

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.

Peter Riley

Collected Poems

SAMPLE  
Volume 2

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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), Western section looking North  
West — towards South Condurrow, Tolcarne, Grenville, and Basset Mines.  
Image by courtesy of Dr Keith Russ.

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SAMPLER

SAMPLER

XIV

Poems, Cambridge (i)

SAMPLER

(1985-2000)

# Saint Louis' Island

*First version*

Again the bright label suspended in the sky  
the new light burning in the old walls. Stone  
carves the water: neither an attraction nor  
a privilege but a mercantile success, –  
a job of work. Water encrusts the stone  
with tokens of twinhood, symmetrical facets  
streaming in the river wind, a place that  
cannot sink to what it has become.

Baudelaire lived here then moved to outer hell.  
In memory of Berlioz I carry the heart monstrosity  
this bright morning through the wet streets and  
over a bridge onto the stone crown. Aren't I also  
the disqualified lover of vanishing states?  
Aren't we all? Beams and signals hover and cross,  
the wide eye of the street dweller calling to  
the vertical fantasia of state O my lost brother!

Our forehead mansions, our genital kitchens, skin  
to skin we read our histories to the world  
and fortune is what we dare to ask, not for the  
self, that sore, for the life. The vane  
skreaks in the wind tossed off the cathedral,  
the shops open and tense like bees in amber  
and fast in the new day where first and simple  
things are right, be grateful for every other.

## Place Dauphine

I sit in the quiet place at ten p.m. A few people playing boules among the trees by the amber lighting, a dog or two being walked. A triangular square of 17th Century housing with the river beyond it still capable of including a sewing shop for the locals. I eat *un sandwich grecque* with a beaker of red wine I carried down from my room in Hôtel Henri IV which is OK but you need to be at the front, I had a view of drainpipe formations so I came down here to the public place, in the gentle wind that follows the river, rustling the leaves...

...guard our declaration, devolved to a common purpose not any old common purpose but a common purpose held in the indolent moment such as this. Like a game, but not one, like a recognised good in a casual emplacement, an instant of historical success. I love this place. Baudelaire, come back from outer hell.

SAMPLER

## Aria with Small Lights

*Late one summer evening in 1997 I walked out onto the hillside at the back of an Italian mountain village, and soon after I'd passed the last house noticed a glow in the air ahead of me among conifers, which proved to be the small village cemetery. The glow was from the lights on the graves, some of them candles but mostly small electric lights of the kind we use for Christmas trees. The cloud base was almost on the ground and the light although slight was dispersed into it as a luminous mist. I walked up to the gate and stopped. In the following poem this action of approach is repeated, by my reckoning, thirty times, in almost every stanza, in many different ways but always as an approach to a space which is not entered.*

SAMPLE

In an ordinary life I walked one night  
on the high ridge top, Vitiana, great valley  
of the Serchio north of Lucca. I walked,  
nobody about, late evening, stone ginnels  
and steps, enormous toads and fireflies, warm  
darkness, I walked up behind the village.  
There was a glow round a corner. In the hand  
of the night haze I wasn't anyone, I had  
no history, some kind of foreigner under a wall.

And anyone could become this. There was a light  
dispersing into the darkness above a gate in a wall,  
a glow hovering in the space I walked towards,  
nameless and unknown under lit windows,  
on small tracks past the top of the village. Harm  
strapped to my back as it was a needed message  
I walked towards, a diagnosis. It was a land I  
petitioned to enter at the custom shed but had  
no language, no history of known good at all,

Because I refused to be reminded and might yet  
meet a new mind in a night glow hovering tall  
over me in the under branches of a few low trees,  
not moving at all but hanging there like police notices  
in an occupied city, the blue light you have to turn  
under and in the door to bow before the empty page  
and ask if you might be considered worthy to stand  
to the side of this country, under the wall, with no bad  
words spoken against you, the pure eyed calf in its stall,



Standing there while the cemetery glows, and hides its bite.  
When I reached the gate in the wall it became further  
to what was in front of me than all I had known, the cost  
of continuing, because it was a town and nothing else,  
a town with all its lights below me alive and burning  
through the night, it was the very town of death  
busy about its businesses, telephoning across the land,  
balancing its currencies against its goods and I had  
nothing to offer it. I had nothing to offer it at all.

