

## Tin Pan Arcadia

ROBERT SHEPPARD was born on the South Coast of England in 1955. Between 1989 and 2000 he worked on a long network of texts called *Twentieth Century Blues*, of which this volume is the largest showing. Previous books from the project include *Empty Diaries* (1998) and *The Lores* (2003). His work is anthologised in *Other* and the recent OUP *Anthology of British and Irish Poetry*, in which he is described as being 'at the forefront of (the) movement sometimes called linguistically innovative poetry'. He is currently Senior Lecturer in English and Creative Writing at Edge Hill College of Higher Education.

## Previous publications:

### Poetry

*Daylight Robbery*, Stride, Exeter, 1990

*The Flashlight Sonata*, Stride, Exeter, 1993

*Transit Depots/Empty Diaries* (with John Seed [text] and  
Patricia Farrell [images]), Ship of Fools, London, 1993

*Empty Diaries*, Stride, Exeter, 1998

*Neutral Drums* (with Patricia Farrell), Writers Forum,  
London, 1999

*The End of the Twentieth Century*, Ship of Fools, Liverpool,  
2002

*The Lores*, Reality Street, London, 2003

### Edited works

*Floating Capital: New Poets from London* (with Adrian  
Clarke), Potes and Poets, Connecticut, 1991

*News for the Ear: A Homage to Roy Fisher* (with Peter  
Robinson), Stride, Exeter, 2000

### Essays

*Far Language: Poetics and Linguistically Innovative Poetry  
1978–1997*, Stride Research Documents, Exeter, 1999

# Tin Pan Arcadia

THOSE TWENTIETH CENTURY BLUES

ROBERT SHEPPARD



CAMBRIDGE

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*To Patricia*



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I would like to thank all the dedicated editors involved.



# Melting Borders



# Melting Borders

Preface to *Twentieth Century Blues*

Those buckets of blood there are the president's property;  
they reek of recent history, but have nothing to do  
with what has become your fault; leakages  
of household gas that punch too-distant disaster-holes  
in the indifferent sky. He'd skipped from jail to the  
palace, rhyming with corpses that had fallen for him.  
This is the first free bulletin for 40  
years: his bullet-soaked face rolling  
across the divisions of our suddenly parallel lives,  
between striking ambulancemen and prisoners  
handcuffed between 2 wall-charts: 'Given to Charity'  
and 'Given to Shareholders'. Scab paramedics  
give the *all clear* to the prostitutes' civic poses  
in the glow from the ambulance windows,  
after checking for small-scale social infections, now  
8% of council tenants own shares. Why  
these people come here, I don't know, great  
gangs of lack of proof roaming across our lack of purpose.  
One terminates every 2 seconds. Up  
from the sewers, I will shoot into the celebrant crowd  
until the fervent anthem of my machine gun  
dies. I was a food-taster *and* sex-trap for him;  
he took fingernails as hard currency. Violated orphans  
like me are loyal to the people's secret brides:  
old grain for sale in foreign-aid sacks, while you  
worry about which gospel gives most truth,  
where tangled colour-coded wires can be read  
as misery-indices in 3-D; or where a pictogram of  
a whale's tail dives into the charitable fund.

DECEMBER 28 1989

# Smokestack Lightning

## a mythology of the blues

for Tony Parsons

History of Sensation 5  
*Twentieth Century Blues 1*

Let it all go. As I sing I drive my  
dynamite for some strange machine  
of this nearly spent century;  
the big city calls its sinful  
numbers heaven. My fast rolling  
kisses are for the stern  
lady, dodging me, back of the beat.  
Our harp player's dead – when Pete  
told me, we laughed. A quick shimmy  
was Elzadie's goodnight; buttons and  
belt loosening, Arvella's swift farewell.  
Pete's 12 string steam whistle leaves town;  
I want you to take my place in this song.  
Elzadie lifted her hem and smiled, as he  
tuned to an open chord. Bending G on the E,  
the dog jumped into the horn as  
the KC moaned, with a mocking beauty  
mating rabbit foot dreams. Arvella slumped in  
the shade, feeling contempt, thinking: give me  
the train's shake. Sweat rolled off  
transport as delight, a nervous fix  
in this thief's paradise of form and  
necessity possessed by devils. He'd  
rehearsed all morning, restless,  
couldn't wait to start again, to howl  
out, temporal and grounded, 'We'll never  
get out of these blues alive' -  
above the frets, trembling. Inside:  
shared diction, dancing voices, mojo stomping,  
good book palms together in prayer. At night

she wedges the chair against the door,  
feels evil thrashing outside the room,  
but can't connect the pose of his  
arpeggio muscles above her, de-tuning  
slackening; sings down the phone:  
'Take my lonesome love in hand.'  
Dancing with her to the juke band,  
his tense fingers practise chord shapes  
up and down her spine; to be a real person:  
a girl adjusting her skirt, singing *Twentieth  
Century Blues*, a pearl on her lips, - her devil  
astride two chairs, playing slide  
with a Coca-Cola bottle. She  
is about to say something over the  
gossamer telegraph line, to survive  
his strong hands rambling through.

