Also by Peter Riley

Poetry

Love-Strife Machine
The Canterbury Experimental Weekend
The Linear Journal
The Musicians, The Instruments
Preparations
Lines on the Liver
Tracks and Mineshafts
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Passing Measures: A Collection of Poems
The Sea’s Continual Code
Aria with Small Lights
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Excavations
A Map of Faring
The Llyn Writings
The Day’s Final Balance: Uncollected Writings 1965-2006
Best at Night Alone
Western States
Twelve Moons
Greek Passages
The Derbyshire Poems
The Glacial Stairway

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Two Essays
Company Week
The Dance at Mociu
Peter Riley

Due North

Shearsman Books
Acknowledgements

Excerpts from ‘Due North’ have appeared in Cleaves Journal and Poetry Salzburg Review. (+ Longbarrow Press but I acknowledge that in the notes at the end.)

Section XI was published as a booklet entitled The Ascent of Kinder Scout by Longbarrow Press, Sheffield in 2014; thanks to Brian Lewis.
Morning and afternoon are clasped together  
And North and South are an intrinsic couple  
And sun and rain a plural, like two lovers  
That walk away as one in the greenest body.

*Wallace Stevens,*  
‘Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction’
I

Housman’s Question

XXXII

From far, from eve and morning
And yon twelve-winded sky,
The stuff of life to knit me
Blew hither: here am I.

Now—for a breath I tarry
Nor yet disperse apart—
Take my hand quick and tell me,
What have you in your heart.

Speak now, and I will answer;
How shall I help you, say;
Ere to the wind’s twelve quarters
I take my endless way.

From far— human groups moving
over the great grasslands with the herds,
sucking the milk of gazelles, sleeping
curled under the fleece / gleam of eyes through black hair
vast green and red lands without division,
footsteps measured in millennia.
and morning: raising the head, learning wisdom
in a form of desire, a distance to be gained, learning to wait,
absence of question-marks, Orphic stasis.
Moving and staying, bearing the location with us
   advance built into the structure of settlement. Not “travel”—
   there were needs, and displacements — economy collapses pack up
   and go

   but to somewhere and together
   in the same heart-space, the encompassing world arcs.
   To the high pastures with the beasts every year.

   * * *

   from eve — outpacing the desert
trekking in a great curve across the African savannah
towards the northern swamps and forests
the great diadem that divides the sky
into days and days into hours, captured
   in a circular stone hut with entrance facing SE,
   arrive and attend while the sky ticks on.

   * * *

   Here/ First memory of the call to distance,
the 27 arches of the viaduct striding across the town —
   what children are taught: cleanliness, modesty, application, alphabet
   retaining the pivot, the customary right
   we are not beggars, we are neighbours’ children
   We live here
and this is our decade and this is our language:
words fulfilling themselves between people,  
in the air, reaching across expanding distance, free to all, stuff of life  
free of ideological baggage.

*From*/ cotton mills, smoke drifting over railway sidings, canal boats,  
learning to speak from, slow increase of, understanding in daily return journeys  
mill operatives, office clerks, tenant farmers  

Bunches of red and yellow flowers  
sempiternal succession, interrupted  
by disdain and conscription.  
Lands thick in scarlet panoply, streams of blood and water mingling.

Little tiny child, what shall we do  
to keep this hour and arrival intact,  
while skies of slaughter blow  
the twelve ships to harbour  
and all the bells of earth

*and morning/* spruce standing in snow, in lines, eight  
then fifteen, wood smoke drifting across the fields  

dividing thought between love and duty  
and by the winds of earth to a compass rose  
*twelve quarters of sky*—I remember  
the sound in the air, of wood on stone, the sea breaking,  
the stone rings, gates of the dead land beckoning on the horizon  
steam locomotives in the night, tracing northern fates.

*Am here* Unfractured, chorale.  

North wind comes knocking on my door
bed of clay / chiming throng — chime on,
silver bells! healing in the wing that moves
out and in, healing in the lungs: these are real
midwinter acts, enjoined under wicker arches
(love and joy be to you) (we are not
daily beggars) (you know us, we live here)
but we don’t belong here
we come from far away.

Macarena, the paint sniffer: “I don’t belong in this country, I come from somewhere else.
My parents are waiting for me there, my sister is at school, she is doing very well…” Beyond the forest beyond worry about belonging, the terrain opens to the sky, a pale blue death certificate sheltering her trust.

