

SAMPLER

Jeremy Hooker

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Selected Poems 1965–2018

JEREMY HOOKER

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from

THE ELEMENTS

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Song of the Ashes

for John Cowper Powys

His ashes sang on Chesil bank,
“Old cheat the worms you chose to go
In fire’s sensation, body’s final fling,

Not in green villages put cold to bed
With ploughmen in their huts of sward,
Not anchored by a stone.

Where all is strange the senses
Twisting whimper like a clueless hound
And terror whips its own heels raw:

You found a way in what you were.
You have amazed the hump-backed bass
By striking, silver-black, at ambush

In the surf, and played the angler
With his trace of wire. The weaver’s spine
Inflicts no pain, for your intelligence

Became the poison and the wound;
Nor can you suffer more the ocean’s histories,
Returning sated like a shag to roost.

White Nose and Portland,
Chesil’s tide-plucked bow of stones,
Are but one shell whose echo cannot sound

Down shelf on shelf the deep-sea crypt.
Adrift on mountain chains, mid-ocean rifts,
An image of the land they mock,

Where all lives tend back whence they came –
What is so strange as to be born?
Fear fear and in the fire be fire.”

So sang calm ashes on the sea,
Dissolving on a tide which they made visible.

Easter at White Nose

i.m. Llewelyn Powys

Over downland, where the field
Of wheat in an arc
Drops into space,
We find the clean-cut lettered stone:
THE LIVING THE LIVING HE SHALL PRAISE THEE

The chalk is a globe bitten
Through its axis, the white line
Of retreating cliffs
Jagged with marks of teeth.
Far up in the salt wind,

Hearing the sea crumple
Mouthing its stones, I could lie
Here like ash if death only
Meant contemplation
Under the gently reddening

Sunlight and salt.
Old atheist, the new corn
Has forced a green way
Through flints to the edge
Of your stone. Like St. Francis

You have stretched naked
On the naked ground, thankful

At Easter for the unholy
Resurrections, and sure
There was no other.

These flints teach the same
Dogma, and the brute wheat
Supports you with its fine green
Shoots; perhaps it is only
A wish almost as old to sense
That I speak to a mind
In the smooth domed hill.

Elegy for the Labouring Poor

1. *The Picturesque*

“There will soon be an end to the picturesque in the Kingdom.”
(John Constable, after the destruction, by fire, of Purns Mill.)

I

The picturesque is always with us.
Paint stiffens but the river swims forward;
Clouds move on and a mill becomes ash,
But the human features stay variable
And the pliant earth defies stasis.
And it is there, in that movement,
As another sky forms and a new generation
Measures the wood or levels the corn,
That the imagination commits itself
To an act that is elegy and salutation:
For what is welcomed – this continuity,
Is also change displacing the self that welcomes.
The carpenter alone commands a permanent living,
Elm perpetual usage. Nothing lasts
But the mortal nature of all that's unique.

II

Near Bishopstone the family tended sheep
And ploughed the flint. There I glimpsed
A tractor fuming chalkdust
And found the fields worked profitably
But empty, smooth and pallid.
I came to a village under the downs
Whose graveyard held few stones –
The rest had ended in town cemeteries
Or been put to sea. Not one
Pushed a pen or was pushed by one.

Why grub in the past
For that life whose work seems fickle as ash?
Not to savour lachrymae rerum, nor toll
The general dirge that the globe goes round;
As the elegist wags a grave skull
Sonorous as a belfry: plough fossil,
Fossil pylon...
But to resurrect from the used land
The life that gave life; to utter it
As it cannot be known in the canvas
Where river and cloud stand fast,
Or in chronicles of the cold law;
As it can only be guessed by the self
Acknowledging change; as it can never be known.

