

Due North

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
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Western States
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PROSE

Two Essays
Company Week
The Dance at Mociu

Peter Riley

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(this address not for correspondence)

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Morning and afternoon are clasped together
And North and South are an intrinsic couple
And sun and rain a plural, like two lovers
That walk away as one in the greenest body.

Wallace Stevens,
'Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction'

I

HOUSMAN'S QUESTION

XXXII

*From far, from eve and morning
And yon twelve-winded sky,
The stuff of life to knit me
Blew hither: here am I.*

*Now—for a breath I tarry
Nor yet disperse apart—
Take my hand quick and tell me,
What have you in your heart.*

*Speak now, and I will answer;
How shall I help you, say;
Ere to the wind's twelve quarters
I take my endless way.*

From far— human groups moving
over the great grasslands with the herds,
sucking the milk of gazelles, sleeping
curled under the fleece / gleam of eyes through black hair
vast green and red lands without division,
footsteps measured in millennia.
and morning: raising the head, learning wisdom
in a form of desire, a distance to be gained, learning to wait,
absence of question-marks, Orphic stasis.

Moving and staying, bearing the location with us
advance built into the structure of settlement. Not “travel”—
there were needs, and displacements — economy collapses pack up
and go
but to somewhere and together
in the same heart-space, the encompassing world arcs.
To the high pastures with the beasts every year.

from eve — outpacing the desert
trekking in a great curve across the African savannah
towards the northern swamps and forests
the great diadem that divides the sky
into days and days into hours, captured
in a circular stone hut with entrance facing SE,
arrive and attend while the sky ticks on.

* * *

Here/ First memory of the call to distance,
the 27 arches of the viaduct striding across the town —
what children are taught: cleanliness, modesty, application, alphabet
retaining the pivot, the customary right
we are not beggars, we are neighbours' children
We live here
and this is our decade and this is our language:

words fulfilling themselves between people,
in the air, reaching across expanding distance, free to all, stuff of life
free of ideological baggage.

From/ cotton mills, smoke drifting over railway sidings, canal boats,
learning to speak from, slow increase of, understanding in daily return journeys
mill operatives, office clerks, tenant farmers

Bunches of red and yellow flowers
sempiternal succession, interrupted
by disdain and conscription.

Lands thick in scarlet panoply, streams of blood and water mingling.

Little tiny child, what shall we do
to keep this hour and arrival intact,
while skies of slaughter blow
the twelve ships to harbour
and all the bells of earth

and morning/ spruce standing in snow, in lines, eight
then fifteen, wood smoke drifting across the fields
dividing thought between love and duty
and by the winds of earth to a compass rose

twelve quarters of sky—I remember

the sound in the air, of wood on stone, the sea breaking,
the stone rings, gates of the dead land beckoning on the horizon
steam locomotives in the night, tracing northern fates.

Am here! Unfractured, chorale.

North wind comes knocking on my door

bed of clay / chiming throng — chime on,
silver bells! healing in the wing that moves
out and in, healing in the lungs: these are real
midwinter acts, enjoined under wicker arches
(love and joy be to you) (we are not
daily beggars) (you know us, we live here)
but we don't belong here
we come from far away.

Macarena, the paint sniffer: “I don't belong
in this country, I come from somewhere else. *[an obscure allusion]*
My parents are waiting for me there, my sister
is at school, she is doing very well...” Beyond the forest
beyond worry about belonging, the terrain opens
to the sky, a pale blue death certificate sheltering
her trust. *[but probably she died]*

Now for a breath — this caravanserai, lakeside inn on the edge of the world
where we learn the tables of time and change: you can
stay here for ever in the decorated moment, wide and deep,
temporary shelter that will not let go of you / gradual
and piecemeal shift to husbandry and cultivation, so slow you couldn't
say it happened. It / *blew hither* / updraughts on the edge of day
remoulding the compass rose, competition
for control over storage. War.

