

Richard Burns

Avebury

a poem



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*To rise up and become wakeful guardians of the living
and of the dead.*

Herakleitos of Ephesus

*And the Lord shall be King over all the earth; in that day
shall the Lord be One and his Name One.*

Sabbath Morning Service

*For the first time in our history we are contemporaries
of all mankind.*

Octavio Paz

for Octavio Paz

[1]

huge slabs
wrenched
from under grass, dug
out of hills

time's
teeth

worn

yawning the sky in

porte of light

earthed

tongued

broken
altars

answerless

covered the cave's
cracked jaw

*

[2]

back and forth
round and round
under the cloudy dome speechless

sniffing among these petrified hopes
these ossified dreams these
dead memorials pacing
back and forth

ancestorless

under the compact slogans of the sky

walking
as dead

cursing
their answers
their meaning

looking for what

the riddle ?
the question ?

*

[3]

and can the stone know
me I wonder
 does the stone
 wonder

even here among absences
and wreckage

if any place

*

[4]

if any place
most of all

here, most
of any

in the dance
in the ring
of stones dancing
metaphor on metaphor
silence
anagrammatized
measured spaced out
in this syntax of land
this plot of time

where the green causeway ends
where the avenue ends
where thought ends

begins
the burial
the dance
of stone
begins

*

[5]

the sky's throat
says

Ascend Sun

from this syntax of hills
this plot of space

mean

light

ripples
expanding
 across the downs
 waves returning
 from where ? the centre
to where ? circumference

*now any
place is now*

say the stones

I do not tell I say

*

[6]

little mother
of Willendorf
 'vegetable' Venus
of the hunters
 neckless head
featureless
 under the beehive hair
thin arms asleep on breasts
 like hills belly
enormous the buttocks
steatopygous the whole blind body
 bowed over the womb
as if above
 an unseen child

*

[7]

in the gallery
contorted struggling
The Prisoners
one in limbs and torso
 nigh perfect, yet
with genitals
 trapped
under unhewn rock
 the arms
 unable to heave
backbreaking
 stone off his head
undiscovered
 dreaming in

*

[9]

on snake island
two *phalloi*
unsheathed from stone like flowers
and the air parched
so high above the sea
that time of year, August
with *Meltemi* blowing
and an hour by boat back to Mykonos

poised erect
twin offerings
twin motives

one of the shafts
broken
above the marble scrotum

*

[10]

now see where in marble play
the musicians: a sturdy
flautist with double pipes
stuck in his chinless face
his companion seated at a cracked harp

nameless the song from a cave by the sea

silence

still growing
out of, louder

heads uptilted blinded by sunlight

the tune climbing, still
going strong in

great dusky sea, so many pebbles round your neck
so many glinting jewels in your hair

*

[11]

I am awake
sleeping, I wake

in
the cave, tomb
and temple

under
turrets that wind
and climb

deep in your chambers

where I lost my memory
of concerns and imports
and the way
up is way
down

of all but boyhood

those dead children

ghosts

I said
I never believed in

you
here, all present ?

*

Light,

and your hands
a sudden shield a torch
shaking out shadows

against a blaze of inner noon
your blindness

you

there, my
sister ? my brother ?

pounding
of blood across temples

breath
an instant held

the drip
drip of distant water

that unfathomable roaring

*

[13]

where sleeps the man
who shaggy haired
roamed the steppes
with wolf and bison
ate grass, and played
with the herds

in that time

before she came
with her ear-rings
of amber her breasts bared
her armpits scented
let down her braided hair
and struck you with that gaze of stone
taught you the art of her stone smile
woke you with language
of cattle
byre and cave

I am awake
sleeping, I wake

in that time

before Delilah

*

[14]

and where now

brother of boyhood
male half of my otherness
strong as the beasts you hunted with
before we hunted

how have I lost you
in this cave blackness dancing
blinded by a mask of hands
in that time
by my own cunning

changed my face
like one gone
under sunlight
on a long journey

aye we must treasure the dream whatever the sorrow

brother, you
were the axe at my side
my hand's strength
the sword in my belt

in that time

standing in this cave of light
this mouth of stone
that eats me

*

words you rush in on me like a surf
into my core like semen to the uterus
like torchlight on these stones
moving and melting the frost's shadow behind them
trebling their din with intervening silences

and who is this come riding
in on the foam this long haired
green creature who brings me
back again among the scattered seasons

once I was young enough to think
you like these stones were immortal

in the wave that gathers you up in it like a sandgrain
and drops you down somehow else,
has it changed you, the sea ?

has it turned you into a fish ? a note ? a pearlseed ?
in the silt did you taste like this ?
whose was it that kiss,
who was it embraced you ?

jetsam of dream,
eroded

down in the pit I have seen your face mother
your skull in the rockface

and who is that other
face in shadow
the cloud that lurks just behind you ?

*

[16]

stone
you too

a monad

atom
as I am

what is the sum
of these quanta ?

I am not just
my body

are you
stone
my body ?

the total ?

*

[17]

under my eyes these stones
are

dancing

stars

birds

figures of speech

growing into each other

out of each other

and have become
the spaces between them

points
in the dance

including me
enclosing me

me, embraced
in this dance of stone

*

[18]

stone in me
stone that I am
centre or periphery
nomad and society of atoms

eyed by stone
eaten by stone
loved by stone

danced in the dance
by the dance
of stone

by stone
uttered
by stone
dreamed

*

[19]

bloody stone
 blood I am
grained
 with breath
death of ancestors
 of my blood
 stone I am

wizened

enduring

the sun's hammer
the frost's nails
the wind's arsenal

*

[20]

adamant

defying discourse
messages
eyes tongues

telling nothing
giving nothing
being of absence
core the dream

threshold
ledge of energy
meniscus of darkness
grain of light

bringing to life
in me what does not exist
me in what does not exist

subversive stone

uprooting
word from language

winding down
time to rubble

this continuum

in you

all is the saying

*

[21]

in my throat
the man rises
 from the cave he was immured in

 break
 speech
in a tide on these stones
 wash
clean break
 word
into stone
 out of stone

 sleeping, I wake
 I am awake

 and the ghost gone at end
 of childhood

comes back
eroding, endures

 among these ancestors

 sharing

*

[23]

this was no whore
not abandoned
not 'wild'
and cruel only

when an absence
and no gap
between speech and her mouth

matter of words
word of matter

always touch
lips touch
tongues speech
 the world
 born

wherever

light of eyes
eye of light

child of elements

wherever
 touch and find
anywhere centre

say these stones
of Avebury

*

[24]

*find any
where centre*

echoes from peripheries
out of galactic range

creatures awake on distant shores
across those seas and skies

beyond sidereal thoughtspan back
to breathing

waves
expanding, re-echoing

*including
us here*

*enclosing
us here*

say the stones

*now every
where centre*

I do not tell *I say*

The *Afterwords* to the original edition included the following:

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Richard Burns
Great Shelford, 1971