

Lee Harwood

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

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

Not the Full Story: 6 Interviews (with Kelvin Corcoran)

Translations

Tristan Tzara *Cosmic Realities Vanilla Tobacco Dawnings.*

Tristan Tzara *Destroyed Days, a selection of poems 1943-1955.*

Tristan Tzara *Selected Poems*

Tristan Tzara *Chanson Dada: selected poems*

Tristan Tzara *The Glowing Forgotten : A Selection of Poems.*

LEE HARWOOD

Selected Poems

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Acknowledgements

All of the poems reprinted in this volume have been taken from Lee Harwood's *Collected Poems* (Shearsman Books, Exeter, 2004), with the exception of those in the final section. 'Cloudy Sunday' and 'Comparative anatomy' first appeared in *Shearsman* n° 75/76; 'Frames' was first printed in *Zoland Poetry*; the poems from 'Gifts Received' first appeared in a limited edition collection of the same name from Artery Editions, Hove.

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FOREWORD

These *Selected Poems* range from 1965 to 2007. The titles given to the sections in the contents list generally correspond to the books where the poems first appeared, though not always. Some recent uncollected poems are also included.

Over these years I think, and hope, I've changed in the way I see the world. It would seem natural that there should be a parallel development in my writing. Re-reading these poems, however, I realise there are often repetitions and echoes, insinuations that remain throughout on or under the surface. A reader will soon recognise them, despite shifts in the scenery.

The poems, I imagine, harbour curious stories, questions and explorations, instructions for assembling pictures, declarations of love and other obsessions, elegies, and often enough a collage of all these things. They set off, one hopes, into the unknown or barely guessed at. It's in the reader's hands.

Language is never perfectly reliable but—obvious enough—it's all we have to talk to one another. It's to be used as well as possible, as precisely and clearly as possible, but not to be wholly trusted. The complexity of language and people and "life" is to be worked with, accepted, and all their contradictions to be relished. I learnt this, and ways of mapping it all, early on when still in my teens from reading Ezra Pound, and then a year or two later from Tristan Tzara, Jorge Luis Borges, and John Ashbery. After that the list of writers I'm indebted to spreads far and wide, whether it be the thought and imagination of Jack Spicer or the sharpness and heart of Anne Stevenson or the amused tenderness of Constantine Cavafy. My thanks to them all.

I would also like to thank the editors and publishers who over the years have brought out my books. My thanks too to the editors of the magazines where these poems first appeared. Their work and care is a generous encouragement for any writer. And finally a whole heap of thanks to Kelvin Corcoran, John Hall and Robert Sheppard for helping make this selection. Their advice made this, I hope, a more varied and balanced choice of poems than I could ever have done on my own.

Lee Harwood

CLARET LABEL

The large grey château isolated in the middle of lawns and pastures that extend beyond reason.

A large dark grey building put to the cruel uses its exterior already suggests.

A Gestapo Headquarters—interrogation rooms and cells—the top window on the left almost exactly half way between the end of the building and the main entrance.

Though this is in my imagination in a sun-filled kitchen in the early afternoon in September

where such interrogations could equally happen—husband and wife piling up cruelly logical absurdities, complaints, and accusations while the babies cry in the next room.

Monsters & Co.

The top window on the left of a slum tenement seen from a train window passing through east London—Bethnal Green, Stratford . . .

Stop the train. Step into that room. “Hello, I am Anthony Barnett, Norway’s greatest jazz xylophone player. I saw you through the window. I saw you moving about your room, sitting watching t.v. I had to come to say ‘hello’, to embrace you. We humans must stick together.”

The film breaks at this point. Crackling noises and smoke pour from the improvised projection room. The village priest rushes out threatening the noisy audience to be quiet or else . . . If we sit quiet and still we will be allowed to see the rest of *Sabu the Elephant Boy* with French sub-titles.

A POEM FOR WRITERS

To finally pull the plug on the word machine,
to rise from the chair late one evening
and step back into the quiet and darkness?

The dull white lights of the control-room of
a large hydro-electric dam in Russia
a computer centre in Brighton
the bridge of a giant oil tanker in the Indian Ocean.
Subdued light that reaches every corner
with no variation, tone, or shadow.

To leave the warm desk-light's tent
and step out into the . . .

“I am just going outside and may be some time, Scottie”

Trains rush through the night,
across country through suburbs past factories oil refineries dumps,
the lights from their windows quickly disturbing the dark fields and woods
or the railway clutter as they pass through town,
staring in at the bare rooms and kitchens
each lit with its own story that lasts for years and years.
A whole zig-zag path, and the words stumble and fidget
around what has happened.

