

*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 overlay  
 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.