

HIGH ON THE DOWNS

High on the Downs

A Festschrift for Harry Guest

edited by
Tony Lopez

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are reprinted here by permission of Anvil Press Poetry.

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from the Japanese version printed here is by Andrew Houwen.
Peter Greening’s ‘Review of A Puzzling Harvest’ was first published
in *London Magazine*, 2003.

Rupert M. Loydell’s poem ‘Boathouse, Early Morning’ was first published in
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John Mingay’s review ‘It’s Hard to Hold the Past’
was first published in *Stride* magazine, 2011.

William Oxley’s poem ‘Ecclesiastical Polity’ first appeared in
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Preface

We have lived elsewhere. How otherwise explain
the shock of recognition at the gap in the hedge,
that day high on the downs when the sun led you
to a place you knew though it was your first visit.

Harry Guest, 'The Sixth Elegy'

These various tributes and memoirs for Harry Guest on his 80th birthday immediately show in what regard he is held amongst those who have known him as a poet, translator and teacher. It is clear that he has had a profound impact on many lives. I have known him for 35 years or so; we are of different generations, and I consider him to be the best of friends: good company, perceptive, funny, generous, tolerant, and true. Much as I enjoy his friendship and think of him as my particular friend (as many others surely do), I know that he is also a major literary artist whose best work is of permanent value in English poetry, and that he has written translations that extend our understanding and appreciation of European and Japanese literatures.

Harry's poetry began to be published in pamphlets and books in the 1960s with *Private View* (1962), *A Different Darkness* (1964), and his first Anvil collection *Arrangements* (1968). His early work is of the same era as the artists David Hockney, Peter Blake and R.B. Kitaj, who were concerned to present the complexity of lived experience in a new and vital manner, as directly as possible and without filler. Harry's poem 'Montage' from that time depicts just the same kind of contemporary reality, at once intimate and public, cultured, tender and sometimes violent, but also in thrall to the glamour of the movies.

The lamp made your skin glow, at last
naked underneath my kisses.

...

I lay with you on the rumpled bed,
and talked about Axel Heyst, the paperback
on the one table by the cheap wine,
the tooth-mug stained a hard, irregular maroon,
and the cigarette-packets in an alien script.

Months of preparation, briefing, prayers even.
For this.

The scene is sketched in quickly with precise and telling details in order to be undercut as the experience of a double agent, in some wartime scenario of sudden attacks and terrorism. The reference to Joseph Conrad's novel *Victory* feels personal and sets the mood. The maroon stain, the tooth-mug and the cigarette pack are the stuff of *films noirs* and Len Deighton novels; the intimate matter immediately creates emotional engagement, but the individuals are unknown and they remain unspecified. Their emotional lives may well be double like the clandestine political reality that they inhabit. This is a long way from the drab utility verse of The Movement and it shows a sense of daring and adventure to represent whatever life throws up.

Had Harry Guest worked along this line he would have been an interesting poet without doubt. But he went to Japan and assimilated another profoundly different aesthetic; he learnt Japanese and translated ancient and contemporary Japanese poetry. He used his knowledge of modern European languages to translate Ronsard, Baudelaire, Hugo, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Rilke, Brecht and others, and to really stretch his own writing capacity. One has to read the sequence 'Elegies' or later poems like 'On Golden Cap' or 'Comparisons' to understand the range and depth of his achievement as an original poet. This little book is the least we could do to show our appreciation of an extraordinary life and career very much in progress. It begins with some new poems and a translation by Harry Guest.

T.L.
2012

HARRY GUEST

To Lynn, December 28th, 1977

Like your **n**earness
no **d**ark **o**men
reads **e**xactly
months **u**nseen so
darling **u**ntil
night's **b**laze **a**ttains
real **g**uesswork **u**se
each **s**tart **t**rembling

Into Out Of

Darkness to dawn. Coolness rising
with no fear of spread day. The known
panoply—magnolias, birdsong,
drifting mist, the lake: the moored bark
a given intimation, shore
invisible. Though, remembered,
one impulse of pure longing, a
childhood spent in prophesying
forgotten dreams, the absence of
love needing eventually
progression from nightmare to ease.
Gone splendour. The lawn, curving on,
leaves brighter borders, the colour
different—a green past recalling,
gestures to signal to gestures
recalling past green a different
colour, the borders brighter, leaves
on curving lawn, the splendour gone.
Ease to nightmare from progression

eventually needing love
of absence, the dreams forgotten:
prophesying in spent childhood
a longing pure of impulse, one
remembered though invisible
shore, intimation given. A
bark moored, the lake, the mist drifting,
birdsong, magnolia, panoply
known. The dayspread of fear? No. With
rising coolness, dawn to darkness.