I was halted before it, I was in a life in the night  
not worth telling while echoes of my father  
still clung about me. We were living in a hut  
or cottage off the village square somewhere. Thence  
we walked hence we loved there we drank the singing  
wine. In the early evenings the people who were  
really there sang in the square gathered in a band.  
There were flesh hooks in their songs, there were knives  
to cut life out, there were eyes fastened to the wall,

The walls that hang over you with small lights  
in small windows near their summits. I'd rather  
shrink to a blob of sweat on the road under that  
towering domus than claim a thing I never so  
much as lived a week in. Or be a ghost entering  
people's houses quietly through the closed door,  
a thread of ink through lives, out the back and  
walk on up to the cemetery, whose lights are knives,  
at which day trades recoil, though gentle and small.

The colourless lights, burning in the night  
like points of certainty in a page of weather  
like the only certain thing left us, that  
message from a great distance across the snow  
and ice of death to this warm night burning  
with one meaning. Which if I could stress forth  
on the tables of pasture I'd be able to stand  
the silence. I can't stand the silence, the sad  
messages reaching no one at all,

The vacuum at the desk across which no fight  
and no love can pass, and is set there for  
us to make some moment of, and know a lot  
less. Leaning over the gate I ceased to know  
where love can hide, someone's name burning  
like a fag-end on the path, and remain sure  
of the pavement under all lives. The walled  
garden with the lights of nothing on the ground  
was the end of my thin days in liberty hall.

So I stepped no further forward than I might  
and there were fireflies coding hope and loss:  
switching on and off, hovering in and out  
of the bean frames on the rich hillside, and slow  
toads moved with infinite patience and no harm  
on the village steps under the dim lamps. The dark space  
behind the church had a lit shrine in the wall that fed  
the roots of separation. Where are you all this grand  
pulp of living night so educative and tall?

XV

Excavations

(1995/2004)

SAMPLER

SAMPLER

## Preface

These are: meditations / constructions on 19th century excavation reports of the contents of prehistoric burial mounds in northern England, mostly of the period now thought of as an uninterrupted development from Neolithic to Early Bronze Age centred *circa* 2000 BC, with emphasis on the apparent funerary disposition and orientation of the body and its parts, and other internal features, in relation to each other and to the whereabouts of the tumulus. The archaeological evidence is sometimes given within the text, sometimes not. The primary sources for parts One and Two, Mortimer and Greenwell, who both worked in the Yorkshire Wolds, are as given in the headings and notes. A “wold” is a plateau-like area of high ground in a curved chain of chalk hills, uncultivated (wold = wild) until the early 19th Century. The appendix, ‘Dioscuria’, arises from the excavation of a tumulus in the Peak District of Derbyshire, by Thomas Bateman.

The reports are taken as they were found. A modern archaeologist might attach greater weight to the effects of soil shift, redistribution or destruction of burials by subsequent burial or by other forms of intervention, such as burrowing rodents, etc., and would also want to consider the results of loss of flesh by exposure of the corpse for a long period prior to burial. But no amount of cautionary rationalism can invalidate some of the amazing things found by the old excavators under those grassy hilltop mounds.

I feel these pieces can be read in various ways, according to the reader’s inclinations or experience of modern poetry, from pure text to monologue. My own preference is to read the piece whenever possible as a kind of *choros* sung and danced over the exhumed remains, as at that point near the end of many of the Greek tragedies when a screen is drawn back revealing a tableau of death (empty figures and masks, the actors from which are now survivors in the foreground). If so, it is a Chorus often striving between lamentation and celebration, whose members speak together in different tongues from different places and times, offers of harmony bought in fragments and the relics of a common humanity authenticated by a common fate.

## Technicalities:

*Italics* about 90% represent quotation from the archaeological sources, usually fragmented and not necessarily exact, but there is a 10% anarchic principle within which they can also be anything else. This proportion is greater with **bold**, which basically represents quotation (or feigned quotation) from old texts, the majority 16th or 17th centuries lyrics in English.

Each piece is numbered with my own number to the left, and the number the excavator gave to the tumulus on the right (for some reason Mortimer usually represented the single century as “C” while otherwise using Arabic numerals – perhaps this had some connection with his profession of corn chandler). A number such as XXI/8 (or 273K) represents the burial or deposit numbered 8 (or K) in the tumulus numbered XXI (or 273) (Greenwell’s and Mortimer’s systems respectively).

## Abbreviations:

OGS = original ground surface (i.e. the ground surface upon which the tumulus was built and into which the subterranean elements were dug, not necessarily lower than the present ground surface).

