

SAMPLER

*Sonnets*  
*of various sizes*

SAMPLER

Peter Oswald

*Sonnets*  
of various sizes

SAMPLER

Shearsman Books

First published in the United Kingdom in 2016 by  
Shearsman Books  
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](http://www.shearsman.com)

ISBN 978-1-84861-492-5

Copyright © Peter Oswald, 2016.

The right of Peter Oswald 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.

SAMPLER

# Contents

Love all at once – heart bursting into head	9
As I went looking for my love	10
My lover is like Berkshire in the night	11
Love is a medical emergency	12
(Wedding present)	13
Closest, I recognise her least. She breaks	14
(Vows)	15
Carrying one another carefully	16
She's somewhere in the house. I will not go	17
In all this grass there is no other hare	18
My something love, when the dark's hair is down	19
Like walkers passing one another soaking	20
Daughter, the streets have got you and the screens	21
Cold May comes through the window – trembling panes	22
Over the pub roof words like seeds come flying	23
Bales of scrap gold. There is no other word	24
Like a wood pushing through a wood, a carpet	25
A whale sings deep inside your stomach, wakes	26
We who will not die stand beside a stone	27
How can we wake you up? You sleep so well	28
(The dead)	29
Bells running over their beads, over the hills	30
Actually skeletons are not bad looking	31
Owlshriek: scrape of a sword withdrawn	32
Poet, throw death out. If you do not throw him	33
A naked woman, lovely as the night	34
(Speech.)	35
At last, the great Third Reich victorious	36
A fawn's been blinded by the birds. Beware	37
The falcon, in discussion with the dove	38
There are no lions in the stubble fields	39

Now day has exorcised the woods. The breeze	40
Whole-day-long journeys, hours of fields and towns	41
Sun	42
(The wind)	43
The clouds are copying the trees and cows	44
Six foot of intricate machinery	45
Here is my hand, a future map they say	46
(Westminster Bridge)	47
One day a song will burst into my brain	48
Often I've tried to settle in this place	49
Ladywell has gone up into the sky	50
David stood firm against a storm of days	51
Waiting for the renewal of my passport	52
Elderly summer in her Ascot hat	53
(Sleep)	54
(Spring)	55
Now summer in her loveliness is here	56
Rain falling out of heaven happily	57
Now listen in to the periphery	58
The wind that shakes the ilex tree shakes me	59
Dawn is a kingdom just beyond the world	60
(gimme some truth)	61
England. I think some clear and simple thing	62
Take away their mountain – see them scraping	63
This year, as last year, stitchwort, I fear	64
(Hedges)	65
(Scalpay)	66
God bless the consonants that call up trees	67
(After Dante)	68
(After Dante)	69
My love is in the world and I am free	70

In a letter, Hopkins wrote that the English sonnet is too short, because Italian vowels are longer than English vowels, and the Italian is the original and perfect sonnet. So in this collection you will find one extended sonnet – Les Murray wrote that an example of ‘sprawl’ (which is something he approves of) is a sonnet in its twenty-first line. You will also find some sonnets from the Italian of Dante, crammed into tight English vowels. Some sonnets that don’t rhyme. Some in the rhyming-couplet form of John Clare. And some poems of fourteen lines which are probably not sonnets at all.

(These poems were written over a period of thirty-two years. They are not arranged in chronological order.)

SAMPLER

SAMPLER



Love all at once – heart bursting into head,  
Every not yet and now and finished instant:  
Would crack the brain, like as if all the dead,  
Future and past, and those dying this moment,  
Sucked, great star-cloud, into a garden shed,  
Or every rose-seed crammed into one case,  
Growing one rose, with the whole world, its bed,  
Squeezed in the talon roots. The human race,  
Its final number, has to be outspread,  
Like refugees on a long road, flung dots  
Of difference, fields not murdered into bread;  
And roses have to grow in separate spots;  
And I have got to love you bit by bit:  
Flashes of scraps, like windows headlight-lit.

