Islands of Voices

The Selected Poems

Douglas Oliver
By Douglas Oliver:

Poetry
Oppo Hectic (Ferry Press, 1969)
The Harmless Building (Grosseteste and Ferry Press, 1973)
In the Cave of Suicession (Street Editions, 1974)
The Diagram Poems (Ferry Press, 1979)
The Infant and the Pearl (Silver Hounds, for Ferry Press, 1985)
Three Variations on the Theme of Harm (Paladin, 1990)
The Scarlet Cabinet, with Alice Notley (Scarlet Editions, NY, 1992)
Penniless Politics (Bloodaxe Books, 1994)
Penguin Modern Poets 10, with Denise Riley & Iain Sinclair (Penguin, 1996)
Selected Poems (Talisman House, 1996)
etruscan reader viii, with Tina Darragh & Randolph Healy (etruscan books, 1998)
A Salvo for Africa (Bloodaxe Books, 2000)
'27 Uncollected Poems' in A Meeting for Douglas Oliver, edited by Wendy Mulford and Peter Riley (infernal methods, Street Editions and Poetical Histories, 2002)

Arrondissements (Salt Publishing, 2003)

Prose
The Harmless Building (Grosseteste and Ferry Press, 1973)
Whisper 'Louise' (Reality Street Editions, 2005)

Criticism
Poetry and Narrative in Performance (Macmillan/St Martin’s Press, 1989)
Islands of Voices
Selected Poems

Douglas Oliver

edited by Ian Brinton
with a Preface by Joe Luna

Shearsman Books
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Introduction: ‘infinity of the instant’

As if recognising a debt to a European cultural past, Douglas Oliver’s Preface to the posthumously published Salt edition of Arrondissements immediately evokes an echo of Dante:

More than mid-way through my life I have begun writing Arrondissements, a series of books or long sequences in poetry and prose, designed to reflect the world at large through the prism of Paris.

Three years later in August 2006 when Lee Harwood was being interviewed by Andy Brown for The Argotist Online he referred to a letter he had received from Oliver suggesting that ‘Inside the harm is a clearing’ and this is also an echo but this time of the American world of Herman Melville who wrote in Moby Dick about how when whales have young they form a circle of protection around them. Melville suggested that for some strange reason the water in that inner circle remains always very calm.

In 1973 Oliver’s novel The Harmless Building was published jointly by Tim Longville’s Grosseteste Review Books and Andrew Crozier’s Ferry Press and this prose fiction was the first substantial piece of writing to appear after the death of his son Tom, who had been born with Down’s syndrome in 1969. As John Hall was to point out in a review of later work this publication was ‘the first to engage directly with the ideas of harm and harmlessness that Tom’s life and death had prompted’. The absolute seriousness of Douglas Oliver’s novel was evident from its opening statement:

For the moment the truth is hiding in obstreperous fiction.
I can, however, say that a real mongol baby died and that his memory affects my life.

With a humble and courteous disclaimer near the novel’s opening Oliver tells the reader that ‘my life is nothing special, no more exciting than average’ but he then focuses our attention on the central question concerning our awareness of the immediate present:

The project here will not be speed, poise, style, or the crossbow whizz of thought, though that may seem the project. Instead,
I should love to keep a mongol baby alive in my mind, an outgoingness and kindness, a lack of coherence, an area of almost no-harm like a clearing in the middle of harm.

In a ‘letter written to Douglas Oliver’ by J.H. Prynne, published in 1973 in *Grosseteste Review 6*, we are given a moment of insight into the reactions of one intelligent reader and the insight radiates out from that point:

Really I think this whole achievement is quite overwhelming. Attention worked out so closely does not often attain to a condition of truth. The trust usually asked of us is textual, or “human” like a friendly dog. But both together is so absolutely delicate and fine. I cannot say how deeply affected I am by having read this book.

Perhaps that ‘outgoingness and kindness’ is closely related to Douglas Oliver’s focus upon the importance of the individual moment, an honest awareness of the present, and an understanding that the ‘gravity of a poem lies in its whole form, and the prosody alone, being part of that unity, is sufficient access to it without the performer having to feel anything’. The tensions that rest between the creation of a poem and its source within the poet were noted by Oliver in an unpublished letter he wrote from Brightlingsea to Andrew Crozier in August 1974. Having just finished reading Crozier’s long poem *Pleats* Oliver recognised that ‘there has been a close relationship between the poetic consciousness and the reported event which has affected both sides of that tension in a way that I immediately recognise as profound’.