An indication such as NW-SE indicates the orientation of an object: lying north-west to south-east. If the object is a human body the position of the head is given first. NE/SE indicates a body lying with head to north-east, facing south-east (therefore on its left side), though this relationship is normally spelled out. Cremated remains can also be oriented when the deposit of ashes was formed into a longitudinal shape rather than a circle or a scatter.

# Distant Points

*Excavations*  
Part One, Book One

From the Researches of J.R. Mortimer  
in the Yorkshire Wolds

SAMPLER

SAMPLER



I.

I

the body in its final commerce: love and despair for a completed memory or spoken heart / enclosed in a small inner dome of grey/drab-coloured [river-bed] *clay, brought from some distance* and folded in, **So my journey ended** moulded in the substance of arrival **I depart** *and a fire over the dome and a final tumulus of local topsoil* benign memorial where the heart is brought to witness the exchange: death for life, absence for pain, double-sealed, signed and delivered – under all that press released to articulate its long silence, long descended • tensed wing | spread fan | drumming over the hill.

2.

C39

folded in river clay, the boat on the hilltop / lying East-West facing upwards *the right hand on the right shoulder, the left arm across the body* gradients of sleep, to die, to dream, to mean – *beyond his feet to the East a row of three small circular pits or stake-holes* dawn trap as the compass arc closes southwards and the heart is secured by azimuth, all terrors past: **She only drave me to despair** / dead child, cancelled future in a satellite cloak hovering to SE. Yet the loss, folded into history, sails adroit in the clay ship over commerce and habit, bound for (to) this frozen screen where [cursive] we don't live, but do (love) say, and cannot fail.

3.

233

who) *crouched at a right angle, head to East facing North, right arm doubled back, hand on face, left arm bent at a right-angle, arm across body* – armature of memory and affection, relinquishment of wish – squared in his own frame **perish in despair | die for the fair** and other (wares, treasures, trash) So closely the arctic weather becomes his word, and his lost fortune rings the horizon, armored in latitude **that most rare brest** against the warm, denying thought.

4.

6

South: destroyed children. We turn our backs; only the North is kind.  
The forged cold.

5.

18

Upward chevron on the shoulder-pack, the stars between dogs' heads  
(Orion's eyes set to vengeance) **suspended heart** attaining meaning |  
meaning the shepherds' call across the valley, the hunter's triad in the  
forest **where kindness dwelles** /hanging **in middle air** his **auctoritie**  
feeding back the overplus (of pain too) as service. His right over a  
temporary clearing. His prior pacted death into the curve of light at  
pain's edge, where the City spreads.

6.

21

Distance joins us by the third person *each holding a part of the same child.*  
Looking so hard eye into eye across the motorway and the chord dissolves  
– So it was in the long hills with the flashing tailback: endless demands,  
rival claims **that the heart may break**, overjoyed at the world's convocal  
edge.

7.

43

the food that finally blocks the face, as a town blocks light • pains of succession  
*tightly crouched. But beneath this was another body, head to South facing West, six  
black flint discs behind his head ... five more of these scattered through the body  
of the mound, and one on the western horizon in its own house: There, **be  
there my trust** | fixed there **never part** | I blocked my face with knowledge  
facing the plangent sunrise and a sky shard calling me to fidelity turned my  
life round to a short song at a great distance further. Distinct ringing of the  
earth as the black stars gather to the nail-head.*

8.

72

Turn our heads the same way, many years apart | *separately, and on different horizons but the two bodies in almost exactly the same position* [heads to WSW facing SSE] a chord that burns through a life across the grey ganglionic nuclei to reach a platform behind the eye (arctic clouds massed in indigo, faked in gold) *dorsal vertebra pushed tightly into the calvarium* glowing red, and behind us the moon of broken things and infant souls. A new created world springs up.

9.

276: Dog Hill

Our limbs become hunters and tear us apart from the centre outwards, one step from home. The bird knight stands to the side, resting | *one complete foot on the original ground surface, a little North-West of the centre.* Metatarsal, thin as leaf, on the child's pelvis. A new created world springs up.

10.

273: Duggleby Howe

Red in a white matrix the fire stars, lives rendered to a point and sealed in the blue clay dome, to hover over the theatre of memory *a finely ground and polished plate of almost transparent flint in front of the face* **My feerfull dreme** | falling angels, hands in front of faces swirling into darkness | to where no earth or sky or any mortal claim has any place **nevyr forgete can I** love's harm.

