

SAMPLER

Eagerly We Burn

ALSO BY BARRY HILL

The Schools (1977)

A Rim of Blue: Stories (1978)

Near the Refinery: a novella (1980)

Headlocks and Other Stories (1983)

The Best Picture: a novel (1988)

Raft: Poems 1983–1990 (1990)

Sitting In (1991)

Ghosting William Buckley: a poem (1993)

The Rock: Travelling to Uluru (1997)

The Inland Sea: Poems (2001)

Broken Song: T G H Strehlow and Aboriginal Possession (2002)

The Enduring Rip: A History of Queenscliffe (2004)

The War Sonnets (2007)

Necessity: Poems 1996–2006 (2007)

Four Lines East (2007)

As We Draw Ourselves (2008)

Lines for Birds (2011)

Naked Clay: Drawing from Lucian Freud (2012)

Peacemongers (2014)

Grass Hut Work (2016)

Reason & Lovelessness: Essays, encounters, reviews 1980–2017 (2018)

Barry Hill

Eagerly We Burn

Selected Poems

1980–2018

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for Rose, her Song

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That Beautiful Black Horse

It's too early to be fearful, or angry.
When the sun comes up it's going to feel colder.
The scum at the edge of Swan Bay will look white
but grubby, the fast water still inky.

The wind will feel like it's come across the frosty Nullarbor
but it hasn't
it's just whipped up
and fallen upon us from the Antarctic.

Lend me your beanie.

I'm carrying a candle
one of many on a kitchen tray
in the dark, step by step, a glow under my chin.

The ten thousand jam jars
(we scrounged as many as we could)
the ten thousand candle flames

and the lights are placed on the black road
for a leap of the imagination:
composing the word PEACE

at the boom gate
on the road to the secret base before dawn.

Now what?

By the paddy wagon, the horse stamps and snorts.

Kind Fire

i.m. Seamus Heaney

Not the digging of potatoes
but the forging of iron implements
produced those shoulders
and the biceps I pressed—
a boy's hand on the father's bulge
a swelling roughly the same shape

as the hammer's head
I still have, along with his chisel
as thick as my wrist was thin.
Tools hand-made, part-time
in time stolen from the boss
at the Victorian Railways Erecting Shop—

one of the great sheds among many
in the long dry grass with the Scotch
thistles out past the Abattoirs
on the way to the back beach:
ribbed sand, soldier crabs, an oily creek, eels
a bike ride from home

me sitting on the little padded seat
the iron-framed perch between his arms
near the handle bars
his breath a bellows on my neck
his kind fire always there
as he peddled me into the Southerly.

Her Favourite Munch

i.m. Beverley Farmer

She tells you again, as you arrive once more, that she is dead already: she died yesterday or the day before. Or both.

You used to say: I think I know the feeling
(after a birthday, sleeping pills, a big dumb night...)

Glib. Wash your mouth out.
Now you say: I just wish I could bury you.

There. Knee to knee, let that sink in.
Bury you was the kindest thing you could think to say.

You did not have to think. You just said it.
Thoughtfully she heard it, as would a crow in her fig tree.

There are scraps of food on her lovely upper lip.
The other day you clipped her fingernails.

Gothic, and as greasy as the seat of her walking frame...
You wondered about her toes, zipped up in pink.

Like dyed dead rabbits. But you are not
her keeper, you never married her, let the nurses smirk.

Anyway, she intends (an odd word) a cremation.
In the absence of a sky burial, you could set her alight.

Remember the friend who said she was a pure flame?
The walker's so filthy it would go up in a tic...

Dusk. And she's still in her pyjamas. This morning
she declared a holiday. No one need touch her today.

Huge, cobalt blue, Matisse flowers on silently
screaming snow white. She might even be enjoying

the look of that look. You could turn up in a dressing gown
—stand the other side of the bed, just like her favourite Munch.

Beloved Historian at Home

For Hugh and Patsy Stretton

He cannot remember a line of his great works
or my name, but most days he locates his toothbrush.

And he can, still, turn to his wife
who finds him there in his well of love.

