Collected Poems
By the Same Author

Poetry
The Benefit Forms
Overdrawn Account
Anaglypta
This Other Life
More About the Weather
Entertaining Fate
Leaf-Viewing
Lost and Found
Via Sauro Variations
About Time Too
Anywhere You Like
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Ghost Characters
There are Avenues
The Look of Goodbye
English Nettles
The Returning Sky
Like the Living End
Buried Music

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Twentieth Century Poetry: Selves and Situations
Poetry & Translation: The Art of the Impossible
Peter Robinson

Collected Poems

1976-2016

Shearsman Books
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for Ornella, Matilde & Giulia
Note

This collection of poems from across forty years is by no means a complete poetry. There are pieces from those decades that, while repudiating nothing, I didn’t feel inclined to reprint here. *Collected Poems 1976-2016* is organized in ten sections, and I’ve tried to present a balanced whole. These named sections could mostly be said to represent best versions or substantial selections from the same number of ideal collections, some of which, over the years, were published in more or less this form, while others – the first and sixth in particular – emerged partially in different publications. The tenth is a new book of poems. Many of these collections were prefigured by interim pamphlets, chapbooks, or limited editions.

A great many editors of magazines, newspapers and anthologies have sustained these efforts over the years and I am indebted and grateful to them all. My particular thanks go to Richard Tabor, John Welch, Michael Schmidt, Robert Jones, Julia Flanders, Eiichi Hara, John Lucas, John Froy, and Peter and Amanda Carpenter for their work on individual publications, and to Tony Frazer, editor of Shearsman Books, for his sustained commitment and dedication.

*Peter Robinson*

*December 2016*
Overdrawn Account
SAMPLER
Worlds Apart

Swarling brick
and a smell of sticky tarmac,
dazed, the ambience
at the street corner,
where men, they’re jobless,
were drawn out by sun,
mused on far-off places,
a next pint, ‘the same again’.

And some did go
some thin dawn
from quiet, grey wharves
out through the Manchester Ship Canal
to Chicago.

Or imagined escape
from women who had them
hiding the smell of the beer on their breath;
the pretext of finding work to support her
sent them.

Out there, grandfather
worked as a restaurant car waiter,
but something caused his
rush home to her,
the house, his own armchair
at Rusholme, Manchester.

A photograph displays him:
sepia, jaundiced, thin.
He voted Baldwin,
would hardly accept the Co-op divvy.
Who he was
in his suit and large trilby,
hugging a white hen,
his death and his own obfuscations
have blurred.

It catches something:
fixed, so proud, in his fenced-round
plot of ground,
thinking himself a propertied man.

Sweat stands out on that wrinkled pate.
Tying runner beans to poles
the eye’s aim
and his hands
co-ordinate
and the act appeases
tumult, voices in the head.

Their latest row,
some foulness over the sink’s mess,
focuses
such curdled-milk eyes.
Intently, he husbands
greens that help them
supplement their weekly budget.

Re-planking the walls of his hencoop:
accurate, clean joints comfort.
Rule of thumb,
plain common sense
he clings to, attaches
some little order
to his circumstances, patched
with that easy romancing.

An ads rep for a store, he’d say,
though only a door-to-door
vacuum cleaner salesman.

Nothing but this puddle
now where his eyes
will find their reflection:
wind on his face confirms it:
him, intact in his world.
The comfort here in close nature
is as light circumscribing a profile
and air in his lungs
is thick like her breath.

Then what he looks for
in those eyes
is her recognizing him,
and though she’d laugh
with kind neighbours and shopkeepers,
laugh behind his back
at the stories, the half-lies,
his world suffices.

Under a pale sky
he’d track clouds’
white underbellies
withdrawn invitation.
Fresh, cool air
would rustle his paper.
He’d sit in a deckchair
assured by each detail,
inhabit the allotment of an old man.

A Homage

‘Will you say when you write
how much I owe my mother.’
Lowry to Maurice Collis, 1951

Enraptured by brick and dirty stone,
L. S. Lowry, every weekday,
wants through the back streets of Salford, alone,
alive to the textures of decay.
His eyes examine pores in a wall that formed their intentness. There is no other world than this. It is the recall of a crumbling relation. ‘Oh, my mother.’

*November 1975*

**Waking, St Paul’s Square**

Across the park, outside, if it’s autumn the leaves are dingy, like cornflakes strewn on the floor.

A bell tent of light that’s only the sunshine clots in the room’s air, a milky suspension.

Effect of the curtains, they’re hardly less white than the sphere of a Chinese lampshade, and as still.

The sheets are turned open to the ceiling’s emulsion that lends warmth to the inmates.

Parallel, two consoled people, as a fly on the plaster or sunlight discerns them, in their cotton envelope.
The Benefit Forms

1

A large grey room
indifferently lit,
whose benches
face cubicles
down one wall
like starting gates.

Two floors high,
the bluish distance
fills its windows.
Clouds shift like a back-projection;
they feather, disintegrate.

Then, that class of person
inundates the place.
They stand in corners,
sit on benches,
mostly wait.

A roll-call punctuates
silences, low murmurs.
One, or a couple,
enter a stall.
He voices
and she echoes
guesses to questions
misconceived.
Then they move away.

A painting of Ibiza,
some Mediterranean port
brightens the far wall.
Broad strokes of red
and sandy gold
dash what look like restaurants
against a cobalt bay.
Then my turn comes.
I’ve lost my tongue.
Some say it degrades,
but I don’t know what to say.