11.

70

The central hole in the small sky, with white markers, focused on the heart *head and thighs violently thrust to the side* (left, North-East) or focused on the head but missed it – *twisted, and a small hole in the rock to the right of the head, containing* (food, rubbish, the usual suspects). Facing the future disjunction but refused to see and so to act *Both hands in front of face* **who seek their gain in others wo** *Here Psyche descends et se répand sur toute la terre.*

12.

116

Lying front to back across a red streak, *a pipe of ferruginous earth* (that your heat stay by me and not spiral in the smoking glass) Ageing to South-East with the coral and deepening, hands *as if reaching for the cup* that only the child obtains **So living die** and crest the circular sky in declaration, and leave not well alone.

13.

88

The entertainer (*shafted arrowhead under thigh bone*) bursts open and casts his bodily parts into the family office! They hold themselves together, focused on a burning hub that persists from generation to generation: **All these were men.** I come to warm my hands, and deliver a letter. The sun extends an arm athwart the corner of the rectangle (where timely care lapses) singing **Humble dum humble dum / Remember oh thou man / Thy time on earth is spent** in a succession of psychosomatic illnesses leading irrevocably to/ **Tweedle tweedle twino.**

14.

52

Sewing, salting, sailing the self out on the world / blades ringing through the eyes | *A one-note bone flute, or whistle* A pygmy idiogram that wraps the mind in succession and brings the body home in pieces *a skull, with the other bones of the body jumbled together and piled up against it. The under-jaw was fully twelve inches from the head and on the opposite side of the deposit* : the whole body in the mouth. Turning, burning a point a memory into | trampled ground, into | distant provinces.

15.

54

*a deposit of various tarsal and metatarsal bones, skull fragments, jaw fragments of six individuals, crammed into a skull calvarium and set crown up on top of the grave* Speak together then, for greater gravity [**ther is no life like ours**] and (when the pie was opened) plunge spiralling into the earth, from this eminence – bird knight, cartilage flapping in the wind.

XVI

Alstonefield

(1995/2003)

SAMPLER

SAMPLER

## Preface

*Excerpts from two letters to Tony Baker*

(1) 6th August 1991

Dear Tony,

[...] speaking of which, on the way back from Liverpool last time we stopped for the night at Alstonefield, and as I was strolling among the fields south of the village in the evening I suddenly had the distinct sensation that it mattered, this place, that its very existence mattered. I surprised myself, because obviously there's nothing there that any version of cultural modernity needs for half a second. Limestone hills, sheep pasturage, meandering river dales – what does any contemporary claim want with any of it? Yet there it was, all round me, manifestly necessary. As you know, I lived nearby for four years so I should have known, but everyday sights do diminish so, don't you think, and sink to marginal residues of our upkeep, if we don't have a theology to polish them with.

And I began to think of the place as an arena, a theatre of outrageously manipulated light in which the soul puts on a show for the people, where the self's instant of being is depleted as the lost masquer bearing a lantern among towering land-forms, in search of his company. I could see that it would be necessary to enter this scene again and again in search of the plot, threading questions and trials into the labyrinth, the complex displays of rock and vegetation, sheep-pens and graveyards, set up by the masters of the challenge, the pluralities that devised this spectacle and left it there like an open book. And a writing was needed, an interlinear commentary, to work the self through the fairground of its purpose and throw a shadow image back to all the rest of the known.

It had to be like that, it had to be a performance, because there was no trace of those pure and simple instruments with which we wage our self-wars, like "nature" or "society", and the human mental heart seemed to be cast before the eyes as an unhoused proposal, a thing of many possible directions, carrying everywhere on its back a balancing or compensating device which always begs to differ, always seeks the exception. For nothing up there is quite itself, everything bears the shadow of its contrary, including nature and society. An upland pastoral community run by machines; a week-end break zone for the wild soul which

betrays refused planning permission at every turn; sublimity locked into sordidness on the high pastures, elegance and care struggling with cynical exploitation in the valleys... It finally seemed, set there in the centre of England, the very literature of what people are, the star-wars shooting round anyone's living-room in Bradford. Am I rambling? I hope so.