Plum Juice

Without realising
 I turned the page
 with wet fingers
on my new copy
 of Du Fu
 smearing *The Sick Horse*.
Later, when I thought them dry
 I came to *Facing the Snow*
the pictures he painted
 crackling
 with pure lament:
 Above the battlefield
 many new ghosts are crying;
 steeped in sorrow
 a lone old man is chanting.

 The ladle lies useless,
 the wine jar toppled over,
 the stove grows cold,
 red embers slowly fading...

And still my touch was dark
 a purply red
 an indelible ink
my brush swollen
 to write an end
 to our running wars.
 No news comes
 from anywhere this winter.
 In empty air
 a sad old man is writing.

Badly Mothered, Blazing Chaos

i.m. Sam Hamill

Your rugged smile, Sam.
It had been around O
it had been around.
You had Utah grit between your teeth.

Worn down at fifteen
you cleared off to Haight-Ashbury
where you got yourself two 'little habits'—
a fist-full of poetry here, a load of smack there...

Then, half a century later, you land here!
To sup at a safe antipodean table
like some new artificial paradise—
with us 'being kind' (as you said of me and my wife)

to our post-op guest:
a man weakened but still chewing
the fat of poetry and politics and socialism.
You were the first Yank I'd heard say 'socialism'.

Seemed we'd both arrived at a good place.

I asked you, apropos the youthful street life
the muggings, the jail terms
if you were 'still an asshole'.
Your grin could have filled a flagon.

Today, you would have been 75
just weeks before me, another month
breaking onto another beach of poetry:
black wave after black wave of blank verse
Zen ruminations and whatnot—
little tsunamis of hope, literary effects

and paraphrase, Classical homage, subservience
to truculent beauty in our own idiom.

All the while casting a cold eye on the college kids—
their fathers, the bankers and industrialists
the arms-manufacturers, the gun-keepers
and the gatekeepers. The anti-socialist cunts...

But we loved women, we really did.
Good women were what we needed
good cunt or no good cunt (we're drunk again!).
Fellow cunt-worshippers, not mother-fuckers.

Anything but harm a mother, and that's the truth.

The mothers who harmed us came on this earth
to teach us some truth, that's the truth too.
They taught us to treat all things as equal.
They led us into all manner of translation.

Remember when I asked you why
Bashō left that kid by the side of the road?
The cruelty of haiku! More had to be said!
I was uncomprehending, incredulous: you far less so.

We get what we get the way a good line
finds its full-stop. Only to start over again
as pipings on pipings became our life—
Taoists while hardly knowing and

trying to resist the disconsolate
making this line better than that
(or at least as good as that jerk's). Anyway
a strong line does not permit a man to put himself down...

When we left the table I held up some Chinese.
'Aw', you drawled, 'I'm not working on that right now.'

Wish I'd had a line from your Chuang Tzu:
The blazing chaos is the light that guides the sage.

And to think: back then, the authorities thought
they were giving you a clear choice:
'Do real time, Hamill, or join the Marines'.

And that cleaner of latrines in Okinawa
the old man who showed you the interiors
of temples... When did it hit you that
secret teachings include powers to set up type?

Behind me the candle burns, Sam.

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Politics

You might need to take up karate again
If only to take off your own head
In the mirror of fake news

The lies are so thick on the ground
You can hear the crunching underfoot
Slugs galore, slugs born in sophist throats

Worse than sophists. You'll need to
Wring or break—one strike—their necks:
Speech has little to do with it

It's as if they drink *Round Up*
They munch each other's fingernails
Which the best have pulled out

They have stopped screaming
And you can't scream these days
But you went through a recent phase

Or phrase, the framing of your abuse
Animus, homicidal desires, new insights:
'To love thy neighbour is an act of aggression'

You know the goody two shoes teaching
On anger, revenge, blood lust, what you want
Is to get your hands on their tiny minds

And cruel eyes, fingers into those eyes—
An emergency strike, forget the etiquette, yes
Blind them and bind them, take them out...

