

Not the Full Story

Also by Lee Harwood:

Poetry

title illegible

The Man with Blue Eyes

The White Room

Landscapes

The Sinking Colony

Freighters

H.M.S. Little Fox

Boston–Brighton

Old Bosham Bird Watch

Wish you were here (with Antony Lopez)

All the Wrong Notes

Faded Ribbons

Monster Masks

Crossing the Frozen River : selected poems

Rope Boy to the Rescue

In the Mists: mountain poems

Morning Light

Evening Star

Collected Poems

Gifts Received

Selected Poems

Prose

Captain Harwood's Log of Stern Statements and Stout Sayings.

Wine Tales: Un Roman Devin (with Richard Caddel)

Dream Quilt: 30 assorted stories

Assorted Stories : prose works

Also by Kelvin Corcoran:

Robin Hood in the Dark Ages

The Red and Yellow Book

Qiryat Sepher

TCL

The Next Wave

Lyric Lyric

Melanie's Book

When Suzy Was

Your Thinking Tracts or Nations

New and Selected Poems

Backward Turning Sea

LEE HARWOOD

Not the Full Story

Six Interviews by Kelvin Corcoran

Shearsman Books
Exeter

Published in the United Kingdom in 2008 by
Shearsman Books Ltd
58 Velwell Road
Exeter EX4 4LD

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-001-9

Interviews copyright © Lee Harwood and Kelvin Corcoran, 2008.

Poems copyright © Lee Harwood, 1966, 1975, 1988, 1998, 2004.

The right of Lee Harwood and Kelvin Corcoran to be identified as the authors of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyrights, Designs and Patents Act of 1988. All rights reserved.

Cover image copyright © Bobbie Cox.

Author photo copyright © Jemimah Kuhfeld, 2008.

Acknowledgements

All of the poems reprinted in this volume have been taken from Lee Harwood's *Collected Poems* (Shearsman Books, Exeter, 2004), by permission of the author.

Thanks to the photographers Tim Megarry for the pictures on pages 11 and 32, Judith Walker for pages 53 and 85, and Veronica Agius for page 97.

CONTENTS

Introduction	7
1.	
<i>Photo.</i> On the beach at Worthing, 1947	8
Poem. 'Summer'	9
<i>Photo.</i> In Rotherhithe Tunnel, 1964	11
Interview: When the ricks were burnt	13
2.	
<i>Photo.</i> Sam Widges Coffee Bar, Soho, 1964	32
Poem. 'The revisitation'	33
Poem. 'Dazzle'	34
Interview: A defeating pink	35
3.	
<i>Photo.</i> Palace Pier, Brighton, 1971	53
Poem. 'Charles de Gaulle Airport—Roissy'	54
Interview: Swimming the Atlantic	55
4.	
<i>Photo.</i> King Mycerinus and wife	67
Poem. 'Desert phone'	68
Interview: Our long history on small scraps of paper	69
5.	
<i>Photo.</i> Walden Pond and various poets, 1973	85
Poem. 'Talking Bab-Ilu'	86
Interview: Nowhere Else	87
6.	
<i>Photo.</i> In Chelsea Physic Garden, 1990.	97
Poem. 'Late Journeys'	98
Poem. 'Genghis Khan's Hat'	99
Interview: Courage, traveller.	100

INTRODUCTION

The publication this year of Lee Harwood's *Selected Poems* emphasises, for familiar and new readers, that the poetry comes first. Having read this growing body of work over 30 years, I thought it was time to call upon the author to speak up for himself.

The idea of *Not the Full Story: Six Interviews* is to allow the poet to talk in his own voice about his poetry. The title suggests what is here and what is not. On occasion a poet might be persuaded to talk about the work, its contexts, sources and even its emerging aesthetic; here are six such occasions.

The interviews took place between November 2007 and February 2008. We worked through the poetry chronologically. The result is a poet talking about four decades of his remarkable work.