Now for a breath — this caravanserai, lakeside inn on the edge of the world where we learn the tables of time and change: you can stay here for ever in the decorated moment, wide and deep, temporary shelter that will not let go of you / gradual and piecemeal shift to husbandry and cultivation, so slow you couldn’t say it happened. It / blew hither / updraughts on the edge of day remoulding the compass rose, competition for control over storage. War.

***
Afterwards we pitied the fallen
and sought their homes, to comfort their mothers
a loving cup against the malice of a carved line
while she sat there and knitted…

migrating geese in the sky
coffins in the backs of horse carts
coming over the heath in a line
all the names forgotten now
the wind on the river

ruffling, *stuff of life*—

with a backpack of names
draining like an hour-glass onto the road
migrating geese in the sky
ancestral bone polished brown we take it wherever we go.

_Tell me_*— how from the vast emptiness of the million words
the short phrase strikes the bone between the eyes,
tell me how the world is altered, _so little_
tell me as little as possible, tell me *falsetto_
tell me all night—

*What have you in your heart*

— coal smoke, long-term hope
folded against the cold,
the grass growing on the weirs,
the entwined briars in the graveyard.

There are catalogues and histories in my heart

and timetables, running through the night.

From death, returning not alone

with no baggage, with workers’ power

under cover

to reach

the shaking-loose of minds

in quiet urban corners with yellow street-light through the trees outside
to/from/far from a western brookland kept sealed

Pound, treading the back roads of Languedoc
dizzy with love and malice, muttering the genealogies
of Italian landowners and professional soldiers
working out codes of command in papered-over

cracks between story and science

tarry, disperse, the time has come, the power of the thinkers

burns in the raging forehead

of the desert soldier, the Pakistani newsagent in his

ransacked shop

desperation forged into a ringlet—

Take my hand / Tell me

looking around, what do you see?

(we lost everything)
In the circle dance, the hora,
the child’s hand reaches for mine
to be steadied, to be brought forward
into more and more of where and when, into
a safety, while beauty is stronger than freedom.

Who wants to end in a croak pit,
telling the world it is finished?

Then sustain it, tell me
what you have, lost or left
in a language beautifully linked
that you could tell the links one by one
like the links in a silver chain, a silver
tested and coined, fixed in the moon’s side,
over the end of the world
and we’ll get there, reach
the flowered arbor, the chambered tomb
crawl into it and read the stone
with difficulty (about honour). Then answer

Where are you from?

—war and bondage
gross disparity of incomes
everything is a commercial for something else

and I would turn and answer
among the springing thyme,
Oh, peal upon our wedding,
and we will hear the chime
and sing the song
of parting, to be a soldier
far across the sea  I had a dream the other night
dividing the token across time that will
endorse our rejoined cognition
before it is too late, quickly,
my hand
lies on my chest
and everything is still.

The child at the door
asks for nothing more.
The city at her hand
voids the echo. We
dance together in
the slight grin of knowing
each other’s fear.

Ere to the/ return of piano with spread chords
four quarters in settings by
Vaughan Williams / Bartók / Janáček
nationalists, working down to the local where it opens out—
sčasování— holding the fading tone at stations of perception
overlapping language units, a temporary home
as the Empire dissolves (in blood) and the palaces are for sale.

The wind across the plains divides itself
four, then eight
forms in compassionate conflict
for there is more to music than marches and waltzes, more
to history than the Austro-Hungarian empire

At its demise

all the love flew out

in bouquets of discord to found new
professions, rushing in with offers of help.
Some of it saw for the first time the lives of the people.
Some of it reached here, knowing nothing
of the genealogies of Italian land-owners, learning
the price paid on the fields of Lombardy
for the slightest deviation from the feudal code long
after feudal honour was disowned.

“"This is Lucio. He is only a baby now,
but you will help him [to live] and later
he will help you," she holds him
and he looks up to her eyes
rests his forehead against her cheek for a moment
and looks up again.

At the Ospedale in Florence, little trains of orphans
guided by nuns through the cloisters
in a sense we all came from there
endlessly, endless way
where from I don't know——

Tenant farmers above Halifax,
world of clarts and slopstone
and the rain singing in the yard.