Kid Bailey's the name I travel with, kidding  
around: the name on the only phonograph;  
walked up to the shop window, the glitter  
of the diamond-fretted Dobro a death squad  
tuning up. My handkerchief shields  
the chord shapes from  
your thieving eyes. Just pull the razor  
and shave him. The gun in the guitar case was  
no use - jealous man stepped up to Charley  
as if to ask for *Pony*, retuned. Bill-  
boards tell women what  
to be: a circle of music-stands  
dreaming thrills, dancing the Shimmy-She-Wobble -  
some guy called it a dry fuck -  
the guitar dances too, spins  
above Charley's head. I could see  
my own rapt reflection in the shine,  
an invisible piano whose pedals are moody

bendings. Love my suitcase and the road.  
Arvella's choked voice in his drowned  
throat was only a name in a song. Late  
capitalist machines filter hiss from old records.  
White rooster corrugations beckoned Elzadie.  
He looked at her empty shoes and built her up -  
songs for gone Elzadie as he held  
his guitar like an old woman he's just  
drowned in the gutter. Arvella scowled  
as I played his body, a piano's  
grin, strategic melodic outburst. Suddenly  
slashed Charley's throat, his light face  
blackened to hell. Arvella leaned  
against a tree waiting for the voice-thrower,  
weeping as he watched. Dancing  
flat against him, rising, I wanted him,  
his cracked voice. Pretty girl, Bertha Lee,  
a lot of Charley's singing for him, I thought.  
Broken guitars above our heads, a scrapyard ceiling,  
his breath on the damp trails he'd laid  
on the backs of my legs. You could  
make a plastercast of his hands,  
real cobwebs playing host to a toy.  
My skirts are grinning. His voice  
is inside my sky, over the radio. Off  
with nothing but my guitar and my name -  
never played *Rowdy Blues* one time too many  
the same barrelhouse. I spotted clichés every  
inch of her body, chain-gang eugenics, a prison  
which took your name. My thumb  
print on his photograph; his words  
want to lick me into the present - the tense  
Son House always uses to speak of him.  
Coming out of the Dark Road, the Silver Moon,  
they look me up and down as though

I have subverted planking, beauty  
that feeds off ugly draughts, a clinical  
breakage in an imperial history. Pay  
me faster, pay me cash, I carry you faster,  
pay hot-love/hard-luck hobos who ride  
the station wall. Dropping the needle was like  
opening a door on his last jukehouse, nine-  
teen sixty; old place I go, leaves trembling. . . .  
When our harp player killed himself, he wrote  
a three page suicide note, took a massive  
no-mistakes overdose. Hold that woman I'm loving –  
she's taught me to howl out the blue devils.

Suck the dominant zero of my shabby  
industry! It's unacceptable trade,  
sounds organised like oil-drums in a  
car-wrecking yard. Guitar shell  
across the knees, a glance  
on the intricate drive toward death,  
silence of too much music, condensed  
like a dream in the assassins' streets.  
My new harp wrapped in sore lips surges  
in the body like the striped diesel bulleting  
past that note before the fourth verse,  
strings for the high wind to play silent,  
gauging the tonic, fanning my hand  
in the music's shell. We glowered  
at each other, throwing shadows, our barrelhouse  
quiffs turning from the keyboards. His hands  
and my body spun web between the brothers.  
Pete's guitar yearns a void,  
cleanhead parody, suddenly chokes,  
as she sings, accompanied by a trace of him,  
driven to silence, floral phonographs on a coffin.  
Arvella's face glowed, as the match flared. He

held it for a moment, glanced lazily, the ear  
*knowing* the next chord pushed back to the dominant  
and its rhyme, a limb floating the crowd.  
Paralysed down one side now, Elzadie's  
eyes had been splashed with tears,  
the sounds of Cadillac death; Arvella's voice,  
sweating the world it's breathed, his  
teeth crowned gold. She's not seen Arvella –  
the gasoline blowing black gusts above the  
flames. She could still see the charred  
frame of the cabin, blistering, red-hot, in the smoke,  
and thought: that's over and the dream book's  
closed, the strings nearly as dead as me.  
Elzadie bit her lip, trembled, silent. What  
stops the dissonance, the mad tears?  
Dancers swim in my sound, here beyond  
exchange, out of a deeply controlled accident.  
The Schlitz sign was broken, flickered  
as the dancers looked at her empty shoes  
while I sang. Precision in the slither,  
fixing mimetic fingers. He'd held the  
guitar close to his body like a dancer,  
trains re-coded as the soft roll  
of her body, sparse wires following the track  
more faithfully than a man will follow his love.