The manic "Estimate" Brown, you will recall, stopped at Dove-dale on his way to Keswick and hated the place – shrivelled valleys, miniature grandeur, he said, the horror without the sublimity or the immensity; meaning it was separated from 'society' without offering that surrender of the wild self into its full theatrical succession as of the Lakes or the moors above Haworth. It wasn't simple and it wasn't enough – it was half way there, it was untidy, and awkward. Well I don't know, I adore all that surface water further north, the constancy of the music, but I've lived through enough manifestos and I've begun to believe in peace, messy and running-failed as it is, the blank horror these states face at the prospect of having to live without an enemy. And anyway that segmented limestone dome ringed in darkness (ringed in squalor, actually, and waste) cuts natural light into the most "untoward thoughts" without any help from theoretical Marxism.

And since we no longer have to give personal names to the entities that debate within the arts of perception, the narrative is less predicated – I like that. To stay with landscape objects and chunks of thought, like living in one of Ben Nicholson's paintings, and our entire traffic is set a questionnaire, concerning worth and tenure, which I thought could be played as a continuity impelled by hidden reserves, like the Irish bag-pipes, without any, or much, sparring against the kleptocracy being needed, and certainly not to have to ape the kind of de-relating *coupure* you get in *The News* visuals.

[...] the slender fit of grey stone buildings and dry-stone walls into a very diverse ground of curved grey-green slopes – at every turn spreading outwards, white steaks at the edges of the view always curving upwards to a provisional horizon [...] particularly as it was twilight, and the moon was large in a clear sky so all the near fields were silvered into a texture like the gloss of human skin. And the pub is a good place for a cheap meal for the wandering, and suitably impoverished, definitely proletarian, pastoral or pasteurised, writing person, at the end of a day.



We must take a walk there some time.

[...]

(2) 10th February 1993

[...]

I keep going back. It's still there, every time. I stay in a B&B in the village and moon around the landscape, sometimes alone, sometimes I bring someone with me. I don't write, I don't carry notebooks; I walk in the valleys, I stand in the fields, until I get home. I'm making sure it's still there – "it" being not exactly Alstonefield but the challenge and serenity it conveys, and for that there's no alternative but to be there, there's no channel of information in the world I could trust. If someone comes with me I listen carefully to the same scene working through a different life, however fragmentarily, in the hope of sharpening and extending my own sense of where we are.. So there are also matters raised not mine, and not settled by anything I know, which have to be entrusted to the language as to the hills clothed in weather. And can be, for this tactic also discloses the limits of personal poetry. An enormous fight starts between "the" and "a" which tenses the entire discourse: traditional stagecraft versus objectivist texte. As yet inconclusive, unfinished, and I'm increasingly unsure which side I'm on, whether the world can be captured in a small ring, or should be left to its usual dissipation in detail.

The house I usually stay in has a very 1930s feel, especially about the windows, with cast-iron radiators beneath them, bay windows with small panels that let in a lot of daylight, and look out onto pasture marked out by dry limestone walls, modest heights mostly implicit in the distant folds of grey-green which can prove quite formidable when you actually visit them. The whole landscape is fixed under a geometry of stone walls, parallelograms and asymptotic curves charting all the wave-like thrusts. I seem to breathe a pre-war atmosphere known from poetry, fiction, film, or the generations remembering – a theatre of pauses, dream hotels and branch-line halts, a roller-coaster of green roads, calm metrics ruled over depression and despair, a working industrial city beyond the hills forming its new image of man, with Nash visions of eternity sitting quietly on the grass, and a literary tramp at rest in every barn and haystack... It was the period that bore me, which everyone always remembered with affection:

“The war put an end to all that” whatever it was, it’s difficult to say. It lived in the country hotel as in the Marxist meeting above the tap-room. Something was held in the hand which meant something. Stability and change as coextensive, a central healing balance between the cruelties of monetarist disdain and those of underdog resentment. So a hope. The war put an end to it. But it sits for me unrecognised in those dull fields like a Chinese poem, a spirit flight distilled to leaf patience. A deific glow that scuttles out of sight when you turn to face it, but integral to the entire geology. Because it is a sedimentary landscape, however distorted in the details of the disrupted surface: the horizontal successions of settling fundamentals underpin everything you see, layer upon layer.

By the time I get there it’s usually getting dark. I install myself, go to the inn for dinner, and then wander over to the churchyard. Which is a rather obvious prosodic gesture, but everyone needs help getting started.

Well, we didn’t get that walk in yet.

Love to all, P.

