

Peter Riley was born in Stockport in 1940. His education was at Stockport Grammar School, Pembroke College Cambridge, and the Universities of Sussex and Keele, and he has lived since in the south-east of England, Denmark, the Peak District, Cambridge, and Hebden Bridge. His first book of poetry was published in 1969. His poetry has always pursued the intersection of diurnal and exceptional experience, the commonplace and the potential, seeking to inhabit the route where language, on a loose rein, leads the author towards the unexpected recognition. It is also a poetry of result, personal, political, and historical, so it does not exhort and it does not decry: it stands witness. While much of it is a pure extension of the local, Riley sometimes takes up the technique of describing an elsewhere – a foreign, unknown place, a prehistoric grave, a very new or very old music and asking it to declare its hidden messages and singing its song. His several books of prose have worked out some of these concerns in studies of Transylvanian village music, travel notes in Romania, English village carols and improvised music. Since 2012 he has been the poetry editor of *The Fortnightly Review* (online) where the purpose of his reviewing has been to establish a way of describing the appearance and results of poetry without recourse to any of the closed or parochial vocabularies. His poetry is itself the central and generative point of all these possible avenues, and has ventured into intense compaction and expansive narration, hop-skip-jumps and immense rambles, always returning sooner or later to the known percept, the only workable meeting place.

The two volumes of this collection include all the poetry up to 2017 which he wishes to see preserved, and some which he does not. Something like a tenth of its contents has never been published previously.

SAMPLER

Peter Riley

Collected Poems

SAMPLE

*Volume 1*

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#### NOTE TO THE READER

Untitled poems are headed by three asterisks, those which are parts of groups  
or sequences by a single asterisk, or bullet. Dates are those of first separate  
publication, unless this is greatly distanced from time of writing.

#### COVER

Abandoned mineshafts in the Great Flat Lode (mineral rocks  
under the Carn Brea, south of Camborne, Cornwall).  
Image by courtesy of Dt Keith Russ.

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I.

Poems: London  
1962-1965

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## Where Was I?

Sipping hot chocolate in a shop window  
and the 13th Century dementing outside,  
my friend Michael, who will wear  
a grey plastic mac to anywhere on earth,  
visibly chuckled, his forehead seemed  
to sprout architraves we very nearly  
missed the train.

In Berlin we met a girl  
who only painted fish and took  
the professorial Richard home with her.  
In Koblenz on the other hand  
Nick got in with a very  
smart set who didn't have walls  
or beds or something.

We drew lots. I ended up with  
a small cripple called Lorenz  
with one hand and a hook, and  
they said, "I hope I don't get  
the black dwarf" and I did.  
He collected toy soldiers  
and was going to write novels.  
Totally kind.

# Privately

Earthly creature by your  
kindness more future

than the stars: we  
lose ourselves north

and south and in our  
ecstasy forget, as if

travelling. A light  
shines from the earth that is

not reflected, a line  
unfades over the dark

plotted fields cutting our  
unwillingness to be:

we are, our senses parade  
the quaking systems by

fleshlight, meeting  
head-on a law

of movement in love.  
A love of movement in law.

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## All Saints

By day we walked the city and planned eating. By night we made love and slept. A part of Manchester I'd never known well previously but Tony Connor lent us his "bachelor" room which was a fairly bare space on the second floor of an old office block, not now extant. It had a window out the back over the rooftops of that shabby and about-to-be-redeveloped urban sector, which at several early mornings threw up a yellow infusion of town-haze, in which the dark blocks sat. There was dust everywhere and one naked light bulb. It was our first domestic act ever to go to Woolworths and purchase for, I think, 1/-, a plastic shade for it, pink as I remember. It was Christmas. The twisting stairs up to the room shifted and groaned every time we used them. You stood in the room naked, a black kitten staring out of your arms. There was nowhere to cook or even heat a kettle of water but it was warm because Tony had bust the lock on the gas meter some time previously and we fed the same shilling through again and again – no one had come to read this meter in the last five years, he said. We took our meals in a cheap café along the road at All Saints, which also does not now exist. I record the adequacy of living, with no excursions and no justifying work. The furthest we got was The Manchester Museum, about half a mile away, where we spent an excessive amount of time in the netsuke collection, which also does not now exist, and ignored most of the rest. The labour was one of calm close attention.