JANUARY–MARCH 1990/1993

# Sharp Talk and Amended Signatures

*Twentieth Century Blues 2*

1

Thirteen 2

for Kevin Rowbottom

Sharp talk treats you like percentages.  
Her red molar laughs, a kinetic suit  
perched and purring beside her smudged lipstick.  
Phatic 'For Sale' signs lubricate this  
master and his mistress of the  
post-colonial tea-chests. His ansafones  
all breathe softly after the bleep, 'I'll  
sort out a waterfall of hair' – but his  
penis is working out tomorrow. It  
barks for sex out of a gangster's  
appetite as her body clinches jackpot,  
their upended phrases jetting over the lush lawns.

Esher

Riot in terms of quantifiables on his communicative back staircase. He's a shadow across the power-opulent heart of London as its alarm clock trills. A posing bullfighter minority of the tag-end

His speech is smashed out anxiety living in a postmodernist world of blowing kisses to everyone. You're next. Anyone with a black flag captivates her plural image

Minutes after looking at his penis, she steps up Church Lane, watches the map of symptoms. The deliberateness of the smashed panic. Four police vans of witnesses in perfect clothes

Commentaries in which the zeitgeist is ordinary perception, just things. A disruptive poetics is called for until morning's potential high tunings re-define themselves. A universal splashed against her window. The state snapped the sash cords

He realised that higher beings meant smashed officer gaps, a haiku fission, ripping through business. Young men with street recordings sat with fingers firmly over their ears. The screaming of a woman streets away

Trash car window tales of secret videos and tarmac wind to look over your élitist clothes. First class sucker knows the body tremor as she makes herself scripture. Libido sticks to her, chewing gum from a bus seat

The structure of gungrit and the side-street glimpse papers, moistened by rain. Rust-red brain tremors that run at the speed of instinct: frenzied emanations of BNP futures, off-peak utopias, entropic nets. Walkman refusals. AIDS terror choruses tuned into the skirt. The length of the slit is a corporate failure up festivals of commerce

Sex-show post-sleep apes void into solids. He wears my response on alert as he twists, in retinal delay, dangerous in his own body space. Hollywood big sleep with powdered style-perverts

Super-consumers hand-jive silence. His body signature votes in the language of limitless quantities for the blonde, who'd skipped off too quickly. It is difficult to speak to the hunter as the hound wolf-sniffs the cameras along the route

Busybody witnesses with perfect recall of events that will not happen. She weighs these rituals like a ghost. Her atoms don't appear. Resisting, she's framed in the L of the smashed-out window, massaging the struggle on all fronts

Slips on caked pigeon shit. Streets of mercurial wheels, of amended signatures. First out of the taxi is a can of Tennants, black high heels and the flashing knife, wrapping its weight in genital protection

Short-circuited, her fingers phallic, she wears the room in adversative change. He hoists the decoy of his erection, episodic or epic. They hold a dialogue of frozen armaments, communicative frames of men falling from ladders into competence

Keys were screwed into her. He licks her clothes slapped on her image, drawing the vulnerability of the day across her error. His clause assured her. Blood, still sticky, spattered their disregard

Stencils blot out the light as naked bulbs bleach the sun from the ceiling. His tongue bores a hole through her upstairs and it's banging on the floor. His head lashes, secure, from its appetites

TOOTING  
MAY-AUGUST 1990

## Codes and Diodes are both Odes

The Magnetic Letter 2

Codes and Diodes 7

*Twentieth Century Blues* 3

Invent icicles dripping interference  
and discover structural lift  
in emergent interchange  
opening like a clam – multiply coherent  
shoals of desire. Flashes classic Hollywood shot  
in erotic slippage exhaustion,  
scorched doors for release. Desire  
dances in the polyphonic  
sentence, means a world, slips through  
the signified, refunctioned  
in our critical hold: jigsaw  
scales, particle syntax admitting  
intertexts and music of rhizomic  
diodes. Overlay of systems,  
enough revealed delight to design  
us all, while  
magnetic words twin the  
reader swiftly across echo's edge.