SAMPLER

As I went looking for my love,  
On a wet bank I slipped – a stripe  
Of damp on my left cheek, a swipe  
From a low branch sagged in the wet  
Of its dead freight, not dropped yet  
Into the litterings that spread  
Orange-brown circles, pools of shed  
Prototype souls, or skins of thought  
Not wrong but just used up. Hooks caught  
Then, in the flapping of my jacket,  
Sharp rose-memories, and my right boot  
Sank, and I, reeling, dragged at it,  
And sinking flailed and flailing sink  
As through the wet wood weave my loose footprints.

SAMPLER

My lover is like Berkshire in the night.  
She stretches out like Slough beneath the stars.  
Her veins are lamplit sidestreets where warm cars  
Pass on a wave of light from light to light.  
Between her towns dark woods bow to the moon,  
But total darkness you will never find,  
Always some vestige of the afternoon  
Keeps shining like the daydreams of the blind.  
She has some heaths where people never go,  
Or if they do, at certain moonless times,  
Think themselves ghosts revisiting their crimes,  
And feel eternity's dead heart beat slow.  
But just when she's convinced them that they're dead,  
Morning gets up again in Maidenhead.

SAMPLER

Love is a medical emergency,  
Cell-overload of electricity,  
Heavy intensifying mist of light  
Mixing the mind's eye up with the eyesight.  
A sudden swishing secrecy of screens,  
A drunken disappearing of between,  
And you are opened in a necessary  
Ancient suspension of all modesty.  
But you are two and this is a magician  
Mending them in the mask of a clinician,  
No, a witchdoctor with a smiling knife  
Cutting towards the noose around your life,  
As it hangs in the balance. First in crisis  
Joins us, and then in crisis separates us

SAMPLER

(Wedding present)

That was the day the sun just went on rising  
Into the light; the thrush, in its dawn singing,  
Out-topped its highest note until unheard ones  
Shattered the windows of the chapel and  
Of the skyscrapers flashing tangerine,  
And the glass flew straight up into the stars;  
Mercury burst from the barometers  
In bullet streaks; tall-stretching sycamores  
Were pumas sharpening their branchy claws  
On the sky's ice; hawks shrank into the stratosphere,  
Mountains grew mountains as if bodybuilding –  
And the most near pressed close to the most far.  
Then the whole thing snapped shut with a string's twang  
Into this silver locket – here you are.

SAMPLER

Closest, I recognise her least. She breaks,  
Glass of a river when it melts through rocks,  
Shatters into a crowd of characters,  
Dark glitterers and silent chatterers,  
All of her selves, all her past lives, her strata,  
Orange leaving dashing to a brink of water,  
All claiming this one moment, shades who crowd  
To the trench filled with honey and hot blood,  
Slowed by Odysseus with his blade, lost man  
Hardened to make them answer one by one.  
Who are you when you are a swarm of bees,  
Split from the hive, between localities,  
Who, when the next is found, sink back unseen  
Into the sleeping person of the Queen

SAMPLER

(Vows)

This is no shapeless patch of territory.  
We travelled here by random roads for certain,  
but it's a place, it is a certain country,  
and we have earned a certain recognition,  
since it was us who chanted out the borders,  
marking the flowing map of what we move in.  
So the dark field I climb is you, the village  
beyond, in rising light, all have love's features.  
Which are a cage of light to free the eyes,  
or water to the seal released, who touches  
at every stroke, no edge, no see-through limit  
with faces pressed against. So he abandons  
triangulating fear with death and failure,  
and hate's co ordinates all prove inaccurate.

SAMPLER

Carrying one another carefully  
Over the stones, each brimful of the other,  
And careful not to spill, exchanging spoonfuls,  
Like children feeding one another medicine –  
Be careful how this concentration  
On the midpoint, leaves free the fringe of vision  
For half-seen things to enter, bright invasion  
Not border-checked by thoughts, but flooding  
As through the eyes of leafless Eve and Adam,  
Accumulating insect-jewels, feather-crowns  
That will be hard to carry later on.  
Beware you bearing one another's bones,  
Like flowers, the later limping over stones,  
Laden with treasures and without a helper.

SAMPLER