alone it is night, the earth indicates
its preference for the lost and faithful
while he, shrugged out of the light, cowboy
sabbath in ruins and the cold lizard
deafens at his feet. Outpatienced he is
scared to look her in the eyes for the true
horizon is there, in that arc kept, thickening
to cloudy blue beyond the forked inlet.
Well or ill he traces his fault, his razor
snags on the morning soap and
opens an ancient track through fields
of cowslips, sunken to flint, down-
hill everway.

3.

Grounded, and the stream is not clear
and the notch in the skyline fills with snow,
our daily fuse-box, we are half
asleep, forgive us, our daily refusal.
Then lights enter the bay as a signal
long attended, moontrack vibrating on the
stave the choirboy's cue a wooden rod
heading for Vivaldi's foot. A wasp falls
disbanded through the black air, the youth that
emerges in the middle of a life nameless and
meaning no harm but far too late the nerves
connect, the sides touch, he floats howling
out of the window curves over the hill and wakes
up every sleeping vole on the island.

4.

Christmas token at the cottage door, the map
was mapped for the faithful he is
lost on a black moor or study table waiting
for the star to enter its place in the heart
the hole where the stone used to be.
He is in his chair and the wish waits
in its rusty trap. His offer calculates
while he dozes. His ignorance falters,
flutters in the elements and settles
on someone's shoulder at last. He opens
the door, the night takes his hand
the coin in his palm turned
upwards. Damage laid into the distant
future the hypothesis grinds on.

5.

The bedrock sparkled,
a nightchild came shouting
at six the impending reversals:
hedges aflame with
desire come together
past any wish on the
empty page forever.
Take it in the yellow cup
reluctant as normal,
for the world captains
figured this out
long ago
and called it waste.

6.

Just where the wine is
deepest he walks out
thinking something
needs to be done with these
stacks of surplus affection piled
open on his knowledge of the world.
Mother sends him out for
fish and chips if he returns
with a crown he must be a thief.
But he thought his offer was
black and white and it seemed
like socialism turned
down for advantage, not
for the world will he forget

7.

To keep steady and point
to the farm on the cliff
created as it is in space
as the third space between us
full of worth, the unsold fruit
we follow with our eyes
all the way to the boiler room.
By trust postponed the house is
vacuumed now, the light burns
grey in the fields scattered with
rosebay fluff and bits of fuse-wire,
cancelled gardens with leaning
sheds. Unexpected trope, prize
virgin forehead, undisclosed.

i.

The tongues of flame around your waist
are cold to the touch and new breezes
laden with yellow dust arise from
tombs of kings, we cough our way
through to night. Cancellation
of theory, under the banked and
calling stars pale lines on the earth
pass by the megalith and
down the fields to fields of
shifting grain. Shifting gain
falls from my arm as it rises
to the cheekbone, ashen tissue
that marks me sinking to you,
winding roads I never dreamt

ii.

To know you now I enter a state
of columns, arches, vaults, ruins
of a night and its unmanaged hopes
to continue through any makeshift
dwelling, cosy domestic or costly
protective, charcoal grey.

In a leather wallpapered coffee-bar
with a glass of very cold milk it is
possible to mention the future
and look neither up nor down.

Those to whom we mean something,
spirits we grazed in the open fields
now pass silently in the street
together will time make all things right?

iii.

Drink up and go, we engaged ruin,
turned our days into warnings
and lost the prospectus in the
cold breezes of dawn between
blocks of flats, slowly labouring
the cold pavement to reach
a bungalow with a fridge and cans
of condensed milk in a cupboard.
Small rodents begging recognition
scuttle into the bank, sure at least
of their names. But I was he
and you and you were she or them
if I was him or any
of the four were us.

iv.

As anyone nested in the armchair of
radical but entirely self-fulfilling
action his glance will ever stray,
assuming terminal points, glitter
on a long black dress no woman ever
wore and areas of cloud fuzz
over, two hands on her waist.
Parents will keep children
from the light in their heads,
red and orange, of the year, show them
the ships in the bay but never
the ticket itself, the naked almanac –
there are no guides to love,
or histories of wrong.

v.

Innocence appears disguised as soldiers or
young girls and rips apart the baptistery.
A torpedo packed with sugared almonds
makes for the pier where Jackson's Follies
are waiting to go on with the Funeral Dance.
Innocence arrives in the form
of a look of dazed trust on someone's
face and the whole circus calls it
a day and goes home singing.
The constant bud rocked in
opaque tides survives ages and persons,
ambition and despair, survives body
fluids and uniforms and moves into
meaning sailing forth.

vi.