2

An alcove skylight
picks her form from shadow,
crumpled on the bed.

A classic draped figure
tired after work,
she focuses the room.

There’s a sink and stove.
He is trying to smooth
lumps from packet soup.

It simmers, their love
and the atmosphere’s
tensed equilibrium.

Her Majesty’s envelopes
drop through the box.
There’s almost nothing in them.

Then the soup boils over.
Let her sleep. He mops it up,
the least thing he can do.

3

You are standing by the door
in a rented terrace house.
With you, a man and a woman
are answering the questions.
You’ve counted the number of beds
in this house and, against them, names
that live there: and you want them
to sign a form that says they are lovers. It’s called co-habitation. The couple are angry and now, with a food stain patterning your shirt front, you’ve reddened to the collar.

4

Imagine who you would be in the window as you go across the precinct.

Ice-blue light, the sky overcast, is a dirty sheet drawn right over your head.

Anything, anything after an interview – soggy newsprint,

pink, in the near ground detains sore eyes careless with distraction.

‘Medium build,’ the writing says ‘for labouring’ or thinned I am to ‘something clerical’.

Now across the park’s expanse, a wind gets up denying open spaces.

The trick of self-possession treats my lack of trade or skill to name and fit me into.

Set against the ochre brick-work, that young man, I am,
who misremembers
where he’s going.

5

Of an icy morning when you go
with the blue Alhambra
and red sky to savour
or names on derelict chapel walls,
all moves are known of the walk to work –
hurried stride sure of its way.
Careful of the footing,
that black man’s feet are bare;
they’re flecked with a dusting of frost.
The one-legged match-seller’s
wedged against where
mum walls meet our grubby past,
and these are scanned for
traces of the local histories,
a desired place, where to stand.
Jonas Boothroyd at first light
hobbled on his one leg;
around his gate were crowds
of distressed, deserving poor.
Now, under friendly eyes
and a famous smile,
you can’t not sing
those voices in your head:
the look of that advert’s
winning gaze, or hers
it is, whose close love
you’ll work to be deserving of.

6

Ghosting faces
    of a man, his wife
    defined in the glass
watch each other
watching each other,
and in the window
their room’s interior
is reflected
back to them –
mute wallpaper, a world.
This loved reflection cuts out
lintels, doors,
the street’s dark stonework.

Or, in a second-storey office,
she is fastening her hairgrip,
eying the window for table-glass
carefully
in silhouette.
Here she is to beautify the scene
against the skyline mill chimneys.

Paying out Benefits, we sit here.

A light beige and grey
under strip-lighting,
this, the colour of their love;
it has set the counter’s glass screen
there, for them, their mirror.

Urine, stale sweat,
a faint breath of alcohol,
about these irritations
swarms the brown image: a man.

Outside, down the sky,
blue, clear,
pigeons turn
and glide. Their shadows’
darker greys on the slates
turn with them
and that’s a trick of the light.
It bemuses, turns me
inward here.
Voices rise from the street;
their sense is diffused
by car noise. Listening,
I can't hear.

Some distance down the hall
a crowd of women has gathered.
This Welfare Department beige wall
frames what it supports.
The drunk man in the corner sees
pink and blues,
black, oranges, greens
of local colour
blur to a tunnel of white noise
clashing in an official ear.

Striking appliance assemblers' wives
demand a family allowance
and don't say why
their husbands are striking.
Not for the principle
but the money
they worry, with questions
for a striped grey suit,
as for bargains
in the rush at a jumble sale.

But the man is calm. His hands
are firmly clasped. He commands
a respect. This administrator
gains their silence.
'It's the law
lays down who we provide for.
It's the law, you understand.'

Petrol on rain pools separates.
Spectral colours
occur at the edge,
out along the gauntlet
of lit displays
    and they’re to work
the light and warmth: dispersed
somewhere down an alleyway
in the dark,
and we’re left in the air.

8

By mid-afternoon
    the cumulus hold,
    the clock’s hands slow.
Penurious and cowed,
you have filled in a name
and amount
    on each handout.

Your strained eyes search
    a mottled sky
draining down to grey
for traces of reddening
    cloud edge,
a pink, or
    pale orange horizon.

Imagining, the want
    to have this ebbing away
blush for bureaucracy’s
    clarity of name, event.

9

Then the wilderness goes untended.
No one moves beyond the back door.

Literally drawers of life together
remain, more worth than the bother
to clear, becoming a species of relic:
Veronica’s hanky, a photograph.

Parlour sofa, the wide bed half-full,
but she prefers it half-empty.

The grant in her purse will bury him.
Please would you note: ‘Harry Wild has died.’

10

‘I don’t owe this country a thing.’
A cough, the Pennines,
these have thickened his,
‘England owes me nothing.’
There’s a salmoning cloud
in blue that deepens.
We turn at the corner.

Wind comes funneling
down through the flat blocks.
‘I’ve never claimed dole
or the Benefit.’

Uncertain light
appeases the township’s
stone of its harshness.
It is an effort
home such days,
the land’s fall
contrary to the crowd’s flow.
The day’s work has drained you.
Relax now.

Polished wood paneling
with drinkers in the half-lit
smoke room, distorted there,
the cloud cover threatens;
we’re staring out
at the cast of house-fronts
confused through globules of rain.