Afterwards we pitied the fallen
and sought their homes, to comfort their mothers
a loving cup against the malice of a carved line
while she sat there and knitted...

migrating geese in the sky
coffins in the backs of horse carts
coming over the heath in a line
all the names forgotten now
the wind on the river

ruffling, *stuff of life*—

with a backpack of names
draining like an hour-glass onto the road
migrating geese in the sky
ancestral bone polished brown we take it wherever we go.

Tell me— how from the vast emptiness of the million words
the short phrase strikes the bone between the eyes,
tell me how the world is altered, *so little*
tell me as little as possible, tell me *falsetto*
tell me all night—

What have you in your heart

— coal smoke, long-term hope
folded against the cold,
the grass growing on the weirs,

the entwined briars in the graveyard.
There are catalogues and histories in my heart
and timetables, running through the night.

From death, returning *not alone*
with no baggage, with workers' power
under cover
to reach
the shaking-loose of minds
in quiet urban corners with yellow street-light through the trees outside
to/from/far from *a western brookland* kept sealed

Pound, treading the back roads of Languedoc
dizzy with love and malice, muttering the genealogies
of Italian landowners and professional soldiers
working out codes of command in papered-over
cracks between story and science

tarry, disperse, the time has come, the power of the thinkers
burns in the raging forehead
of the desert soldier, the Pakistani newsagent in his
ransacked shop
desperation forged into a ringlet—
Take my hand / Tell me
looking around, what do you see?
(we lost everything)

In the circle dance, the hora,
the child's hand reaches for mine
to be steadied, to be brought forward
into more and more of where and when, into
a safety, while beauty is stronger than freedom.

Who wants to end in a croak pit,
telling the world it is finished?

Then sustain it, *tell me*

what you have, lost or left
in a language beautifully linked
that you could tell the links one by one
like the links in a silver chain, a silver
tested and coined, fixed in the moon's side,
over the end of the world
and we'll get there, reach
the flowered arbor, the chambered tomb
crawl into it and read the stone
with difficulty (about honour). Then answer

Where are you from?

—war and bondage
gross disparity of incomes
everything is a commercial for something else

*and I would turn and answer
among the springing thyme,
Oh, peal upon our wedding,
and we will hear the chime*

and sing the song
of parting, to be a soldier
far across the sea *I had a dream the other night*
dividing the token across time that will
endorse our rejoined cognition
before it is too late, quickly,
my hand
lies on my chest
and everything is still.

The child at the door
asks for nothing more.
The city at her hand
voids the echo. We
dance together in
the slight grin of knowing
each other's fear.

Ere to the! return of piano with spread chords
four quarters in settings by
Vaughan Williams / Bartók / Janáček
nationalists, working down to the local where it opens out—
sčasování— holding the fading tone at stations of perception
overlapping language units, a temporary home
as the Empire dissolves (in blood) and the palaces are for sale.

The wind across the plains divides itself
four, then eight
forms in compassionate conflict

for there is more to music than marches and waltzes, more
to history than the Austro-Hungarian empire

At its demise

all the love flew out

in bouquets of discord to found new
professions, rushing in with offers of help.
Some of it saw for the first time the lives of the people.
Some of it reached here, knowing nothing
of the genealogies of Italian land-owners, learning
the price paid on the fields of Lombardy
for the slightest deviation from the feudal code long
after feudal honour was disowned.

“This is Lucio. He is only a baby now,
but you will help him [to live] and later
he will help you,” she holds him
and he looks up to her eyes
rests his forehead against her cheek for a moment
and looks up again.

*L'Albero
degli
Zoccoli*
(a
film)

At the Ospedale in Florence, little trains of orphans
guided by nuns through the cloisters

in a sense we all came from there

endlessly, *endless way*

where *from* I don't know—

Tenant farmers above Halifax,
world of clarts and slopstone
and the rain singing in the yard.