

History or Sleep

ALSO BY ROBERT SHEPPARD

POETRY

Returns

Daylight Robbery

The Flashlight Sonata

Transit Depots/Empty Diaries

(with John Seed [text] and Patricia Farrell [images])

Empty Diaries

The Lores

*The Anti-Orpheus: a notebook **

Tin Pan Arcadia

Hymns to the God in which My Typewriter Believes

Complete Twentieth Century Blues

*Warrant Error **

*Berlin Bursts **

The Given

*A Translated Man **

Words Out of Time

Unfinish

FICTION

The Only Life

EDITED

Floating Capital: New Poets from London (with Adrian Clarke)

News for the Ear: A Homage to Roy Fisher (with Peter Robinson)

The Salt Companion to Lee Harwood

*The Door at Taldir: Selected Poems of Paul Evans **

CRITICISM

Far Language: Poetics and Linguistically Innovative Poetry 1978-1997

The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and Its Discontents 1950-2000

Iain Sinclair

*When Bad Times Made for Good Poetry **

The Meaning of Form in Contemporary Innovative Poetry (forthcoming)

* TITLES FROM SHEARSMAN BOOKS

Robert Sheppard

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—Selected Poems—

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All texts written 1990-2000 formed part of a time-based network of texts, 'Twentieth Century Blues', published as *Complete Twentieth Century Blues* (2008), including poetics and detailed index of its 75 parts and its 97 'strands'; additionally, some earlier texts were introduced into the numbering. For this selection, I have omitted this schema. The appearance of a number of poems in both *Tin Pan Arcadia* and *Complete Twentieth Century Blues* has allowed me to be severe with their de-selection and re-packaging here.

Contents

Round Midnight	9
One for William Carlos Williams	10
Returns	11
Strategies	15
Twin Poem	17
<i>from</i> The Hungry Years: an Unwriting	19
<i>from</i> Mesopotamia	22
The Materialisation of Soap 1947	25
Looking North 2	26
Internal Exile	28
Living Daylights	33
Coming Down from St George's Hill	38
His Furious Skip	41
Three Poems by Wayne Pratt:	
<i>from</i> The Penguin Book of British Parrots	46
The Magnetic Letter	49
Melting Borders	50
<i>from</i> Smokestack Lightning	51
<i>from</i> Killing Boxes	53
Fucking Time	56
<i>from</i> Empty Diaries 1901-1990	59
<i>from</i> The Lores	69
History or Sleep	79
Three Hundred Word Sonnets	
<i>from</i> The Lores, Book 8	90
<i>from</i> Entries: Empty Diary 1996	91
Small Voice 1	92
The Push Up Combat Bikini: Empty Diary 2000	93
A Voice Without	94
Only the Eyes are Left	95
Parody and Pastoral	96
<i>from</i> Reading <i>The Reader</i>	97
National Security, Huyton 1940	101
Three Figures Climb	103

Erotic Elegy	104
Prison Camp Violin, Riga	106
<i>from</i> Berlin Bursts	108
<i>from</i> Warrant Error	112
Four Poems Against Death	124
Another Poem	129
Yet Another Poem	130
As Yet Untitled Poem	131
The Given, part one	132
<i>from</i> Arrival	137
Standing by	138
Fictional Poems from <i>A Translated Man</i> :	
<i>from</i> The Masks	139
<i>from</i> The Light	143
<i>from</i> EUOIA	144

*To the memory of Lee Harwood
and for Scott Thurston*

Round Midnight

Stan Tracey: tribute to Thelonious Monk

The varnished Bechstein
has been polished beyond perfection:
two rows of mirrored ivories
grinning
under a spotlight.

He stabs
his first jagged chord, pricking it
with stray notes. But the ghost's hands
are also at their keyboard, a left
knuckling his right, exactly.

The jumping hands below his bowed head
flesh an illusion, filling
the punched hollows as he watches.

Both pairs
have followed this dance too often
to break formation with the other.

But if one played a sharp where the other
played a flat
we might witness chaos – or invention.

One for William Carlos Williams

A slender stem of water,
surfacing, twists
into a thin-throated flower,
and wavers in the vibrant gulf –

where words set
free are tuned-up, resonant,
to the cry of the world at the poem's edge:
to the truant breeze
on our faces, carrying
the scent of sage as rain shakes it
free from the trembling leaves;

while the mind, stirred
by the wild names
of the common flowers, wakes
and flares.