In an obituary of the poet written for *The Independent* in April 2000 Nicholas Johnson pointed to one of the central qualities of Douglas Oliver’s poetry when he drew attention to the manner in which his writings ‘investigated the instability of language, pitched against the language of political and social upheaval, grief and human vulnerability’. With this struggle for a language that can bring into focus both the world of socially political ideas and the personal anguish of an individual reality we might do well to turn back to that Lee Harwood interview in which he was asked ‘Is there a home in the distant city or is the home here and now?’ Harwood’s answer was uncompromisingly clear:

Well, my interpretation is that it’s got to be the here-and-now, whether you like it or not! That’s the real.
Oppo Hectic

For Jan
SAMPLER
When I Was in Bridport

You know I’m working Jan, you know
I am John. From up here your chairs
scrape oceanically all the time and
birds shriek, sheafs
of first drafts wing from my desk.
These wills I’m writing, don’t think of
floating paper darts from a
cliff-face. It can’t be
morning though shadows slant that
way and the sea’s a blue flat, not
struggling over much sand. The air’s
not crystal but orange against
a sandstone fortress
pitted with flaws and it holds an imprisoned
population. My childhood
of a static shoreline: I
craned upwards towards
the dark prison holes where birdmen
sent out gulls thrown
in a flight-line along the face, bruised wing-tips.
I thought then that quality was in
the hardly-seen arm-movements, the wind after
taking a white scrap in its direction, that
others might throw stones to disappear in the sea.
That beach, archæologically, was
prehistoric. So much
of cliff-flights are layers below
the level of the present-day town.

This
is not a plea for more industry, or you could
joke about flights above the town, how there’s
always the aeroplane. I’m just precise
about the level I start from.
To go below it is a final prison, a kind of burial.
The earthen stairs

The smallest news I have of you is rays of spore, a black sun we stand on. What I hear of you is where we meet. Draw the centre blackness up round us. Earth’s surface is above. At the top of some stairs each step the barrier goes down. We fall about. Down. You’re old-fashioned enough to take my hand slung low at the level of genitals. The moment we will speak has already happened: it waits in the silence in the subterranean hall as meaning stumbles downstairs towards articulation. Waiting too is an anxious group of friends. They live in the news which we gingerly tread. Our descent will reach a cry deep in earth that unfreezes roots in the blackness over our heads. That’s the yell of recognition, claspings in the low hall when we join these sharers of small news. May they renew themselves where fresh spore grows in the infertile levels. Stairs have always led to this point but we lost the way. I had to get information from a medical specialist.
The Furnaces

Weak flame zone
still it's soon flame on a gas stove down the city's very
end a weak resort of the pipe network. Lead tube
extending forward has
a house on its tip
and spits light into a dark kitchen. In the tile surround
alternative gold circlets
spin. The enclosed cooker harbour burns with gas across water beneath
a wide beach, as yet unpopulated. At
its extremities an old port
and the so-called new,
‘new’ because burning waves make ruins flicker on the sea bottom. So the flame
hovering on an invisible
moment of change is the least solitary fact of miles of gas
sent to houses, waves of heat rolling
under the tarmac and here
there are three towns:
the apparent is built on another—the one below uninhabitable
owing to corrupt air
the third is still tawny striations in gas vapour from the
ground, its children having golden hair
and clothes of gypsy yellow
materialising
at the gas flare’s fiercest point; the invisible distance, before
such colours, remakes
time in its tremulous millimetres and this middle town
is being remade in sulphur, leaden pipes
melt underneath and we are no
longer masters
even of the miniature furnace on a hairbrained linotype machine.

Lead solidifies
into words, apt to quarrel, of all others fit to be assassins. And each
house is remade a furnace too the lights go on
anxiety gives me again that old heart-
burn. Leonine children
are in the attic of a house ageing downwards to volatile corruption.
Oppo Hectic

There were father poets who spoke with their mouths round an orange. Round with the saucepan their beautiful eyes smoked their dauphin’s hair where the salt smoked and so did Orpheus. Too much rope for the round of the hat opening, a rind on an eagle’s cunt, and the women whose gloves gleamed, and the bushbaby, since he was early for the poor guys, did not repeat the smoking of his ancestors. It was far too easy. Or alternatively it was far too hard. Or the seven pylons the women of course without the chicken-ridden vegetables and their poetry books said Aaah Ooooh you’ve shit Pushkin down the drain—incidentally why is no-one necking near the drainaway? Looking at that grimace you wrote a few words in excellent French, “the English scum made it with their limbs.” Like love-rape the spirit of the gaoler fixes up a tight circus and the alphabetical posture of the emprisioned men said where are the poets who speak with their mouths round an orange? Their foe rescues them: the ORANGES are really child-poets.