To walk out one January morning across the Downs
a low mist on the hills and the furrows coated with frost,
the dew ponds iced up.
The cold dry air.
And the sudden excitement when a flock of partridges starts up
in front of you and whirrs off and down to the left,
skimming the freshly ploughed fields.

“O ma blessure” groan the trees
with the wounds of a multitude of small boys' penknives.

No, not that—
but the land, the musics, the books
always attendant

amongst the foolish rush and scramble for vainglory,
talk or noise for its own sake, a semblance of energy
but not necessity.

Throw your cap in the air, get on your bike, and pedal off
down hill—it's a joy with no need of chatter,
Hello Chris.

BATH-TIME

A motor torpedo boat covered in giant bubbles silently appeared through
the early morning mists. It was only when it was almost upon us
that we could hear the muffled roar of its engines, and then only
faintly.

I have as much knowledge of myself as I do of why I was adrift in that
rubber dinghy in the Malay Straits.

All the books and maps and knowledge give us too little, leave large
blank spaces, 'terra incognita'.

“ . . . citizens who work and find no peace in pain.
I am chains.”

In chained numbness, not confusion, the war boat bears down on me
on us where Educated Summaries are not worth a spit in hell. The
Cambridge Marxists, with large houses, cars and incomes, can
shove it.

“Anarchist Fieldmarshals, Socialist Judges, Dialectic Fuzz, Switched-
on Hangmen, and all other benefits of Correct Revolutionary
Practice.”

I don't need patronage I need something else.

The mists clear before the burning sun, the sea empty and flat as a sheet
of polished metal. The long day ahead

TEXT FOR TWO POSTERS BY IAN BROWN / POSTER 1

It's the vase of tulips and a mirror trick, though this time the vase is not set between facing mirrors but between a mirror and a painting of a mirror with a vase of tulips, and this in turn photographed.

It's the beautifully printed exhibition note in front of a Korean bowl that has been placed on burnt umber hessian. It quotes Bernard Leach's praise of the "unselfconscious asymmetry" of Korean potters, and how nothing in nature is symmetrical, but everything is asymmetrical, a nose not perfectly straight, the eyes not perfectly level.

It's those dreams of perfection, 'the man of your dreams', 'woman of your dreams', 'the budgie of your dreams', 'your dreams come true' to a jarring chorus of cash registers and half-stifled moans.

Again and again and again and again, and the months and years glide by hardly noticed so heavy and dull is the obsession.

to raise your head for one moment clear of this

skies and clouds ahead
and the fields and cities below
as you fly through the sunlight

And below, not looking up,
"Are you going to see the new gorillas?" he asked as we
walked briskly towards the Jardin des Plantes.

A cold dry day in January with mist on the Downs,
frost on the furrows and ice on the ponds.
A flock of partridges suddenly starting up in front of me,
and whirring off to the left skimming the ploughed fields.

but André Gide wrote: "The strange mental cowardice which makes us perpetually doubt whether future happiness can equal past happiness

is often our only cause for misery; we cling to the phantoms of our bereavements, as if we were in duty bound to prove to others the reality of our sorrow. We search after memories and wreckage, we would like to live the past over again, and we want to reiterate our joys long after they are drained to the dregs.

I hate every form of sadness, and cannot understand why trust in the beauty of the future should not prevail over worship of the past.”

/POSTER 2

SLEEPERS AWAKE

from the ‘sensible life’ whose only passion is hatred

A red and black pagoda towers above the chestnut trees
in a Royal Botanic Garden

The lush greens of south London back-gardens
O summer nights when trembling with that ecstasy
our bodies sweat and flood one another’s

Burst forth—sun streams forth—light—
all doors and windows magically thrown open
a hot lush meadow outside
with dark green woods at its edges

turn it another way
These are insurances not repetitions
or the repetitions are only the insurance on

and it all crowds in:

“Nostalgia for the life of others . . . Whereas ours, seen
from the inside, seems broken up. We are still chasing
after an illusion of unity.”

“Separation is the rule. The rest is chance . . .”*

which way to step?

and the dull brutality of monsters as they grind the bones
“forbidden to delight one’s body, to return to the truth of things”*

The clouds part, your hand reaches through—yes
the glow and light in us, our bodies

And below around us—the flint customs house at Shoreham,
the call of a cuckoo as we climb up-hill to the Stalldown stone row,
the wild moor about, and from its edges
the churches, cathedrals, ancient and beautiful things.