28 DECEMBER 1990

## Killing Boxes

Melting Borders 2  
Mesopotamia 2  
*Twentieth Century Blues* 5

Soil keeps you in touch  
on a piece of somebody  
else's shit still turning on  
that word beautiful isn't beautiful  
torn in two directions transit  
van debates wait for the  
sunset just a blob to  
me the arab shadows reality

Faces in the crowd emerge  
from the emergency a confidential  
whisper in my ear desires  
peacenik erections on charts showing  
positive coverage, as libidinal victors  
curl tongues inside her want -  
less convincing mumbling involves the  
spinning rhetoric cares for you

Nothing erotic in this writing  
except the writing kissing her  
tattooed shoulder, lifting champagne to  
long-laid hellacious phallicism, rubber  
tents and missiles melting, penetrating  
the mind favourable images from  
art a war running with  
the movie rights just run

Sand spray as a tank  
dips a word gorgeous as  
condoms over the gun barrels  
the successful sergeant's string  
of gassed canvas the network  
sings open the window veto  
there is a riot panic  
printed on the contradictory winds

Behind that Union Jack curtain  
the terminal fire-fly armadas  
run pure liquid diagrams more  
launch law than pilots dream  
windows of the street rumours  
of explosions at somnambulant destinations  
focus the single man singing  
the news through broken teeth

Listening to the combat fashion  
the theatre smoke drifts across  
boys on the piazza listening  
to hours of hissing leader  
tape passing the heads of natural  
outrage. They have been  
used, selling smaller dredgings from  
costlier sparkles on foreign rivers

Hacked blossom in her withered  
hand excrement lips at the  
wound's edge butcher with a  
body belt the eerie stillness  
we talked about with sound  
down it's entropy doubled anguish  
waxing his arse fingers war  
artist sticking to his guns

Take off to William Tell's  
turkey shoot the script aims  
and again the litany asserts  
mundane miracles and monsters revving  
into tomorrow wishful thinking in  
inverted commas the roads are  
impassable even here where the  
apple spit hits my neck

Sealing realistic chances splashed by  
chemicals far off you can  
hear the sudden wet tracked  
hiss of tyres running across  
the mouth the bomb shelter  
splinters like the words they  
speak TVs without sound playing  
to a room of men

Carrying bombs the way mourners  
carry coffins he speaks as  
a world president no slack  
no slack fog grief teeth  
biting through a smile hit  
a cultural target the word  
has disappeared a sacked fax-  
man trauma kills euphemism flat

Victory rut discussed to technical  
excess, it refuses to mean  
this world, to eulogize the  
glitter of local snow under  
your divisional cage, implausible objects,  
circumstantial happenings, slick shit clichés  
win rhetoric, says the signs, read  
your rich interdiction with collaterals

It's a lie. He rushed  
off a blurred list of  
names the mad laugh deep  
from an insomnia that seemed  
all surface sees during the  
blackout of this news war  
no voices lines crackling with  
fleet laws for the sleeping

He's only one of many  
postcards of cover shots the  
rotorblades of smile in proper  
poses of reason this night  
is arrested and those bandages  
will be collaged on those  
vox pop cheering flash desk  
men, recoding this masked desire

The sand's hot line burn:  
wildcat smears under postmodern technologies,  
t-shirts sporting these maps stretched  
across camera thumbs-up, measuring  
all manhood against princess warriors  
in metal battle bras, jinking  
oily luxury, dripping liberty under cover  
of darkness or charred infernos

Our evidence for this? Wrecked  
bent metal was shareholders' rig  
dropping down tornado seed, war  
pit monsters operatic talking heads  
with smoke grained voices wild  
weasel zap music as the  
mother of instability crackles and  
you hear the dream roasting

JANUARY-MARCH 1991

# Slipping the Mind

Thirteen 3  
*Twentieth Century Blues* 8

Slipping the mind  
figments of post-  
imperial assertion veering  
off vanished skylines  
invested window dressing  
brown potted plants  
the kick of  
Capital each daybreak

Minister shoots from  
slum avoidance nods  
at arms deals  
above a pool  
ringed with rust  
this moment not  
repeated fireplace shorn  
from a terrace

Coils of repeatable  
citizens pouring the  
eye 55 miles  
of lapping propaganda  
water colours over  
this gutter pastoral's  
precise assertion: *Liberals*  
*Kill Our Kids*

## Weightless Witnesses

Empty Diary 1991  
Killing Boxes 3  
*Twentieth Century Blues* 9

To specific cultural targets under  
missile dances, they deliver genesis,  
the meatiest burgers in history;

They launch scribbles from battlefields,  
thrust the agony shots: we're  
prisoners 20 minutes each hour;

They print misguided sermons on  
Bedouin girls' torn shoulders, Justice  
kissing pistons, lifting iffy weights;

They drop my stories in  
a quiver of blood, grunting  
victory as the arrow falls.

1991