(After Blaise Cendrars)
The Diagram Poems

for Ted Berrigan and Alice Notley

SAMPLER
SAMPLER
Team Leader

He switches on internal driver
his gloves mirror an inset which is
a steering wheel from side to side
blood will hurry past everyone onlooking
the tasselled finger points left
but final direction rests up the team sleeves
into the cemetery there.

Already bereaved of innocence and late, he
hops along to two spectacle lenses
finds that eyes are sighting along gun arms
waits for a white handkerchief to wave
and with relief
nips back to tell people I can’t name
that looped progress to the apples should begin
without snags or
bends a correct slither.
Visits the eyes bowls number of miles
before the teams gather at the crook of elbow
in the hollow where car axles break
and the thing carries off awkwardly, with losses.
P.C.

Blue conjurors in corridors
hope to go straight and quick
immobilise a commissariat and –
grab him, no curving into turbulence –
Sergeant My Namesake bursts
from arcanum into hostile communication
shoots twice, breaking glass,
missfires in the overgrown patio.
That grass is all warning shouts.
We've already had delays of team leader
now loud white thorns
grow in the plans.
Like an adder, the sergeant
swerves to cold. From a doorsill he snakes
into the internal.
The hope of speed is stung in a home of pyjamas
or a bullet to the fancy for a long, long time.
At last, in a dreamy sweat, movement
goes peaceably to the sagpit, safety.

An English voice sneaks to the ear,
interfering, across time,
we are your servants can we help you
to the most dangerous daisy love of sleep?
Such sleep hangs in the parachute
dynamic of an old-fashioned aviator
ejecting from arrowed lines;
his sinker heart houses concubine pistols
which shoot him up internally
in the incurable warfare of the adult
and the intercom's alive with ancient panic

or, another inset, sleep is
droopy with a half-disease
like a vaccinated dog
pulsy as lame
Mount Pleasant piss-off breed.

All foreigners to these three visions
come to their portals to surrender
except, importantly, just one who is fearful
and hurries away before entering
so none of the other movements can be complete.
The Infant and the Pearl
SAMPLER
I

Lying down in my father’s grey dressing gown its red cuffs over my eyes, I caught sight of Rosine, my pearl, passing out of my room one night while a dream passed out of the night of my nation. What a robe she was wearing! Brown and sinewy, lion colours in the doorlight; she turned, Laura-like, on her face a light frown to be leaving, not reproving but right-lipped, reddish hair loving the dead facial centre: virtue could’ve kept her had I enough of it, though I dreamt of it.

In my grey gown I would have gladly slept by her.

I was wrangling in my grey gown, full of wrath as the door closed. And I felt close to me the paternal cloth quietening, the rough flannel lie flat in darkness; if even the diagonal doorlight had been cut off in the night of my nation, if even the much-hoped-for Rosine had just had enough of the dream – a fragment of light finally dying in the room – well, the realm in my closed eyes came alive with one colour: the rosy-red pearl, so rich and womanly.

I shuddered in the grey for I should have slept by her.

Pearl, whose rose grey gleams with infant hints in the hinterland of my dreams, as when any poet dreams of a lost pearl – some principle refound only by resting on a gravestone! Rosine’s the mother of policy, priced beyond our suspect neo-patriotism. She seems in my nights to radiate reddish beams as if whatever our actions she gladdened
our unseen selves, while without her our conscious selves are immeasurably saddened.
In my grey gown I would have gladly slept with her.

The self that shines in the greying sunshine of the immediate is actual, though it is not all that is there. The feminine is numinous in my masculine: it isn’t nonsense to picture a pearl placed on a shrine inside myself; on the swirling surface is Rosine’s reflection which, as if she’s been crying, half turns away, ashamed where her mercy’s judged socialistic, too soft for justice. For the dream isn’t Margaret; the pearl’s true minister would be as lustrous as Rosine is…
In my grey gown I would have gladly slept with her.

My thinking greyed; the vision eventually flickered in half-sleep – then Rosine had fled, a fastidious foe of the tin pan alley serious, powdered, severed head of Margaret, whose self serially repeated, televised, pearlized, and reported ten times, tampered with immediacy. An empty voice in my empty head… and sexual absence inhabiting my bed… like a vacuum in a vacuum, except for the cuffs on my eyes, recall of red… I shuddered in the grey for I should have slept with her.