Returns

1

Rain beats upon me the measure
of the real. Slothfully
an idiot paperboy is moving along the wet street.
Time and again he's erased from the drafts
of my poems, but is now allowed
to stay: humping up the garden paths,
dumbly glimpsing at rolled headlines
between houses. It is spring.

You step into the poem, slide
between its cool sheets. When I'm with you
I think about the poem. When I'm
writing I'm thinking of you
as palpable as memory, somewhere
the other side of sense. The touch
of your hand
becomes almost a memory as you enter
a blank scenario. The idiot paperboy
with the orange bag of evening
papers, leaves the poem.

What is this rainbow, or that
twin rainbow we saw
one confused afternoon, but a wonder
of discriminations cutting
upon a knife-edge of sunlight, trained
in the self-evidence of a beautiful day. Spring
moves towards summer
as night pulls away the rind of dusk.
Public persons return to become private
people again.

You come into the room and the poem follows
to where private words
are found sheltering in cramped parentheses
like spoons in bed, making little sense.
Pausing before the curtains you watch sudden rain
striking out the day, a speckled impression
on the window.

2

Four unmodernised sash windows,
sixteen panes of glass in each, shatter
your reflection with neat
disregard, as you pass.

A face veiled by a curtain or ghosting
the vacancy of the dark room
fills one entire pane; the squared world
plays its forms on this face which cannot see it.

You step out of this grid, return
to the public spectrum of plain eyes,
and are gone about your business –
which is not the business of the poem.

3

People walk in the park as usual,
unrestrained by the nicknames that follow
on a withering glance.

You walk to the place

where you are turned inside-out
like an empty pocket at each fresh
proposition. The only sign of life
is a scaled-down voice through a grille,

its hot breath on a protective screen:
a pellicle of fear. Somebody
is practising on a drum,
a rolling intermittent, persistence; somewhere
just out of range, lies perfect chaos.

Small children in summer clothes
are running towards a frozen stream
on somebody else's afternoon; no wind
stirs in this fresco world, carved into granite silence.

This should be a poem of loss
and longing. It is not a question
of working it out, but of drawing it in
through the senses, and of letting something happen
and go on happening, shifting
on the slurry of tongues.

4

Your eyelids flicker at the edge of waking
as I speak into your dream, turning it
in ways neither of us
may choose. But the movement
of the eyes is itself
the measure, an index of your waking hours
which still has to find,
at the root of what's always been there,
what's never been there; the chance excess
of a flash of renewed memory,
the scent of something
evaporating on the hob of the mind:
the touch of phosphorescence, scooping
luminous handfuls of its quicksilver-body
from the warm water, green sparks at your fingertips.
The sound of oars batting ghost-waves across

the still surface of the river
fills an empty ear. When you are gone the room
is locked into dumb significance. Nothing
moves unless I stretch across
its creased planes of habit. The room,
when I am gone, is folded
into memory. There are many rooms,
many poems. But there is only one you,
fracturing the world like a prism. Two bees
hum from flower to flower on the
aubrietia, nosing into each
as they hang upside-down,
silently gathering for a second. There
is no sense in pointing at the flowers. The dream
returns throughout the day, a prickling ripple
along the spine of this surface that buoys you up –
then breaks beneath you. Particles of spray
sting the eyes.

Strategies

Vagrant sun, with heavy bags of cloud to sleep on. Out cold on the park bench in the afternoon, newsprint comes off on your skin; sweat is ink. You are a stencil, ready to print upon whatever it is that will rub against you. Your grubby opinions.

Jesus, sweating on his cross in the schoolyard. Or up there, where the garden narrows to a dung-heap. Anywhere you choose. Children playing in the street after the massacre, chalking lines around one another's make-believe corpses.

Einstein's pickled brain: study this crinkled walnut to determine the contours of genius. The sounds of the molecules shuffling restlessly through the fabric of the Turin Shroud. A cluster of electric bulbs in a fake chandelier, wired in parallel, winks slyly at the stiff dancers below. A photograph of Einstein poking his tongue out.

The kernel of the skull filled with wine vinegar. Duck! Here comes another squashy opinion, lucid while it flies, messy on impact. A vegetable stuffed with broken beer glasses and sawdust. Then another. And another.

Pick up the man with his arm in a sling, struggling like a woodlouse to get upright, on the pavement over from Yates' Wine Lodge. Someone's given him a proper squashed tomato. Pick him up, clean up your metaphors, and be off with you.

Prostitutes: always by a canal or a brewery, somewhere with 'atmosphere'. Steps built for sitting on; walls for leaning against. The rest is flooded with a darkness that brims at the edges of the lit streets.