Talking to myself

The sweet qualities of our dreams without which . . .

How the wind blows and our hearts ache to follow
the hazardous route the winds follow

6 million Russians
6 million Jews
2 million Poles
1 million Serbs
Gypsies and others

*Albert Camus—*Notebooks*

O,O,O, . . . Northern California

O, rarely fingered jade sat on your blue velvet cushion
in the museum showcase.

O, handsome writing book half-bound in crimson leather
with beautifully marbled edges
sat on your exquisite and highly polished desk.
O, world of unused beauties.

Kick a stone, walk along the beach, kick the sea.
The dapper panama hat gathers dust on the cupboard's top shelf.
Dreams and more dreams. Brightly flowered vines
and the heady scent of eucalyptus trees that
with time is taken for granted and passes unnoticed.

To decorate one's life with sprays of leaves and vases of flowers.
I prepare the vase for you on the marble top of a chest of drawers.
It's just right. Will it please you? Will you notice it?
You did. Returning from your long journey
you enter the house, striding in with deeds done
and love.

That picture fades as the outside world crowds in
now. And your business continues.
My business continues.
The bright clear sunlight illuminates the headland.
A dusty pickup-truck stops outside the village store
and the dogs leap out as the driver enters.
People at the bar across the street watch this
with their usual bemused curiosity.

Someone in crisp clothing drives past on their way
out of town with their radio playing.
Through the open car window
fine phrases from an opera float out:
"What new delights!
What sweet sufferings!"

The dream fades. A rustling of the dry grasses
that edge the lagoon. We lost it.
And the business continues,
the daily life downtown "business as usual".

COAT OF ARMS ON WALL IN ANCIENT CITY

Bears dance to the music, slowly, awkwardly
in the grand piazza.
A thin but sufficient chain keeps them in place.

Grotesque beasts look on,
beasts cobbled together from various spare parts
and men's strange imaginations.
Is that a crocodile or an eroded dragon?
A winged lion or a sphinx?
All the world's plunder cobbled together.

Mists coat the lagoon this evening
as the ferry passes a low barge,
a pleasure launch and a small naval landing craft
on the flat waters.

In the palazzo an evening of decadence
is about to begin and the end is expectantly planned
for systematic and cold debauchery,
whips and black undergarments,
a series of calculated and delightful humiliations,
pains and pleasures.

Has the icon, looted from Cyprus, seen it all before?
The resigned virgin with child
cluttered with necklaces and improbable crowns.
A look of indifference is all we see.
She may sternly pity our fate, or
not even know it. Tough luck!
We'll get by.

We board the throbbing steamer.
Here come the bears hurrying from their last
evening performance and just in time.
"All aboard" someone shouts in Italian.
The splendours fade behind us as
we're cloaked in a sweet velvet darkness.
Ahead is the unseen landing stage,

the sound of crickets and frogs
and a bored bus driver calling to a friend.

The bears troop off and disappear into the night.
Their plans remain ambiguous.

HAND FROM AN EXETER CLOUD

Yes, now the night closes in. Yes, now the fireworks display over the cathedral has ended.

What now? The single bed in the ‘guest room’, the copies of Jules Laforgue’s *Oeuvres complètes* at your head, distant traffic on the nearby main road?

“Is this something new?” asks the clerk
sarcastically.
Not exactly . . .

Dreams of children’s voices heard the other side of a thicket. Dark green tunnels through the bushes and undergrowth. And later the next day leafing through an exhibition catalogue of Elizabethan miniatures—the sudden shock and recognition in seeing one titled “Man clasping a hand from a cloud”.

SUMMER SOLSTICE

Farm boys tramp home aching from the fields.
They know where they're going, though don't
as they plod past the decaying mansion
overhung with dark trees and surrounded by damp undergrowth.
Two more miles to go and then the familiar lit rooms,
the drawers of known possessions, the familiar smells.
They will wash, eat, and go about their evening business.
But it's all far from being that simple and innocent.
Small heaps of possessions litter the landscape.
Funerals are strategically placed throughout the years.
Even rushes of vague but powerful emotions, dumb love
and feelings that cut mazes in the heart.
They pass the darkening hedges and copses
too tired from their labours to care or notice whatever,
though the next morning it could be changed possibly.
In the spacious rooms of the mansion the wind sighs
under the doors along the staircases
from the stone flagged kitchen to the cramped attics.
"Long ago and far away" a story could begin
but leaves the listeners somehow dissatisfied,
nervous on the edge of their chairs leaning forward
in contorted positions.