II

A grey light dawned and on the distant hills that I dreamt of lay a city of disdain circled with steel walls, with silent spires like warheads, in which one pane
gleamed in bleak agate; an arrogant
city above countryside that a murrain
seemed to have hit: a hoar-frost-land,
medieval, the poor and the mighty again
in the chivalric hierarchy, but no golden chain
of charity joining them, just the martinet
reign of chance ruling commerce, in whose train
come prosperity, perils and probably regret.

The hills, though, were free, free of disorder,
hills of privilege, of prerogative governance,
a régime arising from the ruins of order:
lording it over the lean shires, once
the same Britain, now they were Britain's border,
an encircling supreme around happenstance.
And I was a new-style, a knowing dreamer,
though a grey friar flying over foetid expanse,
whose unfortunate fields were unfertilized by Providence;
where medieval was modern and where Margaret
ruled without Rosine, true mercy, while Chance
bred possible prosperity, perils, or regret.

In this landscape of chance, all at once a Churchillian
ghosting of blue graced the hills' far clothing,
yet the soil near at hand rotted, and the sillion
reeked. Brother ploughman ploughed with loathing,
knowing some were making a million
out of the serving classes and saving
their compassion like credit, crowing at each minion
the slogan, ‘Supply and Demand,’ mouthing
the language of natural law, laughing
off as nonsense that ‘natural’, though Margaret
legislates, is Chance, and legalizes nothing
but possible perils or probable regret.

In my dream I dreaded those hills, for they meant
a journey through ruins to a winter horizon.
A Salvo for Africa
SAMPLER
A long, easy line of introduction, as if I’m a poet prosing alongside you, a stranger, half-turning in his enthusiasms. We’re in England, descending the house-combed hillsides of Coventry, early seventies, when the idea for these poems was born; and we enter the shattered Hillfields suburb under the ring road. I show you the surviving top shops, terraces with wide upper windows blank in dark brick where once the ribbon weavers’ looms throbbed, driven by a long, easy belt drive through attics of these joined homes from one combustion engine in the end garden. Came the fall of cotton. Came Second World War bombs, came socialist planners bulldozing Hillfields, came the acrid fires of the homeless on rubbled sites beside the high rises which trapped infants in sweating flats far from their natural earth, families collapsing, some crime – much exaggerated, some prostitution – from outside. Came courage to live through a city’s class and racial tensions, scapegoats in ‘Coventry’s Square Mile of Crime’. Now came the government again, with a full purse, to restore the vanished community, as if money could replace the granny in 25 or the old man who played the spoons in 28, or the larger family that was once the suburb of Hillfields. I turn to you, as if newly excited, to explain how those planners implanted community centres, went for mixed housing, sought to make a sunrise in the slums. And created a middle-class boom instead. See the problem families scatter as the suburb goes bourgeois. I point to the smart new brick. See the hard truth of it: a free market nation will stick such families right at the bottom; they’ll never afford a house even one rung above lowest and slip modestly aside from new building plots into the next meanest doorway.

This relaxed walking – not a singing – gives us time for specifics; but to see the problems of families puts a chord string of iron in the heart, still there many years later in a country obsessed with free markets, following the gleam of international power blocs, the EU, the WTO.
And I read a Daily Mail economist forecasting great wealth for all free market countries. ‘Of course, there will be basket cases, such as Africa’. And I grab you by the arm. ‘Did you hear that? Africa! Not a Coventry suburb, a whole continent written off in our free trade fanaticism.’ As if holding your arm I face towards Africa and write these poems as representative of a failed British imagination.

The iron chord is struck and I walk with you in Dar es Salaam. In golden light move the stereotype dark suits of World Bankers, planning, funding, organising, implementing, evaluating corrugated sheets of shanties rattling in the sunny wind. The government, lenient on forced eviction, has targeted these slums for upgrading with World Bank funding still in these early seventies; it will allocate building plots, slap down fully-serviced cement foundations for squatters, a housing bank for loans, providing you build to old colonial standards. Low-income earners, the self-employed, the jobless can’t get these loans, can’t build to such standards, and the Hillfields, Coventry, story repeats itself. The poor move out to new marginal, unserviced squatterdoms. I follow them in my imagination and imagine I am following the old slum-dwellers of Hillfields in Coventry inexorably moving on. Come the petit bourgeois, the middle classes, come the slippery deals in land, till even the Bank admits: ‘It is believed that many of the plots have unofficially transferred to more affluent individuals.’ An inner city opened up to free market forces will scatter the poor. World trade agreements blindly following the forces that created a Hillfields are creating an Africa ever falling behind this financial neo-colonialism, the World Bank credo, the credo of the GATT, to help an Africa bulldozed already by its own politicians. Then I take your arm again and remark, ‘I have risked prose, a walking measure, to explain why I’ve written these poems.’
The Borrowed Bow

The moment stings, shorting like an old wireless of bakelite body with a trellised raffia screen. The shadowy corner’s acrid with electricity, blue air frazzed with black in a cliffside house blank-windowed towards France. But around the space of shock are other rooms where old men, sitting by their wirelesses, wear country check worsteds with a fleck of red blodged with gravy. This moment is a vanishing point on a post-war seacoast, the pier blown up in case of German invasion.