Ordinary days
begin here and
inhabit this glow
with increasing
relief as it deepens
and darkens over
the town, lights
enter the bay,
take her
down the hill
to the point of highest incidence,
the angle at A,
take her
to the highest harbour.

vii.

Or, sweet comrades, now
that trust is riven
by opportunity into heart
rending waste shall we settle
down to a lifetime's work?
Shall we, stitch and sow
or weep and crow or be
the heroes of our own
uncertainties? It strikes
ten, turn and
look back, that
old man at the gate
full of awesome gift
ours for the asking.

People who don't and perhaps
never will exist
tend the ground between us,
their faint falling cries
in wild forsaken places where
the rotten wood leans
against the wall. There
the ring passes to earth
burnished at the field edge
and carolled into years O listen
to the modest and reasonable plea
at the back of the funeral hall, the
wrapped present glowing with certainty,
the creak of the closing book.

from
CARPATHIAN PIECES

1999-2004

Sunday Evening in Botiza

A warm Sunday evening in Botiza after a scorching hot day, and of course many people are out in the streets and open spaces of the village. Lights on in the bar, and the food shop next door which is also a bar, and the hardware shop next to that, which is also a bar. Quite a lot of men sitting and standing outside the row of three shops, at tables or on the edge of the sidewalk talking animatedly with occasionally a murmur of song. Groups of men and women through the village, sitting on benches or walls or standing, some with bottles some not. Half a kilometre up the main street a big bar used by young people with music coming from it, crowded inside and spilling out into the street. People are not, as in some villages, very much dressed up for display on Sunday evening – they mostly seem to be as they usually are, as they would be any other warm evening, but more of them. Elderly people sitting on their verandas in narrow side streets, alone or in groups, speaking to each other and to passers-by. Nobody working: not washing clothes in the river, not carrying burdens or tools, not guiding animals. Children here and there, in groups or pairs, walking around, running, standing, talking, playing games. The young girls have the unique privilege of walking round in pairs in affectionate physical contact: arm in arm, arms over shoulders and round waists. People who meet kiss each other on either cheek. These things are coded. The priest's wife with her small dog on a lead, has crossed the big open space in front of the bars with the stream and bridge at the other side of it, and is standing talking to another woman, also in a dress and so probably also of the class designated "intellectuals" – teacher, doctor, etc. The dog sits obediently on the earth. There is a cart parked across from the bar with two horses waiting, occasionally rubbing their necks together. As the evening progresses light from the bars gradually seems to increase.

A six-wheeled heavy goods vehicle from the quarries or mines higher up the valley passes at a moderate speed along the main street, past the row of bars and on down the village towards the

main road. It covers everyone: men, women, old, young, children, babies, peasants, workers, gypsies, intellectuals, drinkers, loafers, talkers, singers, dogs, horses . . . in a thick cloud of grey dust.

“I am a Poet”

i.m. Barry MacSweeney

We were staying in Szárhegy, near Gheorgheni, in the house of a retired Hungarian couple who constantly fussed round us in the most charming manner, totally possessed by the instincts of “peasant hospitality” although they lived in a big village now only partly agrarian. He was a retired construction superintendent, waiting for a state pension which was already three years late in arriving. In their kitchen/living room we were given a splendid dinner with a delicious demi-sec rosé made by the man himself, and then went out to stroll the streets of the village.

The street they lived in: long, straight, unmetalled but evenly surfaced, other streets off it at right angles, a grid. The houses all one-storey, moderately substantial in the standard pattern, standing in their own kitchen-gardens with orchard trees and wells, wooden fencing round them. All individually decorated, many even with drain-pipe corners bearing flower-like constructs of the same metal – and equal: all more or less equal to each other.

We turned at the end of their street into a slightly more important road leading towards the centre. We passed on the right one of those long low buildings we’ve seen in many places, probably relics of communism, which people seem to have difficulty finding a use for. A row of rather high small windows in a dirty white wall along the street, doors at each end, and no signs of use in the windows. But the last window with its door, someone had been able to make into a bar: the white wall-paint newer and brighter for the last ten metres, lights on, a couple of tables with chairs on the sidewalk outside it, a few men sitting there. It had been a hot day and was still warm in the dimmed light of a pale cloudless sky.

