Peter Philpott
Also by Peter Philpott:

The Bishop Stortford Variations (Great Works Editions, 1976)
What Was Shown (Ferry Press, London, 1980)
Some Action Upon The World (Grosseteste, Leeds, 1982)
Dammit these words are making faces
At me again. I hope the faces
They make at you have more love.

WS Graham,
from “ Implements in Their Places”
New Collected Poems
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(a Broadcast of Radio Alterity) 97
IN THE PRESENT HISTORIC TENSE
A Serial Poem of the West

Alcmaeon says that men die because they cannot attach the beginning to the end – a clever saying if you take it to have been meant loosely and do not try to make it precise.

( pseudo-Aristotle, Problem 916933-37,
from ed. Jonathan Barnes,
I OF THE WEST

On the grey beach
Men hammer madly at
The talismans of a lost past
Unknown but believed in
Compulsively shattering
The secret’s not released
But broken.

Purchase and achievement spread it
That perfect find repeated
As the miracle of commodity
Swopping it if lucky
Colour postcards of the stars
The piledriver hammering
Red rusty walls
Against a glass-green sea
Bright under the breakwater
Sucking and pulling stones
Until the town and all the people
Lost as the dinosaurs and the ammonites
No one wants to find us

Our secret will be safe
Unbroken inside concrete boulders
Red soft pebbles of bricks
Old worn glass and slivers of plastic
Spreading out and losing themselves
Against the grey black sagging cliffs
In the town of the old men
Quiet and friendliness
Grow in little gardens
Bright flowers around the lawns
Red bean-flowers climbing at the back
The soft fruit murmuring to itself
Under a flawless eggshell sky.

This whole thing hurts:
It pushes in, soft
Furnishing tucks caught and pinned
With great care, love and neatness.
The pins are those
That murder saints and insects
Silently, quietly and like a friend
Under this flawless soft blue sky.

It hurts because it is inevitable
Irresistible, slow and unwanted
The whole body tumorous, or
Swathed in black bugs, while tea
Cups clatter and soft voices reminisce
In rooms pumped out of air.
The sky is still blue.

In the town of the old men
The old dogs, old food, old houses
Old words drift like aphids
Sparkling in perpetual sunlight
And settling, now welcomed
Into their places, quiet
Friendly and wanted at last.
And at this place
Flocks of jackdaws
Like a plague

Telling us messages
Over and over
Like the waves

“You can’t win
You will get old
Die like everyone else”

These wise birds
Live everywhere here
Like the people

The town and
The bare rocky valleys
Like gorges, dead lakes

Where the river fell out
It dried
Piled like rock

Ruins and legends
All false, impossible
Like we knew

What the birds tell us
Eyes black beads in white
Like automata
Or like some
Wisdom burst out
A dreadful warning

Black bodies flying
Into night, sky
And sea
The familiar green world
Beyond the hill opening
Into heaviness, old lawrentian words
Sprouting up and pushing
Fecund, heavy and burgeoning:

The familiar green world
Beyond the one we know
Tread upon but opening
Behind it
Here, now

The familiar green world
Beyond
A child’s picture
Of the wild world
Opening out around

The familiar green world beyond
Any one spot
Only comings into growth
And dying in a dance
Opening to this

Familiar green world
Beyond
The bus promised Hardy country
Slow and dirty, faintly melancholy
With the abandoned air of all public things

Distant views across also possible
Drifts of time and vapour allowing
But never a visit:

The buses stopped before the heights
And you were lost in a dirty town
Returning always to the familiar haunts

The nearer edge is the safer
Can't undo what is cut, not cut except
Nightmare fantasies.

Going back to the familiar green world
Beyond the familiar green places
That aren't the world but a world

Haphazard and torn, unconvincing
And boring as posters in buses
With the abandoned air of all public things
The road runs between water
To the horizons grey reflective skies
Like nature’s way: something vast

Impersonal and beautiful, regular
Predictable as language, reflective
Meaning too that underneath

It’s not the sky but muddy grass
Punctuated by consonants
We all know this

But love the infinite sheens of surfaces
All you need for reflection
Can’t stop it or understand

Meaning like water
Doesn’t go away
But slowly returns

Can’t keep it out
Stretching
To either horizon
We inhabit old films
Black and white westerns glimpsed over the sundays
Family entertainment
The latest british film
Patriotic, stiff and half humorous at least
Deprecating fatally itself and us

Everything switches from under to overplay
Like mad relatives
Threatening impossible people Dad works for
Teachers seen out of school
Like travesties of the real people they are
Threatening or helpful
We also inhabit

And shops that don’t exist
Grocers making up orders
Drapers and ironmongers
Quiet respectable places
Where you were known and
Everyone knows you as the bell
Rings, a real bell

Like the sound of the fire engine
Everyone gets out to watch
The double show:
Getting to it
And then it rushes off clanging
But it won’t come back
Stuck in the memory
A faded land
We all really inhabit
Make it our own
It gets to know us and to love us
Each detail
Unless lost or broken
Slowly reappearing
Sharpens
Parts hazy or insecure
What is a screen memory
And how different from what you are told
Was so?

Imagine a field flooded and iced
No action as dangerous as skating
But the pleasures of walking and breaking

The ice bubbled, cracked and refrozen
Filthy with mud and grasses
Sheets of it covering the fields
Is this

Real or a trick? The ice
Fractures, cold dark fluid under
Welling up and recovering.
It freezes

Then vanishes
The next day.
The wind in the willows
Sliding in from the north
Invariably painful, cold

Playing among ruins
Abandoned refuges
Little hills above the floods

A slight natural advantage
Insufficient to stop
The wind or people

Abandoned towers
Settlement traces and hearths
Swept over just by the wind

Moving the withies
Cold enough to bring pain
Cut to the bone

Abandoned stones
Broken beams and engines
Looking out

Over a conquered country
No reason to stay
The places were left

For the floods and the wind
And the slow abandoned decay
Twisting structures like memories

Blown about like
A field of withies
Under the wind.