My Parents

I woke up thinking they were still alive
and lay there for a moment smiling
blurry with sleep and planned
to share again with them a happy time
we'd spent together months past which
they couldn't have
yet picturing her smile
his caution their refuge our cohesion my
delight until truth's fist smashed through
the paper door of dream and I re-
orphaned now fell back on staring at
the dark
him clapping when I then twelve
trode The Green Bridge of Wales to the end
and back high above swirling surf but her
anxiety
in hospital my tonsils out
visiting-hours seven to half-past
she came each evening changing buses
three times both ways
he noticing
our neighbour's pregnant cat on the lawn

huskily divulged facts I didn't
understand found rather boring
soon forgot

her on the wharf
when I'd come back from Paris
unexpectedly how did
she know

his disappointment at
my poor degree her frown of worry once
I'd touched my aunt for dollars to buy a suit

him kissing her forehead in the morgue
which smelled of stale lilies
and four years later my having
to identify his corpse on the same slab
no flowers that time for he'd died alone

so many wanted and unwanted times
a patchwork world you can't control
old snapshots half-heard echoes veering past
blind alleys flickering deceptively

wake up like that into confusion
deaths denied forgotten shunned
hit back at mere reality and

and

and

* * *

1. Shakespeare: "*Shall I compare thee...*"
2. Wordsworth: "*The world is too much with us...*"
3. Shelley: *Ozymandias*

1.	2.	3.
You	What	Lone
June's	we	place.
blue	see	Stone
noons?	<i>not</i>	face.
	seen.	
Your		Go
face	Seas—	near.
more	trees—	Show
grace.	mean	fear.
	more	
Must	tender	"My
die?	earned	"land!
Wrong!	for	"Bow!"
Trust my	splendour	
my	spurned.	Dry
song.		sand
		now.

Memory

for Jill and Annette

When I was three you taught me how to spell
 Czechoslovakia backwards, a skill lost
 With greying time but thankyou anyway.
 Your presence despite absence like a shell
 Picked up on a Welsh shore withholds the cost
 Of love all three of us were glad to pay.

Ganymede's Dog

for Peter Jay, poet, translator, classicist, prince of publishers

Seeing his beautiful master borne strangely aloft
he barked out, looking up, a confusion of thought
come back this is silly dogs don't fly I can't follow up there
you know that what am I supposed to do come down
please

The sheep were grazing again, unconcerned.
Sudden shadow—whirr of great wings—boy's cry—
and they'd scattered till bird and young shepherd
were lost as a speck on the distance and life
re-began. Munch. Nice grass. Time for a piss.
Munch. Rest a bit. Remunch. Now's what matters.

The eagle, exhausted, dropped his burden
in the immortal lap and soared away crossly,
his duty done. The king of gods
dabbed the ragged claw-wounds, healing them,
then licked the boy's blood off his hands
smiling. Don't be afraid.

The dog would never know how his master
acquired a master who trained him to serve wine
and taught him perhaps more interesting tricks
until he grew too old. Then what?

Too hoarse to bark, he sat back, tongue lolling, tail still,
and gazed up at blue emptiness. He needs me.
He chose me from the litter. Drowned all
my brothers and sisters. Five of them. He wanted
me that's why. I need him too. What do I do now?
Come back.

Please.

Quatrain

He stands there lost in isolation so
A no-man's-land of wonder none would dare
Traverse fenced him that time or later though
The wind such as it was ruffled his hair

Cromlechs

for Tasha, Nichol and Sébastien

Each stone is shielded. This structure stands
the thinness of an ice-pane from the wind.

Erratic blocks in time. Alien
to conquest and the age of June.

This slope with cadences of further fields
inseparate from harvest.

These shapes, hacked out,
dragged here on heavy inches,
dwell still in their far tombs—
the spaces they were prised from
under tough heather.

Grey weight belonging elsewhere
lends them transience.

The landscape's curve alone
not interrupted by their being there
wages the passing storms.