The rooms still have that slow life moving in them, a termite-gnawed Asante mask on the walls of a retired colonial official, an assegai from elsewhere in Africa, a boot-polish shield, a bow, a poisoned arrow; for there’s an unexplored magic in all time, a survival even now of a toothless mouth sopping at a biscuit, a hand trembling on a bony knee, about to reach for porcelain on a frame of swivelling trays, thin finger crooked as for a trigger.

I borrowed the bow of black hardwood, took it and a bamboo stick into the garden. Couldn’t pull the leather string back; the magic of the bow-spar wouldn’t bend for me. I knew I was just meddling. So I went indoors to fiddle with the wireless innards: electronic emotions and jerky excitements in the village of valves, which cracked like gunfire, a tracer arc streaked across dusty connections, as if before the snap of it, the coil of smoke, a tiny bow had shot a brilliant arrow.
China Blue

Chinese Bridport

Then the morning shadow falls, suddenly slanting
down monstrous apartment blocks at Porte de Choisy
and its Chinatown, over a piazza of pagoda-style
kiosks. Diaspora money with its huge fist
has thrust buildings into earth here, cliffs of them
with mud-coloured balconies and strata of pallid walls.
Knocking from his heights, an Asian fixes a lathe
and he knocks at my heart till morning shadows slant
again down Bridport’s cliffs, an early time in England
by a calm sea, a place to start poetry from.
Everyone hurries across the piazza; there’s push-chair
after push-chair, new growth, and a man spits
dangerously over the head of the baby he’s wheeling.

Money in Sunshine

for J.H. Prynne

Jeremy, marvellously tight in your word orders,
your lines never run on endlessly like this huge
rectangular high-riser; though, if the sky’s blue,
it sharpens into a classic. A pigeon flights
along precipices, past shrubs at balcony levels.
Peregrine falcon. Downstairs, a window
mumbles in Cambodian and higher up
glass swivels inwards, holes in the bedazzled.
After immigrant hardship, families come
to this excessively sublime wall of flats:
an escape from sewing, their children at it
too; they’ve saved harder than I could; bins
in the malls filled with cottons, male underpants for a pittance; the female have vestigial lace, go baggy in the crotch. Chinese speculators, whose raw energy and care I admire, stretched these balconies on too long, wanting a luxury to gaze at. It’s like a poem with a word order betrayed by volubility, money destroying the limits of syllables because it won’t stop talking until all the profit is squeezed out.

Calling Them Home

Lost ones of no shape behind the shudder door of the side-street music shop displaying Nouvelles du Cambodge. A winter leaf enters on the heel, though Paris skies are summery enough in Chinatown. ‘Pol Pot, organiser of genocide, is dead,’ the news-sheet announces. To lose your family in the wider passing-on is process of life but not when memory’s vertebrae lie shattered, so the music store owner sells the paper reluctantly to a foreigner whose mind is klutzy with Europe-Asie. No bell tinkles as the shop door closes but a quick drift of sparrows across the avenue draws attention to a coal-tit in the Metro foliage, its black poll, white nape, and call of if-he.
Transcending the Hypermarket

Heavy meat smell by the cheap chicken counter: the birds sell too fast to be displayed seductively but pile up in a massacre heap. Only the adept know that content drawn carefully into a single blinding act of mind unites its contraries, simultaneous but in all possible orders. Birds packed separately under the glass sales counter by palm slaps can only unite closed eyes with dry beaks; mass squirms with evil, this loose skin twisted unbearably.

Fidelity

Fidelity to family’s a fine thing, but fidelity to knees? So are you my pal, dog, in the Chinese hypermarket?

Well, there’s a niece in New Zealand, brother’s child boyfriending over there, and I’m sniffing around in Tang Frères on the avenue d’Ivry, where durian doré pods from Thailand are a green (not gold) giant’s prickly bollocks.

Three Cambodian fingers lie on a sales counter,