Kelvin Corcoran
April, 2008

Summer

these hot afternoons “it’s quite absurd” she whispered
sunlight stirring her cotton dress inside the darkness when
an afternoon room crashed not breaking a bone or flower.
a list of cities crumbled under riots and distant gun-fire
yet the stone buildings sparkle. It is not only
the artificial lakes in the parks . . . perhaps . . .
but various illusions of belonging fall with equal noise and regularity
how could they know, the office girls as well
“fancy falling for him . . .” and inherit a sickness
such legs fat and voluptuous . . . smiling to himself
the length of train journeys

the whole landscape of suburban railway tracks,
passive canals and coloured oil-refineries.
it could be worse—

at intervals messages got through
the senate was deserted all that summer
black unmarked airplanes would suddenly appear
and then leave the sky surprised at its quiet
“couldn’t you bear my tongue in your mouth?”

skin so smooth in the golden half-light
I work through nervousness to a poor but
convincing appearance of bravery and independence

mexico crossed by railways. aztec ruins
finally demolished and used for spanning one more ravine
in a chain of mountain tunnels and viaducts
and not one tear to span her grief
to lick him in the final mad-house hysteria
of armour falling off, rivets flying in all directions like fire-crackers,
and the limp joy of the great break-down
which answers so many questions.
a series of lovers—but could you?—
all leading through the same door after the first hours

of confused ecstasies.
the dream woman who eats her lover.
would suffocation be an exaggeration of what really happens?
the man who forgets, leaving the shop
without his parcels, but meaning no harm.
“it’s all a question of possession,
jealousy and . . .” the ability to torment,
the subtle bullying of night long talkings.
what artificial fruits can compare with this
and the wrecked potting-sheds that lie open
throughout the land? gorging their misery
and that of others . . . geranium flowers hacked off the plants
by gentlemen’s canes and now limp on the gravel
paths wandering through empty lawns and shrubberies
afternoon bickerings on a quiet park bench while
families take tea at a convenient cafe, so nicely situated.

engines and greased axles clattering through the shunting-yards.
fluttering parasols running for cover
under the nearby elms as the first heavy sweet raindrops
lick the girls forehead. the slightly hysterical
conversations crowded beneath the leaking branches
waiting for the july thunder to pass. The damp heat
and discomfort of clothes, a tongue passing the length
of her clitoris . . . and back again . . .
erections in the musty pavilion which should lead to a lake
but doesn’t. the resin scent and dry throat in the pine wood
across the meadows.

“surely you remember?”

but so long ago.

strawberries lining her lake in the dark woods
an old picture slowly fading on the wall
as if a flower too could change her face
as a dusk cloaks our loneliness

INTERVIEW 1 — SEPTEMBER 2007

When the ricks were burnt

KC My simple idea is that we start at the beginning of your work and take a walk through it and talk about things as we go along. I've sent you some questions and you've not crushed them into a ball and thrown them back at me! We'll assume we can go with the questions. I was looking for a poem that was distinctive of that time, very near the beginning of your writing. Can we talk about the poem 'Summer'? Is it typical of your early work?

LH Yes, I think it may be. With those poems in *The Man With Blue Eyes*, there are quite a few direct lyric, love poems, though they are not especially direct. There is a lot of collage in them. 'Summer' isn't part of that sequence of love poems but it is part of that period and that approach to writing.

KC Can you remember writing the poem 'Summer'?

LH No.

KC What were you thinking about?

LH I don't know.

KC What were you thinking?

LH It's so long ago, I really can't remember but because of you mentioning it I read it again. I can see various incidents, things that happened, not just that particular summer but over a few summers, all came together in that poem. It's really a bundle of stories creating an atmosphere. It's also the pleasure, for me, of picking up a story and running with it, seeing where it will go, like a runaway horse. It was a recognition of what writing could do.

KC Heady times.

LH Yes. You can have a pattern of behaviour which, when you recognise it, you have the choice of continuing or to move into a new territory. Meeting and spending time with John Ashbery in 1965 gave me the choice to move into a whole new approach to writing. If not totally new, a more satisfying approach. It was not that John was talking about writing to me, it was just odd remarks that clicked and made me recognise what I could do, and what I had been doing until then. He wasn't really interested in writing about himself—most people's personal lives are boring he said. He was interested in writing about almost a shared life, like the life of dreams, the sort of shared material we can all enter. Later on I realised this was akin to various works of art that I like. Such as Cornell's boxes or the unfinished paintings of Gustave Moreau. You're presented with a scene and invited to walk in and wander around, like entering a toy theatre, and you can create things to entertain yourself and possibly a reader. The idea of constructing poems that did this seemed wonderful. Poems like Ashbery's 'Europe' and 'How much longer will I be able to inhabit the divine sepulcher' are marvellous examples of this building with fragments and suggestions.