SAMPLER

I

Again the figured curtain draws across the sky.  
Daylight shrinks, clinging to the stone walls  
and rows of graveyard tablets, the moon rising  
over the tumbling peneplain donates some equity  
to the charter and the day's accountant  
stands among tombs, where courtesy dwells.  
Thus a special and slight enclosure is set,  
slight as the dark spaces I fill tonight and  
silent and motionless as lives become, swelling  
with truth, scattered with glowing plaques.

Darkness opens the sky to space. Fallen  
light sets up its booth in the stone-yard  
where the theatre of eyes flickers and dies.  
The moon sails the eastern sky, rides  
the upland fields in sole possession,  
the scattered runs of grey wall the walled  
yard and the speaking stones, that say there is  
something made in a life not to be lost  
however small it is not to be crossed,  
not to be cast in eyeless wax.

But is kept folded in this unvalued space,  
space free of us, where the moon slices time.  
Void of us, where we didn't take any  
advantage but sailed away, leaving  
old bones kicked around the churchyard  
and carried off by dogs and wrote out  
the only true thing we are, a record  
of love. Every impossible meeting  
happens here in darkness and silence  
and the slightness of the piecing mind.

A beautiful thing, the moon on stone, and  
central. In a momentary breeze the trees  
sway slightly and clap over the churchyard,  
patches of hawthorn and yew claiming some  
marginal light part towards the edge  
leaving the moon's direct file on old names.  
A farewell to the world that opens the world  
and sets standards of dealing. How  
could you secretise the language on this  
final stage or place a reserve on hope

When the world is watching you? Mirror flashes  
on the horizon, distances steeped in petrol,  
lives snapped to zero across thronging waste and  
planning ethnic cleansing in Mansfield. Death  
pressed through the dream into constant  
separation as the waking world coats itself  
in speed, factorial of despair, that  
defeats the bearer absolutely wall to wall:  
the action without cause, the daylight caves.  
We turn our backs, only the night is kind.

Of course we turn our backs, what is there  
to speak through the coils of resentment  
but denial, heart loss across the mirror  
that coats the bank, what is claimed but self?  
I retire to a distance, I have the right  
in the late evening and on through the dark hours  
keeping to the edge of the necessary plot:  
trade, marriage, maintenance, the sacred cast  
of continuance always at risk, fixed with loss,  
moon marks on stone, trenching the calendar.

I thought I heard in the still night air  
a mother suckling her babe and singing  
softly in the darkness: Poor little mite,  
the cruel captains of earth will wrest  
thy virtue to their standing in spite,  
and all of thy trust in good will  
have to find its own way to the centre  
without me, who am not there. Poor  
accidental thing, she said, poor rabbit,  
what ardour you bear to an unknown point.

Her milk was blue in the sky, it was  
time to go. The moon like a knife in water  
slid silently down the firmament and sank  
into the trees and hedges, shaking themselves  
in the dawn wind. The question frames  
the response in emergent green: my life  
may be kept in some spare cupboard as  
needed from time to time or not but the light  
spread again through the grass stalks  
and the flesh trembled in its window.

I must be blind, to see such brightness  
in such delicate light, to see the world  
in its hope as a leaf turns in the  
movement of cool air, a memory trace  
sufficient to keep a name in stone,  
the letters full of moss. I would serve  
for ever the few ecstasies that form  
such a purpose, the child's space at  
the table, anger stretching into the future,  
obedience glowing at every joint.

“The sky will not help you, the soil and trees  
will not help you, to die in peace.” So don’t,  
carry your account and rankle with the fox  
in the valley, ever on the loose under  
the chains of despair, ever alert to  
the movements of the gentle victim  
we know well, the soft breathing  
in the wooden box, the leaps of inspace,  
we know the lamb. Whose anger paces  
out in the stone day and crests the end.

And know at evening when a path  
to the heart opens for the cold and  
dark airs of the earth full of locked spirits  
and disputed graves. The light bows and  
turns its back on the receding uplands  
coated in false frost, the hill crests take  
the surge of territory to its break and  
mark it as on paper, ink under blue wash.  
Making clear what I thought I knew, that  
truth is at the rim and rings like cash.

At the rim of land is a return of knowledge,  
spilling from the lip. Several pages of worked  
time graft my trust to this fair lecture as  
the staves ring out. Secured in the reprieve,  
balm and fescue stretch to the succeeding line.  
What it means is that I might have done nothing  
but help a different sight into the world and  
wouldn't that be something, wouldn't the graves  
smoke in the small hours to bear such a legend?  
"He spoke to us and it was safe to continue."