2 *Forefather*

He moves like timber on a swell,
In mud gaiters and clay-coloured cord,
Bent to it, sculpting a furrow.
Mould's his name: James Mould
With shoots in Hants and Wiltshire.
His blunt boot-prints, fugitive

As the cloud at his rear,
Are unseen by the camera that exhumes
Celtic patterns from suave downland.
But the tread's purposeful.

His prayer's a bold harvest;
That the seed will stand up golden,
As an army, as mansions in Portland oolite,
As three loaves weekly.
God's ear is readier than Parliament's
Since He'll ferret in barn, byre and hen house,
Tithe hungry.

 So he trudges,
Chained by daylight
To the round of a stiff field,
Deaf as yet to saucy agitation.
"For living it is not, but a long starving."

3 "*Gold Fever*", 1830

After nightfall in harvest weather,
Over the lowland clay
Where the axe has opened hearts of oak,
A faint wind moves in the rigging of leaves.
On the quayside at Poole
Limestone waits shipment, and Portland
With its moon-grey scars butts into the sea.
Bored by the company of sheep
White horses gallop on the ridge of chalk,
But the Cerne giant, erect through an aeon,
Dreams of slackening into repose.
– Green man, fathering riches,
Delicate in the turn of a leafy wrist
Or puckish among moon-drunk sheaves,
Subject to none but the turning year,
Now fires in the labourer's veins,

Kindling the brand – and flexes strongly,
In the fist that will quench it,
Musket and shot and the outraged warrant
Of a mastering brain...

No man's lonelier than James Mould
As he wakes with stubble-scored legs
In a rat's refuge of wattle and daub.
At first the mist hangs clammy flags
But vanishes as the sun hardens
White-hot on flint, deadening the hedgerows.
Hunger isolates: however neighboured
In a common circumstance,
The body slogs alone, by rote,
And the jailed brain dulls
Fixed on the single motion – the arcing scythe
Deliberate as the sun at its habitual act.
Thus he swings through the day, a young man
Hard and spare as the grain
Now whispering in heaps,
Bent with his shoulder to the field,
Keeping it moving, glad of the work,
At a Klondyke near Bishopstone.

4 *Captain Swing Fires the Workhouse*

Rag bedding indelibly staled,
Lousy straw crusted with piss –
Tinder for the pyre.

Lit, the flames flicker cleanly,
Like a candle in a turnip skull
The house makes a face in the dark.
The grass slithers with rats.
Then the windows stare out,
Splintering, and the fire explodes.

To a shepherd out on the downs
It's a cauldron fed by the oak,
As it ruins suddenly, lustily,
And the walls wither and the roof falls,
Pounding down timber and stone.
Like a yule log
It flickers on the watchful old.

Where's Swing?
The sergeant barks at his redcoats.
The magistrate chokes on latinate prose.

No one knows.
Not even a score of labourers
Cat-footing it through the underwood;
Among them, James Mould,
Daredevil as a boy again,
Pleased with himself and scared.

5 *The Voyage Out, 1831*

Bladder-wrack swaying in supple knots
Muddies the sunned quayside water.
Each for itself and each self
Viciously alike, the black-headed gulls
Snatch at refuse and their raw cries
Spread in circles, smacking the hulk,
Thinning out where the estuary opens
And the sea absorbs their voice.
But James Mould seeing the ocean
Sees only flint acres
Fought inch by inch, chalkdust rising,
And hears only his ghostly kin
Telling their names in the stunned brain.

When Portland pitches astern
And the last gull's torn shoreward,
Memory stays. The hulk bores on,
Shuddering, and the massive slabs break,
The clean fathomless wells slide open.
And the unbroken space narrows
To an inland patch of fields,
The chalk ridge, the sheep-walk scabius.

For this is purgation: to scour men
By divorcing them from all they know.
But the things they love go with them,
Untouchable, at times ferociously clear.
And what's left pleads after them,
And sours. Places are empty
That nothing but bitterness can fill.
The labourer voyages. The land uses
New methods, new men. But he takes with him
A life belonging to those acres
And leaves as a portion, the emptiness.
Under the downs, in countless sites
Gutted by the exile of their people,
Others will meet this isolation
They will inherit the emptiness.