## High Lane 1964

Snow arrived the day after Christmas,  
carpeted the roadway and mooned  
outside our window all day.  
There was light on the hills  
and blue-black lines where hedges ran.

The light of the world lay  
on the dark soil,  
the king sat quietly among trees  
willing at any time to  
dissolve away with no fuss,  
conscious of a job well done,  
smiling his January smile,  
promising to return.

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III.

Love-Strife Machine  
1969

*Note. Love-Strife Machine* was in four sections of which sections 1 and 4 are printed here. The poems in sections 2 and 3 have been dispersed into the chronological and topographical orders in this collection.

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## Poems Written on 11th May 1968

\* \* \*

And now he swings over to the bitter left  
and the other man comes up behind  
this could put Blackpool back in the 3rd division  
or me right off the map,  
    these constant manoeuvres

Cutting a hillside into terraces  
has something more to it than supply,  
more to it than fun  
    or cheating at the supermarket.

The succession of rain and sunshine  
wears the structure down  
to a desperation resembling pain,  
love, hate, aren't in it –  
work: to make it at least feasible  
that the lines should intersect the way they do  
    on the map of it all.

The earth so sweetly goes on without us.

\* \* \*

What condolence the earth has,  
the long straight valley up to  
Jacob's Ladder in thickening light  
blaze of subsoil on the fellside  
a flame at the head of the valley,  
earthly beacon.

I came in the world's evening  
alone, the attendant creatures  
sent home, and face to face, clawing  
at the scree, working the bone  
knowing this stone  
also as a city  
I underwrite.

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\* \* \*

To cut notches in the  
green ridge was one way of saying  
w/ chalk between the teeth  
nothing to this down-land village its  
amateur, dramatic, society.

The porous white underlay,  
barren, enfolds so much  
weather not just at weekends.

Husbandry of the dead  
notched into the skyline  
above the far from  
dependable condition of meadows –  
the white: the stars: the stone, to give  
a straight answer.

The cliff road over the ridge to Brighton  
and nothing holds us, even  
by car, at that speed  
away from the light in the ground.

\* \* \*

To blaze through language as if blazing through  
life got all burnt-out a built-in  
defence structure is too expensive

(that stone house  
fermenting and rotting in the valley  
fermenting and rotting in the valley

the valley screams as it rushes past  
any world-image  
broken.

\* \* \*

O our intimacies  
torn apart to the uttermost  
ends of the earth and sky  
in this furore  
carried off by sea and air  
wrenched into music,

fulsome and beautiful  
turned bitter in starlight.

We agree, we give ourselves  
to the weather.

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\* \* \*

I am from language and will return to language  
& no one will know  
what else I might have been.

Storm waves blot out the lights  
along the seafront of Hove and Brighton  
not the back streets of Manchester or  
network of estate roads south of  
Stockport not there the  
same wind curves across the land  
tearing thick grass on the  
Derbyshire moors / I wasn't there.

The centre of all this tumult  
this plastic material woven into  
the rocks and meteorology  
of the continental shelf  
a morphosis the colour of blood  
and winter sunsets out of  
dreams of limestone consolidates, into

a device capable of speech and silence that can  
hold the world in a syllable  
for good or ill.

\* \* \*

How can they live  
wedged into the curve of the embankment  
as if the threat were not personal  
& febrile extension served  
against the creatures of fire?

\* \* \*

The universe is not contained  
in this machine;  
this machine is contained in the universe  
is how it could go with some honour

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\* \* \*

Or the house is a mountain  
and the room a cave  
open into a remoteness  
measured  
in the flight of birds.

V.

Poems: Denmark  
1969-1973

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\* \* \*

Sky streaked with rain and wind  
weighs on the dull fields far into  
distance, birds fly over the pond.  
Your shoulder ahead of me, your  
soft grey scarf in the vast cold landscape  
that spreads round us all the time  
like a helpless guide.

\* \* \*

Snow is falling. Are we still  
as we were and shall we stay?  
Who can say? My heart  
packed into your hands  
knows roughly where we are.