Ever think you would be like this?
Thank them then. They have shown you something
They have drawn you out of the Pathos Self

Osu, Sempai. Fight freely around the empty bowl
Bow and strike, strike and bow. Go to it again
Be the vital young clown you thought you were

Work your way around the floor
As the nightmare roars, revive right ceremony
Perform the Fire Ode, abandon funeral rites

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No eye, No ear, No tongue

What's happened to those *murmured conversations*?
The gentle links between verses, words, whispers?

All that might happen under a lowly thatched roof
after the ten thousand thoughts pass through

in a single night, and which the morning
brings the light into, gently gently lifting shadows

as heart-mind departs from moth-wings
assembles in units of a poem to be woven

together by men attuned to each other, their buds
and stems of poems, and to the spirit of enlightenment.

How could you have travelled so far into darkness?
Some poems, gleefully thrummed, expel illumination.

They are acts of war. They dwell in vanity
can shame you to death, banish you to Bardo—

One false note and you have no poem of worth
or to speak of, you have kinky murders at midnight.

I think (is this the link?) (I dimly realise now)
A poem mangled in wilful conception

gives the risky game away: it reveals a desire
to be priest above all else, some vain character in black

a spirit failing in himself, in health, faith in service:
someone cruel to dogs, a beast of a man who kicks

living things out of his way, who thinks
nothing of treading on a harmless cockroach...

In the time of poet-monk Shinkei
the character for dog was written

on the new-born's brow as a charm
to protect the child from evil.

Your poem had no feeling for dog or cockroach
so in love with itself is your word-spirit.

You remain fond of the poem even as you feel its evil.
Who knows what *minima moralia* will fire you next?

All you knew while writing
was that one dark link would lead to the next...

Now try to find your way back...
Wordlessly if need be, no eye, no ear, no tongue...

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The Glove

For Ronald Farron-Price

A friend
one who Pound would have called
 an old man with beautiful manners
 a Beethoven man
dwelling in the divine structures
 from the beginning
 to the end of his time
was telling me of his present, slow days
 of how his mornings
 some of his loveliest time is spent
 fingering...

I was at a loss.
 Poets have no word for what
 he was intimating....
Except perhaps to say—
 like choreography for hands
 like a dance of heart-mind or
 approaching a form of emptiness
 like touching fullness on the shoulder
 having it turn around...

Cross these out. Stay dumb. Just
 leave him be next time you meet.
Quietly imagine yourself
 slipping your own hand
 into a god's glove.

New Alice Springs Poems

Right Love

Who has written
with right love
about this hard light?

It flicks pebbles, sharpens
reeds, makes ghost gums
amorous for dance.

In Hidden Valley—
atomic clarity of dusk.
They stand around
not looking
as we drive up.
Kids with little salt lakes
glinting on their upper lips.

We are there to help.
We will take your rubbish.
Just bring
as the sun sinks
the bag of rattling cans
that *sound* like the light.

In Hidden Valley
I got caught in the glare
the amplifying net it cast
each of us with pores open
glances shooting past
the whole camp under daytime stars.

Then, back on the bitumen
the night time slump
the light no longer peeling
off you, or them
the conversation about them
starting all over again.

No Maggots Today

She had gales in her
bosom and belly
a sashay rolled
into a clap of mirth

an almost mocking
laughter up on the range
as if she left the bloke
in the ute for dead.

It was a great wind-up
outside Yeperenye—
as if to say
Life's a joyous thing

with no maggots
in the middle.
Just wish I'd seen
her happy thunder face.

She had a loose
denim skirt, a dimpled
lumbar region—
buttocks that talked.

A man standing there
could but carry
his heart
strung around his neck.

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Ready

High three-quarter moon
straight out of the icebox.

Drifting north
over the crawling, outgoing
sea-gathering sheen.

Arthur/Martha—
any man or woman within
gathers wits for indigo.

The last cormorant dives
comes up, preens in
cold shroud, flutter-rising.

As if she might be gone
from you already
or you from her
beforehand, my hand.

Imagination is premature
tidal race. In the present intervals
wear a Bardo nightcap
thank Buddha for her cats.

Pretend you're an old conifer.
Rise at the tongue of dawn
lap the world as water.