A sight not mine I mean. The fields are dark  
and the sheep with their long ears are alert  
in the night, where we purchased the wine,  
of separation and sipped it at the rim where  
the bubbles winked. You were with me  
though you may now forget, how safe it was  
to take affection under the wing entirely  
and trust it the whole length of the dark road.  
The bulk of love obstructs all my fantasy.  
Calm the lamb sleeps its future.

How can anyone believe solo the very idea  
mocks itself. Day closes from the start on this  
limestone chess-board and today the autumn sun  
smote the western sides of the tall grass stalks  
and lowered gradually until the cream of being  
shone back and then it was total, all colours  
clenched in grey-white over the hill's back, it was  
the rose of time in the earth pocket. Fear it  
continuously, is how I came to know the spectral  
city in the end, all the way back to the B and B.

Now I sleep in Alstonefield. Gods and goddesses walk in the dark fields and stand in a ring in the churchyard waiting for light. Of which I have it all over my pillow alone except the permanent. Gradually in the wine of sleep a completed memory compassed by care makes a globe of love. Very little I can do with it, alone. But it is like a repair depôt that continues through governments and wars at the end of a small back road where carefree labourers stroll around dark and competent.

As any night. Looking out of my window at dawn the voice of desire is raucous but filial because of the narrow gap containing the river invisible from here. There the war is final and formal, where gods and goddesses enter their own. The fields coated in water do everything to light the mind can bear except block it like a town. I think my dressing gown is a thin and crucial history of lads and lasses up to good before my time.

In the days of pink-toes I lived down the road. I picked boletus in the woods, effed around the local employment situation and drank a daily bout of distance marked in infant years. It was my wine to rest by the stone wall at summer's end far from Cambridge, where cthonic severance dictates endless toil. When a meticulous light brought a sequence of detail to sever the intimate, I thought to trust the gloss on the stem of travail.



Now the narrow breakfast while the world  
stands outside garmented in fall, the plunge  
and stay of the valley sides, limestone edges  
scrubbed to a gloss and shedding soil.  
Garlands hang on the outer wall and the voice  
is clenched, saying there is never  
enough passed on, the body substantiates  
only its own and when the sun returns  
the day is closed for the night. Here my life  
turns to the earth, and peers into the pit.

Hanging on Thor's lip, the whirlpool cave  
hung over the valley while the miner's hammer  
sounds traces of enriched water to an under-  
ground palace shining with promises. Take  
what's available and depart: a gentlemanly  
mode in the bed of state. I don't blame you  
for running love for profit, O lubric self,  
but I know the victim well. I know the sore  
throat, the scratched palm, the sleeping bag  
in the shop doorway. I hear the passing bell.

It rings, and the throat opens into song  
as a matrix clutching the future across  
fallen cloud, seeking a long friendship.  
Then another day draws to a close and the  
restless pastures seem to suck light  
into themselves as if nothing human had  
any right to it, they say, make yourselves  
gods and better, or leave it alone, leave  
the light out of your dark passages for good.  
Do you remember Lulu and April Fever?

I remember nothing but a trace of soul  
difficult to specify now in the rush  
of weeks. Not quite finished, the day pulls  
hard towards Stoke and gets us to the  
George Inn. The food is good and cheap  
the mild is strong and the hope is of  
worthiness, possibly too as I walk back  
finger inter finger with you on the dark road  
each in performance integral, are we. I trust so.  
The dark is deeper when the trust is stronger.

In the night it rains. In the tight bed  
I am an earth feature witnessing a sublime  
artefact. And someone in the other room  
dreams language to a stone, a white  
silence breaking the skin, like a mother  
nursing absence as the rain on the window  
wipes pretence and claim. A persistent singing  
pierces the cloudy distance – tightly  
bound as I am, taut as a harp to the  
autumnal cyclone, I want your rest.

And nourish my fate, with little to  
grow or be faithful to but what's already  
counted, and set aside. I note in the night  
the messengers at the window, bringing  
our emanations to the edge of peace where  
our bodies writhe nightly against time,  
tense for birth, answer or final clause. But  
I'll pack you a sandwich tomorrow if I may  
and we'll take it out to the high woods  
and watch the godly insects making laws.

To this purpose wake, the sun is high  
and the fields are white, not exactly  
white but it has snowed. The fields are  
different.

SAMPLER