I realised then that while Ashbery had triggered this realisation, it had already been building up, like a chemical build up. A taste for this had begun in 1962 when I read Jorge Luis Borges' *Ficciones*. Most of Borges' pieces are only a few pages long but completely take you into their world. It isn't just about Argentinian culture. It could be set in ancient history or 19th century France. It's a whole fascinating world beyond your own life. Reading those stories, where often enough the rug is pulled out from under the reader's feet, is so exciting, such fun. Even earlier, around 1959/1960 I'd become interested in Tristan Tzara's poetry and his Dada activities. He collages material and it's more fragmented than Borges and Ashbery, but it has the

same principle. So the taste, the curiosity was there, but Ashbery was the one who sparked me to put it into action.

KC And this helped create a poetry unusual for the local climate. It wasn't a poetry in which somebody is bleating out their happy or sad heart in English quatrains?

LH Not that they are doing harm or frightening the horses but I wanted something else, something which was exciting and pulled the reader in and was more demanding. It wasn't telling a story in a straightforward way. It was telling a story, but not the "look at me, I'm suffering" or "look at me, this, that and the other."

KC The poems 'Summer' and 'The man with blue eyes' are in that first style.

LH Yes—the stuff before that was indistinguishable from what was churned out in London in the early 60s.

KC 'Summer' seems to me typical in that it is very charged—I can't tell you what the feelings are but it seems charged.

LH Looking at it again, which is very strange 42 years later, I can see that there is an intensity there and there are quite a few tussles going on. You've got these little intense scenes shifting round and you've got a parallel world which is benevolent. Dreadful things or loony things are happening elsewhere. You do get these moments of goodness, whether it be in some of the pastoral scenes or a landscape of suburban railway tracks and oil refineries. I guess that also ties in with some of the reading I'd been doing—Dada and early Surrealism, Reverdy's idea of *The Daily Miracle*—of how amazing all the things around you are when you look at them and step back rather than take them for granted. And so, there's that, which is quite positive, and this very intense story too with a lot of sexual experience in it.

KC So the sources and the feeling of the poem, neither are homogenised are they—there is a variance and a mixture all the way through?

LH Yes—and big jumps. About half way through the poem from what seems like a European setting suddenly you are in Mexico and with new railways being built using old Aztec masonry. The railways in themselves are exciting—beautiful structures, but built at a price. Then it moves back, I suppose, to Europe. That might seem a weird jolt not at all to do with the poem, but it has and I guess, because of being encouraged by reading Tzara, that's how it comes out. Why not? Why should I take it out? I want this sort of poetics—to seem to use a whole world—like it's a paintbox . . .

KC You've just described the poetics of the early work, of what at the time you were aware of in your poetry and what was prompting you to write in that way?

LH I guess what I'm saying is bringing together these different elements. The landscape of emotional situations, and a story that is continually shifting—that's accurate.

KC In 'Summer' the lines are quite long. Here and in several of the poems of that time, the long lines generate sensuality as well as a sort of languor, it's relaxed but tense. Were you aware of that then? Do you agree with me? They are very physical poems, Lee. They are very involved with the body, aren't they?

LH Yes—there is the sexual side.

KC No—it's more diffuse than that do you think? It's certainly not for the Puritans.

LH Yes but with the long lines I think that's partly an echo of the idea of story telling, of how you said it's sensual, like being told a story. It's the most basic form of literature. It's why as children

a thing we love most is being told a story. As you get older your stories get, in my case, more chopped up.

KC And the narrative draws the reader or the listener in doesn't it?

LH Yes, and the reason for the long lines is partly to signify that tone and also it's something I became more aware of from Ashbery. He would have long lines and when you would naturally think a line would end with one word, he would intentionally take that word and put it at the beginning of the next line. When you have a neat line ending where you expect it, it creates familiarity in the poem. By breaking the pattern and changing how the poem has to be read you jolt the reader, it makes them alert and so they pay more attention to the language as a whole.

KC It rearranges the thinking doesn't it?

LH Yes—and so they will be more alert, not being lulled by neat packages but trying to avoid anything neat.

KC There are elements of the poem which are sensual and languid and other formal elements which shake the reader, which takes the reader out of the pre-supposed way of reading. So there's quite a lot of push and pull in these poems isn't there?