Watch the chisel chipping away the caul, as you sit for the monument that will tower, larger than life, over your tomb. Natural wastage: you feel suddenly redundant, feel the pressure of all the others wishing themselves into your shoes. The drunk is a fallen statue, toppled from eminence, concussed on the bench. He wakes into a landscape of empty bottles,

over which he has been granted dominion. He'll stagger downhill to the stone troughs, the horse-coffins.

Small miracles: poke the nozzle of the instrument into the ears and look through the eye-piece. What do the patterns you see mean? The decaffeinated coffee bean. The can of non-alcoholic cider. Mix the contents of the bottle with the warm specimen and watch it change colour. Small wonder.

He is an excrescence of the architecture, where the alleys are too narrow. He was snagged off by some violent blow, some wild thrashing against authority. After the public whipping there can be no shame. Why did the singer melt into a brown liquid before the surprised audience? Escapologist.

Still-born action: the imploding woman in the diving bell. The virgin birth in the iron lung. With a ripple of despair, the wheezing legend in the oxygen tent turns to stone.

Twin Poem

A gloss between the lines
Identical to ours. This is the city
Of the stories you tell in narrowing
Testimony. Fragmentary pauses and shifts
Carried into the mind make credible things:
The light shimmering in the heat.
It is the pulsing gift which
Wakes in you a forgotten desire.
You will walk through the poem as though
Unfamiliar in that familiar life.

The executions become routine
But they are four hundred years too late
And in the wrong poem.
You watch me swallowed
Like an alien word that will not
Rise to love you wordlessly. Memory
Of this instant goes
Counterbeat to drum me out
To the regime of this place. People
Stride through the dark streets,
The squinted prose
The fifty men were hanged on
By the judicious wind.
Dreams stir and I
Lose their meanings in work so secret
A voice rises to lyrical soliloquy.

Make a world for you –
Only the promise of that world
Will be effaced
Before its recoil, silenced by the mind
Into its milky glare. The provisional
Government of each new word

Sets the bond men free.
I have given you eyes
Down there in creation. You're stopped
In the poem the sentence before
A roaring plea for possession and release,
An open verdict. When the words die, we die.

from The Hungry Years: an Unwriting

for Lee Harwood

1

He had no need of a name
Or further identity. You will be asked
To point a finger at that
Giver of bounties,
Make a gesture as if drinking from an
Invisible glass of beer and then
Give a swift signal of dismissal, as if to say
What's it worth then, boys?
Herself she had called by to
Imagine the scene:
You are called, late,
At twelve-thirty. You see him
Sitting implacable,
Well groomed, but without
Chatting a little,
A brittle frosty impatience
Between you. The signing hall
Is empty, barely
Visible with the strip lighting.
From the waiting benches
Back to the desk, she sits
Refusing to write.
She stares at the document
Incapably slurred this afternoon.
He enters, singing in a deep
Wavering voice. He topples,
Makes jokes about the politicians,
As if he's forgotten what
He was there for.

Drunken youths from the Top Rank
Pressing arrested if broad
And the speedy punks from the Resource Centre.
A year passed. He was sitting alone
In the Belvedere, a beach pub,
Taking occasional sips
From his cold beer. It was late –
Pissed against a sea wall
Giving itself over to the still suntanned tramps.
Each holds an image of ideal female perfection
O is an obvious example.
Tarpaulin rattles
Sash window wind sweeps up
Rocking the moment fire the
Certain man. It's your story
I bet! says the man I am interviewing.
People rush in; the supervisor calms her.
Noisy foreign students in their
Belt loops, not knowing quite what to do
As the embarrassed policemen
Lead her away: at work at bay
Black psychiatrist she walked white
Like a coma. Only half the story
A couple of tortuous signs. If
You interviewed a certain man
On June 21 1978, you will
Foolishly answer yes.

He will take a bounding
Leap as he crosses my mind, but
Far from being a loose screw, he is a vital cog
Out above the signing boxes.
The sight of a squashed tomato on her plate
Peppered references to
Further identity. Her open secret
Is no single story; I am playing
The part of all of those girls
Lining up outside the Dyke Road hospital,
Ripe for weeding,
And about three hundred new ones
The other side of your desk.
Fucking useless whore!
He screams at the girl,
Huge trembling body.
He came inside me four
Restless nights under the pier,
Taking our time in a world
Of crowded streets in tiny rooms.
Huddled plots had later shook her bed
Alone with the darkened story slowly pausing.
To point a finger at that
Trumpeter practising
With horrible people in here,
They had to break the door down –
And she tried to kill herself
Nervous at its
Keep with her pale sash window.