As we passed by a man stood up from the tables, crossed the road and came up to us. He was small, about forty, with a drooping moustache, thick ear-length dark hair, and above all two big

sorrowful eyes under bushy eyebrows. He took hold of my hand and continued to hold it gently, saying nothing at first, perhaps deciding which language to use. Then, still holding my hand sandwiched between his two but without any pressure, he said in Romanian, "I am a poet. But my brain has been destroyed by alcohol." And his big mournful eyes gazed into mine while we nodded sympathetically and waited for whatever came next. He stayed thus a little longer, then without any further business he let go of my hand and returned to the bar across the road.

The BBC at Lunca Ilvei

A BBC camera team with a well-known presenter had been sent to Transylvania to make a programme to be shown on Hallowe'en, with emphasis on the creepy: ghosts, vampires, wolves etc. Why else should they come? What else could possibly interest anyone about Transylvania? They turned up at Lunca Ilvei and were housed in some kind of hostel down the village, the four of them. They knew what they wanted.

They wanted a night campfire meeting, immediately. They had no spare time, it must be tonight. It was arranged, in the fields behind the stables. A quite large bonfire was got together during the afternoon and word went round to about twenty villagers, and us. The two village musicians were also needed – accordion and fiddle. These were smallholders who played locally as a hobby or for slight extra income, and their repertoire was a selection of pieces from all over the country. The accordionist was quite good, though his *forte* was small flutes; the fiddler was rather ineffective, but the accordion carried most of the music.

As it got dark the fire was lit and the cast was assembled on a grassy bank in front of it, sitting on the ground or standing, in a small arc, which by careful camera control could be held to represent a whole circle of rustics around the fire. The ground was damp and quite muddy, and a strip of plastic had been put there for sitting on, hopefully not evident on screen. In the centre of the arc sat the presenter, an Irishman, interviewing Julian, illuminated by the glow of the fire. The BBC had supplied two crates of beer for the crowd, which were appreciated, and mainly because of this, I think, the general atmosphere was happy, in spite of the artificiality of the situation and the discomforts involved.

Because unless you got into the direct shine of the fire it was rather cold and there was an occasional slight swirl of rainfall. Also sitting on the plastic on the ground was not too easy and there was a tendency to slide slowly downhill. But

still the general atmosphere was happy; people chatted, drank the beer from the bottles, and the musicians played, with some people singing among themselves to some of the tunes, and the interview proceeded.

Julian is a good raconteur. Stories about bears and wolves. About finding a bear up your apple-tree in the morning. How wolves would come down to the village from the mountains in the winter and he'd sometimes hear the howling at night. The presenter was obviously not very bright and things went best when Julian himself led the talk on from one thing to another, under the presiding spirit of the *zuica*¹ he was consuming. There was also interplay with the villagers, jokes aside in Romanian which might have said anything for what the BBC knew but which the company thought were very funny. In particular there was among us an adolescent girl, a member of Julian's casual house staff, who was apparently very sensitive on the subject of "boys", to whom Julian would throw suggestive remarks which got squealing responses from her and the whole thing went down very well with the crowd.

The trouble was, whatever was said and done, the presenter or the producer immediately said, "Do/say that again", including all the casual banter in Romanian. Everything had to be repeated, a second or third time for a better camera angle or sound take. Of course it was never as good the second time, and very much less entertaining for the villagers, and these doublings made the whole thing drag on. And there were other troubles, such as inane questions which Julian had to cope with and try to make the chat interesting again. And the cameraman had his own problems. He was evidently very good at his job, working dextrously with a hand-held camera, but had been eating unwisely since he entered the country and was suffering from a fairly severe attack of "the shits". So the proceedings were interrupted again and again by him handing his camera to the nearest BBC-person ("Hold this a minute will you") and dashing off into the darkness, directed loudly by Julian to a group of trees at the back of the field.

¹ A strong home-made fruit brandy

It took quite a long time. Finally the BBC crew looked at one another and said, "That's it, we've got enough." They got themselves together, and moved out, escorted back to their waiting car and driver, quite thankfully I think because the cameraman wasn't the only one who was ill and they all looked tired, and they had to get up next morning for a horse-and-trap ride through the forest to Castle Dracula, a renamed 1980s ski hotel about 20 kilometres away.

But the musicians played on, and everyone stayed. And they did some very popular numbers which most people joined in on, and the dancing started. It was colder and darker and there was fairly definite gentle rain, which nobody paid any attention to. The fire was a big heap of glowing embers now and in front of it they danced in the mud, for about an hour. Twirling couple dances, in mud. It was the best part of the evening, by a long way.