LH Yes, so the poem is like a bundle of voices. The narrator, possibly the other people who would take over the job of the narration, because there is no one narrator, and at times the reader. There's one bit where it says, "'surely you remember?' / but so long ago." Is that someone talking to another in the poem or is that talking to the reader?

KC Who is talking and to whom is unfixed.

LH Yes, I mean there's that thing of *You*, when I've used the word *You* in a poem. I'm really not good at talking about this but I know someone who is! There is a very good interview with Ashbery.

KC OK—what is it he says?

LH This is a 1972 *New York Quarterly* interview—he says, “The personal pronouns in my work very often seem to be like variables in an equation. *You* can be myself or it can be another person, someone whom I’m addressing, and so can *he* and *she* for that matter and *we*. Sometimes one has to deduce from the rest of the sentence what is being meant, and my point is also that it doesn’t really matter very much, that we are somehow all aspects of a consciousness giving rise to the poem and the fact of addressing someone, myself or someone else is what’s the important thing at that particular moment, rather than the particular person involved, I guess. I don’t have a very strong sense of my own identity and I find it very easy to move from one person in the sense of a pronoun to another and this again helps to produce a kind of polyphony in my poetry which I again feel is a means toward greater naturalism.”

KC OK—I understand that, it sounds to me, I don’t know, Frank O’Hara’s Personism meets John Keats’ negative capability. You’re not convinced about what I’ve said I understand—no? What do you mean by not a strong sense of self—what do you think Ashbery means?

LH I just feel that a strong sense of self can be a hindrance. That it detracts from the relationship between the writer and the reader and it imposes the author’s personality, and in a way that moves into the business of authority which I detest. I don’t think any writing should be an authority rather than a questioning, otherwise it panders to the writer’s vanity.

KC At the same time I do think it touches on negative capability . . .

LH I didn’t say it didn’t . . .

KC . . . an invisible self drawing upon others, which is what Keats means by it.

LH When I say that it's a hindrance, it is, but I can't deny that there's a human being writing this and equally, though I say pronouns are variable, it doesn't necessarily mean I'm not in there somewhere, for sure.

KC That takes me very neatly to my next question. You are writing a poetry that you have described to us in the mid 60s which in some ways is very not like the poetry that is immediately around it. It goes beyond the self, it's not impersonal but goes beyond autobiography. Somebody looking for autobiography in your poetry would come back with some mean pickings wouldn't they? However, we are interested in the autobiography and I know you were born in 1939—I don't know much after that. Just give us a potted version of the young Harwood. Where were you born?

LH I was born in passing in Leicester. My mother had gone to visit her family and I was about a month premature. I should have been born in Chertsey, Surrey. I was quickly hurried back there. I grew up in Chertsey on the Thames, it was a small country town then.

KC During the Second World War?

LH Yes. God this is such a vast subject. Basically, my childhood is, I suppose, what many people of my age and generation would have shared. You are born just before the War and your father goes off when you are about three or four months and, in my case, didn't come back until I was about six, because he was stationed so far away. And so I was brought up in a household with my mother and my grandmother. There was the London bombing and various houses nearby suddenly disappearing overnight. It's odd to say but it was a happy childhood despite this, except I didn't really have my father and my mother was working in a munitions factory so I didn't really see her much. Also my gran was a nurse so I was on my own quite a bit. But

it seemed happy and I remember once when one of the rockets came over and landed in some fields about half a mile away it blew all the windows in and I slept through it and I woke up with the window frame on my bed and glass all over the floor and I still remember the sound of crunching glass as my mother came in the morning, picked me up out of bed and took me down stairs and I was really annoyed that I hadn't been woken up to see the rocket.

KC And you slept through it?

LH For some reason, yes—how bizarre.

KC And where did you go to school and what do you remember of school, Lee?

LH I remember a kind of kindergarten during the war.

KC Because your mother was at work?

LH Yes. She picked me up after she had finished her shift. I think I must have been the last kid to be picked up every day because other mums didn't appear to be working so late and I used to be sat on top of this bookcase by the window and there was a wooden clock to teach us how to tell the time. I would be just sitting there with this wooden clock, waiting. No, I don't want to get nostalgic about this time.

KC But as you say, the experience is typical of your generation..

LH Yes.

KC And that's why it's important.

LH We were okay, we had an allotment, we had vegetables. We got by and you didn't think you were deprived in any way.

KC I don't think it's nostalgia at all.