

Savage Survivals
amid modern suavity

Also by Andrew Duncan:

Poetry

In a German Hotel
Knife Cuts the Water
Cut Memories and False Commands
From the Kitchen Floor
Sound Surface
Alien Skies
Skeleton Looking at Chinese Pictures
Switching and Main Exchange
Pauper Estate
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The Imaginary in Geometry

Criticism

The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry
Centre and Periphery in Modern British Poetry
Origins of the Underground:
 The Occlusion of British Poetry 1932-1977

As editor

Don't Start Me Talking: Interviews with Contemporary Poets
(with Tim Allen)

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“I want what you want, human boy.’

— from *Dead Girls*, by Richard Calder

‘The third part of your brain – do you know where it is?’ ‘Wrapped around the solenoid in my central body cavity.’

— from *Demon with a Glass Hand*,
episode of ‘The Outer Limits’

“Careful inquiry should be made to discover the existence of such a system; where it is not in general use it is sometimes used by one sex only, preserved in the memory of old people, used in ritual, or guarded as a sacred art. In each system note what sort of ideas can be expressed by signs. Give a full vocabulary if possible; if not, typical examples. Can connected narratives or speech be expressed? Are there signs for ‘beginning’ and ‘ending’ a message, to indicate a question, or otherwise to qualify or explain any sign or group of signs? Are the signs used as an accompaniment to spoken language? Are they used in hunting, war, bargaining?”

— excerpt from *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*

Acoustic Shock

1. *It was 1964, or 1965. My family and I were on the beach at West Bay, in Dorset, and I saw the ruins of a harbour strewn around. The haven had been built with big concrete blocks, each weighing perhaps a ton. I could not see how the sea had torn them up. They were cast carelessly around as if they had been dropped from mid-air. It was a new harbour and it was as if the sea had refused to accept it.*

2. *In 2002, I read about this process. As concrete sets, it shrinks slightly and develops tiny cracks. When a wave breaks on concrete close to the airline, it pushes the air already in these gaps in the fabric. The air is a very narrow column with a huge force driving it — like a hammer hitting a nail. The smaller the nail of water, the more force it exerts at its point. Because it has nowhere to go, the air becomes hard. Temporarily, the speed of the air is the speed of the wave times the ratio between the size of the crack and the size of the wave. It attacks the boundaries between them and makes the cracks join up.*

Blast, draft, syllable
spirit blowing in the mass —
the Atlantic breathing through a crack
The aulos is the pipe through which the god
fills *the soft wrapping of the tender membranes*
hydraulically jacked & jittered shook &
shattered in structural hiss

The sea knows nothing
and is experimenting with an island
It grows calm behind the stone-fold, the shelter
It records its microstructure, says
but is mimesis *knowledge?*

Rolling, rolling
The block is teetering on its own flaw
tree wrenching out its roots one by one

All structure is subliminal
knowledge seeps out on substance flowing away
through cycles. when a wave disintegrates
it slows down the moon

The grapnel of vocal air
growing slowly through blind slab
to copy a precise design
splitting pore from grip

Fingers of the ocean blow down the pipes
to see if chips fly back
to hear its own roar, sharpened
Fife stops burnt at the breaking point

The sea is softer than seaweed
it knows nothing
it knows the shape of things to molecular level
It has no memory and no limbs
it has the concept of a bomb
a floating mine with sensory spikes

The harbour is a crystal that rings
and destroys itself. A sound
is drawing architecture
It wants months

A capillary fulcrum
sketching itself
with shattering fingers
grains as holdfasts

siege gear, slighting-wall, new ordinance
of space
pistol chamber exit wound
rocker switch detonated by tone
hydraulic cement hydraulically slighted
& set aside
spray pits salivate rust

the storming party escalate
the breach blown underwater
decked in white lace
brought off in sunken barges

the spiracles fingers of air
scrolled up like spills
pushing as if through the stomae of leaves
Qualmwasser
the pistol or fountain-jet
a thrill that spurts out of the back
of someone's head

a lizard of stone whose parts don't join up
in a puzzle the Channel will solve
a flicker of spring limbs
a lizard of air that's no longer there

waves sledge dredging for the last edges of
integrity
hand shake grip sliding seams start
the sea whirls the rocks around its head
to daze them
house-sized gravel rolled by a stream
frame capture
stone swimming through water
frame capture
water breaking under strain
frame capture
motion gives way to structure

The concrete block crawls a few feet and then gets tired
the shoreline is the ruin of all past shorelines
the surface of the shear is solid & impervious

the engines of order overthrown
by wavelines the cults of static power
towering in blocks of arrested will
metabolised by birds breathing

as tall buildings rush
outwards, shuddering wall, storms
raze the empire of sound with ribbons
of air, nails of water

Crossing the Border Hills in an Aeroplane

a sublime fall. a crash. a sea of howl.
a horse of air. a ray or strut
crossing from the swelling ground
to the surface of my eye
a sweep or feather
poised over laws, grains, and cleughs

My great great great grandfather's parish
My great great great great grandfather's parish
My great great great grand-uncle's parish

a lens seven miles long and two feet wide
diverging as distance draws out
lifting up an entire tract of hills
in the shape of the cabin window

at the bottom of this shaft
I would tread on the straws
on a tussock that sinks in and bends
as I counter-swerve left and swerve right
a kind of capillary bounce exper
imental quaking of my pelvis to recover
straight stance. on a nod. slip shod.
toes clenching and fingertips waving
triplash arpeggio of vertebral cogs.

