

Complete Twentieth Century Blues

ROBERT SHEPPARD was born in 1955 and educated at the University of East Anglia. Between 1989 and 2000 he worked on the network of texts called *Twentieth Century Blues*. Previous excerpts from the project include *Empty Diaries* (1998) and *The Lores* (2003). A recent volume is *Hymns to the God in which my Typewriter Believes* (2006), and a sonnet sequence, *Warrant Error*, is due for publication by Shearsman in 2009. His work is anthologised in *Other* and the *Oxford Anthology of British and Irish Poetry*, in which he is described as 'at the forefront of (the) movement sometimes called linguistically innovative poetry'. He is Professor of Poetry and Poetics at Edge Hill University in Lancashire in the UK, and has also published criticism and poetics, including *The Poetry of Saying* (2005) and *Iain Sinclair* (2007). He edits *Pages* as a blogzine and lives in Liverpool.

Previous Publications

Poetry

- Returns, Textures*, Southsea, 1985
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
The Lores, Reality Street, London, 2003
Tin Pan Arcadia, Salt, Cambridge, 2004
Hymns to the God in which My Typewriter Believes, Stride, Exeter, 2006

Edited

- 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
The Salt Companion to Lee Harwood, Salt, Cambridge, 2007

Criticism

- Far Language: Poetics and Linguistically Innovative Poetry 1978–1997*, Stride Research Documents, Exeter, 1999
The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and Its Discontents 1950–2000, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2005
Iain Sinclair, Writers and their Work, Plymouth, 2007

Complete Twentieth Century Blues

ROBERT SHEPPARD



CAMBRIDGE

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*To Patricia and Stephen
and to Joan and Claude*

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I would like to thank all the dedicated editors involved.

Introductory Note

This volume collects, and numbers chronologically, all the poems I wrote between December 1989 and 2000, and arranges them in the network I call 'Twentieth Century Blues', with stated interconnections (or 'strands', printed as numbered sub-titles to the right of the page). It also reprints some earlier texts (written between 1983 and 1989) sequenced and numbered according to their date of incorporation into the on-going project for various purposes and on certain occasions. It is therefore a 'complete' edition.

I never imagined that there would be a single publication to amass these texts, and I am grateful to Salt for enabling this. *Twentieth Century Blues* is a collection of works intended as a network. Three essays within the network (18, 63 and the note to 74), give accounts of how I conceived it *during* its composition, particularly as regards to its structure and its unfolding as a time-based activity.

A complete edition raises questions of organisation that the original scattered publications evade. Readers may treat this codexical presentation as a pseudo-hypertext, an intratext, and the Index assists this approach, but it seemed necessary to attempt to create for this presentation a satisfying page-by-page read.

To this end I have adopted a broadly chronological arrangement, with variations to accommodate sequential reading and the integrity of complete 'books', particularly the three 'Flashlight Sonatas'. I have also moved the Index, which is a part of the network, to the end of the volume, as is conventional and convenient. The Index and Strands have been updated and represent their definitive versions. Notes, many from previous volumes, have been added.

I have taken this opportunity to revise the texts throughout; some are published here for the first time.

Robert Sheppard

MAY 2007

Preface

Melting Borders

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.

28 DECEMBER 1989

Smokestack Lightning

a mythology of the blues

for Tony Parsons

History of Sensation 5

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 for 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

2

Sharp Talk and Amended Signatures

1

for Kevin Rowbottom

Thirteen 2

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

2

Boogie Stop Shuffle 2

Strategies 2

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 capti-
vates 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