Waking up one day
they could set off in another direction, fresh and foreign.
They could but seldom do, so cluttered are they
and rightly distrustful of such snap solutions.

The farm boys proceed
to the fields, again, or turn to the factory towns.
There are glimpses caught in the dusky woods
or on a fresh summer dawn of unknown skies,
unforgettable and dazzling in their beauty. But then
the long day stretches ahead. The stirred dreams settle down
with the dust, beyond grasp or understanding.
The unseen night birds calling calling

THE ARTFUL

for Anne Stevenson

A house by a lake surrounded by woods
all reflected in that lake.
Like a small round painting, like a brooch
pinned to a woman's jacket.

This picture—the miniature scene, and
the woman's soft blue tweed lapel.

Mists close in until you can see
nothing but shifting white and grey.

The air brightens and it begins to clear
into sunlight, clear you imagine
of cunning traps and the games that divert
somewhere else other than. And in the sunlight
on a bright hillside, boulders and bracken,
the mottled white crags above, the lakes below
in the distance. Not shaken free
of imagined, but been there, real as
it can be. A copper tint to the land.
Haze. Feel good, moist-eyed, opened up.
As though time suspended, almost. Red gold.

The unknown woman puts on her jacket
and strolls out of the house to the lakeside.
Autumn. No harm done.
The sun catching the polished surface
of her brooch—blue-john or brown agate.

A shepherd checks his sheep as dusk settles
in the mountains. Obscure silhouettes
that act as possible guides to get home,
to touch familiar things, never taken for granted.

WAUNFAWR AND AFTER/

“The collar work begins”

Ferocious gales sweep up the valley.
Heavy snow on the hills and fields.
Water flooding the roads, gushing across.
Sheets of rain slanting over the bleak
moorland, the scree slopes,
the small village post office.

I want nowhere else
but to be here,
whether crouching in a stone windbreak
on a cloud bound summit,
or coming off the slopes battered and soaked
into a dark soft tunnel of forest.
(A strange form of pleasure you may say.)

But just to be here in this place.
The deserted remote valleys
dotted with ruined farms,
hawthorn and rowan growing in their hearths.
Climbing higher to the empty cwm
with its small slashed black lake.
And on up the slopes to the bare rock ridge
and the summits again.
Nowhere else.
It's that simple, almost.

CWM UCHAF

In Brighton someone yells from a window
down into the dark street and . . .

On the moon in a vast barren crater
a rock very slowly crumbles into a fine dust

A fuzz of stars sweeps across the world
partly known and unknown dark and light

across a table top across crowded grey cells
in a fragile bone sphere cracked and shaky

tumbling down though never that elegant or controlled
the stumbling descent through the days' maze

Jerked back by the stars the night sky
pinning us to the ground in glad surrender

The absurd joke painful as a rock blow
sleep though more prolonged sweeps on and over

There is a silence you can almost touch
its pulse lick its fingers though

never complete always a faint ringing in
the darkness

A sighing wind the noise of distant waves
raking a seashore

All put in a box in this cave the
star arms remote embrace

The soft fur of an animal stepping
out of the cave two paces four paws

Then beginning to back back

Under the stars white dots drops
of rich red blood drip onto the floor

In unknown halls bare and functional
as a thick orange bag on a hospital trolley

The faint glitter of the rocks mica the sky
catching the eye stood still almost

The dust the waves going nowhere in particular
a gradual leaking away

ON THE LEDGE

a scratched rock wall.
falling out of life
through glaring light,
no, through dark smudges,
white and grey, snow and ice,
rock. cold air. flashings.

a final thudding stillness.

your body stretched out in a snow patch
beside a long black boulder.

alone on the rock
in this silence. I. then
clawed ice of a continued ascent
weeping shouting alone on the rock.

and you gone silently down
through grey winter air
the mountains we loved

**FOR PAUL/
COMING OUT OF WINTER**

On a bright winter morning
sunlight catching the tops of white buildings
a tree outlined against the sea
a wall of flints

To be able to stop and see this
the luxury of being alive
when the waves crash on the shore
and a fresh wind streams up the narrow streets
A moment like this lightens the darkness
a little, lifts the heart until
you can walk down the hill near careless

How can that be? suddenly slammed up
against a wall by memories of the dead
loved ones completely gone from
this place

Shafts of sunlight cutting through the clouds
onto the everchanging sea below

How many times we discussed the sea's colours
all beyond description words a mere hint
of what's before our eyes then and now