

Viva La Vida

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Also by Peter Abbs

- For Man and Islands* (1978)
Songs of a New Taliesin (1981)
Icons of Time (1991)
Personae (1996)
Angelic Imagination (1997)
Love After Sappho (1999)

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PETER ABBS



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Geist ist Leben das ins Leben schneidet
Spirit is life that cuts back into life
NIETZSCHE

Child of Pisces

Child of Pisces

Poem in Three Movements

1

First decade. More ambiguous than you'd care to guess:
Trauma of birth, sirens of war, the yellow of roses,
A no and yes.

On the brink of death breathing existence. A skylark soars,
The dark drops down, a bomb explodes.
A night-throb of engines

As fields burn. We crash downstairs. Lights out. Lie flat,
Blacken the windows. The huge dark thunders
And glows.

Slowly, fierce flames cool into craters where brambles
And nettles jostle and thrive, where I'll fetch bullets,
Egg-shells,

Feathers, to name them for my blue-eyed mother—to startle,
Affirm, draw her smile. The war's over.
We're both alive.

Now seagulls scream through air. And far off
The sea's solemn thud and withdrawal.
Love's perennial.

Second decade. The time of faith and prayer and of a place
That should form the tenth circle
Of Dante's hell.

The quadrangle lies under drifting snow, the steps are ice.
I stand at the lectern reading Latin
While the rector

Rings his bell. *Read it again read it again read it again.*
I shudder and stutter a language
I cannot comprehend.

The letters slide and fall from the page, will not cohere.
Silent at their refectory tables
The priests stare.

Under the avalanche of snow, under the failing light,
Under the scree of time
That tinkling bell.

That thin alarm ringing of unspoken fears. The end
Of faith and hope. Dead words
In the throat.

Third decade. Votary of words, raider of lexicons, dictionaries,
Lists, literatures. Verbal work-out—
Yet

The word burns in the larynx, sings on the tongue,
Sears the drizzle of English air
With a clarion call

Lifting star and stone, calyx and chromosome
Into a second life, a moment
Out of the mist

Made clear. Out of the blinding drift a tower of words
Raised up, articulate, edged,
Sheer.

Falling Like Gulls

I often go at night to the top of that dust track
Looking for the storage place. I open the door to face
The dark. It's still aromatic with apples. Cool. Quiet.
On my way down the slatted shelves are on the right.
There's no ripening fruit laid out. But silence.

I pass to the Onion Shed. The wooden door rides on
Its runners jerkily—as it always did. Through the rectangle,
Chicken-wired, windows an opaque light filters in.
Ghostly. White. The bronzed onions we rolled along the boards
Have gone. Our children's shouts are silent in the wall.

I come to the Old House. I go down the green corridor.
The fire burns in the hearth. There's a book on the floor,
It's open on a blank. Outside there's a misty light.
The gate sags in the grass, the fields dip to the sea—
Where silent gulls rise momentarily. Then drop from sight.

Head Gardener

for my grandfather

Back bending to the ground, almost anonymous,
You could pass this place and hardly notice him;

A figure in a garden of espaliated pears, wallflowers,
Asparagus, broccoli. Silent connoisseur of soils

Crumbling in his hands the unseen filaments, cysts, spores:
A lump of clay breaking into life, the dull charisma of years.

But not only here, I see him on long summer afternoons
Alone in the hot glinting greenhouse, his pragmatic fingers

Rubbing the earth to a tilth, then funnelling the countless seeds
From their small dry packets into moist runnels.

Then some evenings, a handkerchief draped over his eyes,
I catch him in the arm-chair, his book slipping from his knees,

Those lean hands still at last—and I imagine all that seed
Germinating in the dark. Clean white shoots. Nubs of green.

Aspen Leaves

As I drift down, almost asleep, I am at the Oak Woods
Pushing the chipped blue door until it opens
Into the walled garden. Box-hedge greens the cinder paths;

They go to the deep pond. In the silver sheen small fish
Rise and fall, the shadows of aspen leaves. I hear the bees
Buzz against the dusty slate, taste the ripe peach's

Sweet pulp on my tongue, see the line of green beech
Opening into the fields, the gleam of the furrowed sea,
That far horizon. In a single instant—all within my reach.

But then the summer light fades fast and grandfather
Sits silent in his chair and the fire is all but out and there's
A handkerchief over his eyes and his book has fallen to the floor

And I'm running up the stairs and there's no light from the moon
And there's a wind gusting under the eaves
And then a hush and—only leaves and leaves and leaves.

Grandmother Reading at Myrtle Cottage

Sleepless—and I see you sitting there at the window,
Light fading as you settle to the pages
Of The Methodist Recorder.

Behind you the cavernous black of the back-room. The wood fire
Flickers, ignites the mahogany bureau and chairs
With splinters of orange and red.

You are doing the crossword and musing over passages
From the Bible: exile of Adam and Eve,
Murder of Cain, Jehovah's testing of Abraham,

The Exodus. You know these story-lines better than the lines
On the palms of your hands;
The Act of Creation right down to the moment you fill

The blank squares with a quotation
From the Psalms. In less than an hour it will be inexpungibly dark
And you will have slumped in the chair, and the answers

Slipped to the floor, then only irregular breath—
And the tick-tock-tick of the clock and nothing and nowhere.

The Glass Dome of Childhood

Almost a revelation this morning—the barn owl in the shopping mall,
Perching on a gloved hand, clawing the simulated leather.
I was drawn at once to its primitive power, its sheer presence.
Its fine wings quivered and shuddered in the fluorescent glare

Of the cramped precinct. I fell for the fall of its white feathers—
The wings like priest's vestments tapering into yellow and orange.
Its eyes hypnotised mine with their circles of primaeval darkness.
I imagined the bird navigating the wildest night, its beak open,

Its claws fast, a daemon of terror, or wavering on rounded wings
In the dazzling trauma of some car's lights. Then I remembered
Another owl. It stood paralysed on a painted bough, lifeless
In the glass dome of my childhood. A hesitant boy I longed

To smash the polished glass, take the victim in my hands
And ease it through the windows into a healing sky—
And now that owl was fluttering before my open eyes,
Splaying its shamanic wings, emitting its long-caged cries.