This godlike seeing
is starvation to the skin,
a blank and sublime state, lifted out,
rare to vanishing, I can see other islands
covered in polished granite & crystal cities
covered in cubes, domes, and cylinders
covered in birch, covered in olives.

The lying snow sharp in the air lens
white on brown winter heath foliage
a whole language of gloss patches
repetitive and unseizable
like a camouflage pelt, toned
from blanket to single clumps on stalks
a map of warmth, wind shelter in brown
a map of altitude, clear lower slopes
with running water we see as deep cracks

Thin air lens catching process of the hill
struck dumb by its becoming, voiced
by the repetition of its fellows,
thing making hills the hills can't
be taken away from, from deep air
deep stair

Taxi-ing in west over Leith Docks
with thoughts of the Malt Shovel barrelhead on twisting steep street
ovens swallowing ripe barley in the brewery out on Lothian Road
don't forget to catch me fill me with the full Eighty Shilling

Weapons Form with Music

a patriotic outburst of thanks to Mr Brian HOLTON for his oversetting the Chinese outlaw novel, Water Margin [水滸傳 or Shuihu Zhuàn], with 70 chapters and 108 heroes, into the SCOTTISH language; sampling passages from Sir Thomas URQUHART and the Lives of the Presbyterian Saints

(I)

Turning in at the red pillars under the fine old mountains
The brief swarthy outlaw drank the wine
And, as it found its courses,
Called out, Waiter!
Bring me an ink-stone and a brush!
I feel like writing an epic!

He set out the treachery of Claverhouse and King Charles,
The corruption of officials in the Millet Bureau,
The virtues of hazel nuts, watercress, and badger fat,
The reasons for the flatness of Strathclyde.

Insolent yamen runners, hawkers of faked tiger bones,
New Right politicians, reactionary clerics,
prepotent landowners, Jacobite papal knights,
conniving lawyers, English patronage cliques,
country and western pubs, ley line whitterers,
strict tempo poets, entry-level sociolinguists — all
would be practice for his new sword patterns.

As the tips of the forest lightly swished and tossed,
He said, What passes are these, when
Writing about outlaws is almost a crime
Because of all the trees being hushed up?

(2)

*The Glasgow avant-garde redesign the Campsie Fells; Sung
Chiang chastises an insufficiently courteous hashed-meat vendor*

A blue sword in a white hand.

At the very point where sky and sword-tip meet, appears
a black dot, rich and splendid, with all
the qualities of the blood, milk and ink of the Dalriads
dense and perfumed as a summer night

a very rich, stiff, finely-ground ink
— made with very old and well-matured oil

blood wringing with Qi
from hours of noble exercise
swallowing air as if washing in it

milk from a cow licentiously loosed
on the lushest of buttery meadows blushing from a midsummer
flood

this is the black dot of ethical focus, it
is brought into being by truth spoken
and heard on both sides

(3)

*Deirdre and Naoise take refuge from Conchobar in the Border Hills;
Pai Shung and Sung Chiang train a corps of slit gong players*

Wet petals clinging to a pomegranate.

Sung Chiang applies
a tab of LSD under each eyelid
left and right
and sticks a martial arts video on—
Five Elements Ninja.
Indeed, we are not in the city
said the Daylight Rat.

(4)

Jade Lion gives up editing an avant-garde poetry magazine and joins the outlaws of the marsh; the unjustly banished heroes drink lager to excess

I'd just taken my giro to the Post Office
That day I slaked my thirst
In a way I never will forget
The eight heroes of Liang Shan Po just walked up to the rail
And struck Bar Attitude Number 4—
I didn't know that then.
They were so cool the whole room froze
The beer at the tap stopped pouring
The smoke in the air stopped drifting
The flames in the hearth stopped flickering
The ceiling fan slowed down to single rotary strokes
Which were the knocking of my heart

The waves of sex and Qi made me stagger.
It felt like fear but I was drunk on it
I felt my old self die
I knew this old town and its syllabic metres could never hold me
I knew I would grow up to go stravaiging,
Hanging bishops, impaling dragoons, chasing tigers. Things like
that.
It wasn't the usual gloom in the Subdued Fiends Hall.

The heroes with black hair and blue eyes were wearing
double dragon belt buckles made from Arctic copper
high boots made of unpolished soft fawn calfskin
shirts of linen dyed with saffron
red ear-lapping fox-fur caps with blue waving aigrettes
cloaks made of blue and gold tassels
cherkesskas with chest bandoliers of burnished brass rifle cartridges

sgians with glass pommels in leather sheaths on gold braid galloons
penannular bronze cloakclasps with inlaid affronted writhing beasts
T-shirts with big Iggy transfers printed on them
and leopard-skin pillbox hats.

They were carrying lost WS Graham books and original Elmore

James acetates

— casual like. That's when I said to myself,
these guys are no on the Minimum Wage,
Any cooler, and your joints seize up.

Hey Rodolfo

I'll have what they're having

I went to the games console just to practise standing, a bit.

I walked up and I stared at them real hard.

Is it true you're the lads killed Ni Erh?

We were expecting you, said Lu Ta.