

Elegies

SAMPLER

ALSO BY HARRY GUEST

POETRY

A Different Darkness

Arrangements

The Cutting-Room

The Achievements of Memory

Mountain Journal

A House Against the Night

The Hidden Change

Lost and Found

Coming to Terms

So Far

A Puzzling Harvest (*Collected Poems 1955–2000*)

Comparisons & Conversions *

Some Times

NOVELS

Days

Lost Pictures

Time After Time

RADIO PLAYS

The Inheritance

The Emperor of Outer Space

TRANSLATIONS

Post-War Japanese Poetry (*with Lynn Guest and Kajima Shôzô*)

The Distance, The Shadows (*66 Poems by Victor Hugo*)

Versions

From a Condemned Cell (*33 Sonnets by Jean Cassou*)

A Square in East Berlin (*a novel by Torsten Schulz*)

Otherlands *

NON-FICTION

Another Island Country

Mastering Japanese

Traveller's Literary Companion to Japan

The Artist on the Artist

* *published by Shearsman Books*

Elegies

SAMPLER
Harry Guest

Shearsman Library

Second Edition.
Published in the United Kingdom in 2018 by
Shearsman Library
an imprint of Shearsman Books
by Shearsman Books Ltd
50 Westons Hill Drive
Emersons Green
BRISTOL
BS16 7DF

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office
30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB
(*this address not for correspondence*)

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-588-5

Copyright © Harry Guest, 1980, 2002

The right of Harry Guest to be identified as the author of this work
has been asserted by him in accordance with the
Copyrights, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.
All rights reserved.

Elegies was first published by Pig Press, Durham, in 1980.
The sequence was subsequently collected in the author's
A Puzzling Harvest: Collected Poems 1955–2000,
(London: Anvil Press Poetry, 2002).

Reprinted here by kind permission of Carcanet Press, Manchester,
for Anvil Press Poetry; [http://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/
indexer?product=9780856463549](http://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?product=9780856463549).

Contents

1. The First Elegy / 7

2. The Second Elegy / 11

3. The Third Elegy / 15

4. The Fourth Elegy / 19

5. The Fifth Elegy / 23

6. The Sixth Elegy / 27

SAMPLER

The First Elegy

The area was overgrown. Brambles and fireweed
had to be uprooted before a boundary
was agreed upon and the last pale
driven in next to the first. Sometimes
the acreage is complete before pen touches paper,
at others the map only remains itself and the final
shading contradicts the outline made at the start,
for example a grey summer's day and on the lake
hardly waves only the slightest folding
over of water on water with nothing reflected
though the hills enclosing it were purple
and on three sides trees came down to the shore.
Adults were elsewhere. We skimmed stones or sat round
in the gritty boat-house. What furniture I remember
appears scoured and cheap. There was a gramophone
playing swing. Unheard mosquitoes
stung our bare legs. Today we stroll beneath lime-trees
in another garden that does not belong to us.
At that time we could not have known each other
even though in a sense sharing the same time-zone,
privation, absence of sunlight, for war
had removed our fathers. The faces are unlabelled,
those melodies possess only a period texture.
I cannot recall who owned the property nor where
we went later. There was a small rocky island
but no boat and I couldn't swim in those days.
The dramatis personae were children on their own
for an afternoon and you and I increasingly
find ourselves left behind as they run over stubble

where the last swallows flash or enter gloomy
chambers in some ruined castle where the lintels
are too low for our foreheads. But a chipped stone egg
on my desk admonishes me for change
emerges from the air and colours the thinnest
depictions of the past. Late June there. Few flowers –
the one rhododendron flecked with unclenched scarlet
shows by its listlessness it has fulfilled
a yearly duty. The blinds are half drawn though only
on one far field where the hay has been cut
sunlight, slanting, picks out yellow among the green.
Knowledge of being alive at a given moment –
given if not taken - has details of heat and shrubbery
absorbing the past tense before we exclude them.
On the ground floor, there in the room forming the corner,
two oil-paintings, each about the size of a postcard,
display these illusions: one, a path through a wood in spring,
the other, a slow stream broadening into pools
under brown foliage. Both show what was needed
though neither comments on anything here
since the brush-strokes limit the scene not for the viewer
only but for the dead painter himself.
The way they've been hung would imply that it's the second
picture that holds autumn replacing April.
It could though be the other way around.
Take a day, any day, says the old fortune-teller.
It may be one that rises with indifference
to the surface, flicks the merest hint of a red
fin, gold scales, one among others, but at that time
you sat and read or went upstairs in a house
that has since been destroyed. You showed me the place,
now asphalt, near the church we were married in.

A copper beech spreads over this wall
and the dead elms show stark amid all the green.
When you were ascending that stair you saw
floor-boards stained dark, a carpeted edge of landing,
no foreshadow of a wind with dust and fumes
blowing across a sunken highway or its intrusion
years later into our talk. You stepped into space
going perhaps from one high room to another
and the crunch of gravel is cancelled under
our shoes as we leave this path for the lawn
but where I wonder will the two of us be when this
is remembered together or separately. The sun by now
has closed the last of the distant hay-fields though one
shaft of light sinks through green water in the estuary.
The open sea is concealed by the long shoulder
of the foreland. In theory you can walk round any lake.

SAMPLER