Earth Poems

1 *Song of the Earth*

Bring or do not bring your mind's distress.
The seas it foundered in
Are none of mine.

My words are flint, cold to your touch.
They tell I am
What you become.

No tree bore the branch
From which your sick thoughts spin.
There is no vertigo in falling leaves.

Along brain's empty dancing-floor
My small blades creep.
The grass's flood-tide bears you home.

2 *At the Edge*

You will haunt the edges
Becoming more shadowy the more
This world streams past.
Now there is nothing but grassblade
Running into grassblade,
Each a separate wave where the colours flux
Orange into brown. The field is going out
With the autumn tide,
And where you were there is now
Only a cry.

3 *The Elements*

Even a poor eye
Can see clear through the globe
To its Antipodes. All, all,
Like a frail door banging in the wind,
A leaky raft through which the sea springs,
Cannot keep out the other elements.
With faculties so weak
You can reach out to touch the other side of death.

Carrying Hay

for Dafydd ap Griffith

We pass a tin cup
For the gulp
Of water, the splash
On a red back
Gummed with straw,
And through the fingers
Easing the joints
Bitten by string.

Trees in shadow ripen
Like plums out of reach
And the bales swung
From hand to hand
Get heavier, building
The last steep load
On the trailer, until,
Senses half-asleep,
We sway from the bare field,
Each slack link dreaming.

SAMPLER

Pietà

“Creep back to the earth thy mother!”

With the greenish pallor
Of an unripe stick, his face
Tilts, staring towards
The still pure planets.

Let him come into you,
Mother with the poisoned womb.

There

for Sue

As sett to badger dark in the warm soil;
As moist places to the secret mole;
As essential darkness to earth itself:
Love, the night surrounds us.
We are the confluence of underground streams.
We grow together and in daylight
Flow out apart, now each in each, remade.

SAMPLER

from

LANDSCAPE OF THE DAYLIGHT MOON

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Tench Fisher's Dawn

For J.R.

We are before dawn intruders,
Mesmerised by the quizzical pitch eye
Of the lake's animal presence.
It swallows our words without a ripple,
And where we crept up the grasses
Uncoil, effacing our prints. The close dark
Isolates our human stink like prey.
But when the stars melt out and dawn
Unsheathes the black acres, and the water
Pales, steaming under the risen sun,
We can see the bubbles cluster and burst.
Then, casting out, we're suddenly in touch.

Cwm Morgan

for C.A.J.

Once in late summer
Through oakleaves darkened by an autumn breath
I glimpsed the falling river
Torn to shreds of foam, and fancied
That one fleck of whiteness swiftly gone
Might be the fleeting silk
Of an enchantress in your tales.
Then as I turned away
You smiled, as if to say
Cwm Morgan was your gift to me.
I did not know
The autumn was already come
When you would slip from me like foam.

Thomas Hardy Burning Letters

Commonsense does it.

First, bed it down, then rake over
Dry grass, dry sticks: that's the knack –
You don't know there's a breeze
Till it snatches; not too tight, though,
Or the match won't take.
That's it.

Now the paper blackens,
Wrinkles like dead leaves, stains red
As the flames worm through.
It catches. And the heart blooms. Blooms,
And fails into smoke. The ash settles,
And you die as it dies, consumed.
There's only a pale film left, more delicate than petals.

They're all at it, gumbooted, sentinel,
Forking on weeds, trash, contents of attics.
You can see smoke standing up all over Wessex.

Here's a man
Has a face only the mirror knows,
Who's watched himself burn there
And outstared the horror.
His pitiless scorched lip twitches.
I wonder, is that for a word
The fire glowed through
Before the heart crumpled,
Or because he sees
Scholars, years after,
Scrabble for ash on their knees.