Apples, cow bells, tin-openers and silk scarves  
piled up in the hall. What we were  
has just arrived. Do we want it?

\* \* \*

Through the day's obscurity she burns,  
through failed languages and the constant  
drone that penetrates the window-frames  
she burns like a lamp in the night  
somewhere close to the sea.

She burns like a red fire  
beyond parked lorries at the roadside.

## Blåbærvej

1.

Eight rows of small one-storey houses, screened by hedges, hollyhocks, small pines, snow scattered, and us foreigners.

2.

Distant woods, lines of pollard willows across snow fields without limit.

3.

Slightly raised horizon with trees, cold wind and snow direct from Germany.

4.

Empty fields, fields of snow. Nothing moves, nothing emerges, temporary home.

5.

Abandoned gardens on the edge of the town, black and red shrubs in snow, white powder blown onto the road.

6.

I cycle out before dawn, sound of dynamo echoes from roadside hedges clogged with slush it slips and dims.

7.

Northern country, far from old home, post takes four days, edge of a harder history. Wondering and sometimes it works.

8.

Every morning I take the snow roads by bicycle  
think of all the boots that have trodden this frozen ground  
an undemanding job.

9.

Underground hot-water pipes go  
by the side of the pond. Passing  
birds make the most of it.

10.

Dark with snow outside  
beating against the windows we  
laugh at each other.

11.

Clumps of snow hang  
on the bushes outside. The radiator hisses.  
Stay indoors all day, listen.

12.

My breath forms a patch of frost on the lapel of my coat.  
Again I cycle before dawn in a white darkness  
about my business.

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VI.

The Linear Journal

(1973)

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## Part One

1.

[*Tarascon-sur-Ariège*]

Someone touches my shoulder and **bang** this extraordinary thing clapped in my face full of trees buildings and a river I can't begin to think about coping with ah these, the Central Gardens of your presence, your image, that I hardly know...

A fixed-term loan of variegated parklands known as "continuing to exist" or all of the past and all of the present "Have fun," they say, "Goodbye." Goodbye goodbye. Our home is totally unmade, we start departing.

And here we all are, sweaty with trust, clutching our licenses on the corner. We flutter we continue to exist we line up we break our pencils in the car door, the wood splinters, we are moved, we take up our memory-bags and away.

My regard, of you, takes the form of a band of adolescents in shorts setting out on an alpine ramble overburdened with tents and calamine lotion disoriented and thinking, for the first time of wine.

Out of this scramble no clarity emerges no government no textbook no map though the light is everywhere we go.

2.

[*Niaux, Capoulet*]

O my eyes hurt and the bottle  
is cooling in the stream.  
The desired condition flattens itself on the wall,  
textual erosion at the river-bend  
and calcium accretion, we have  
madrigals of love and war  
set up in a clearing by the road.

Now there is a hard opaque layer  
over all that transportation,  
the furthest dark nick of cavern  
pulsing through the night sky.  
Intently, our madrigals stand in the  
gloaming: green and furiously small, they attract  
flies and small groups of homeless seeking rest.

O my eyes hurt and a hard opaque layer  
is cooling in the sky,  
the desired condition fastens itself on my skin –  
sexual light on the road and  
cancelled glory bring us  
crashing to a future state.  
We creep into our madrigals and die.





4.

[El Serrat

Please don't tell me about your life.  
The innkeeper is very pleased to have us here  
or rather bemused and the waterfall  
does not disturb his rest. Someone  
is singing through the ache of  
tiny cobbled streets and in the hot dusk  
the whole binding of the landscape  
folds over, shut. The song  
does not disturb his rest. The bottle is half  
full I pass it round. We are still here:  
they threatened us with cosmic stature  
and moral rectitude by turns but  
we took the short cut down and settled  
grumbling in the clear but thick air round about.  
The financial inadequacy of our shoes  
made epic excursions a burden hard  
to bear and we took our coffee  
delicately, in two-handled cups.  
For these are honeymoon tents, and the Asian lights  
are thus authentic: these are the first steps out  
from solitude into two, the social flare.  
Then you fell over.  
I laughed. It wasn't drink but  
poetry and the echo of war.  
As a matter of fact I find things  
impossible, day by day.