

The Flowering of Flint

New and Selected Poems

PETER ABBS was born and grew up on the North Norfolk coast in England. He has written and lectured widely on the nature of creativity and the poetics of culture. In 2004 he was Writer-in-Residence at Lyon College, Arkansas. He is the Poetry Editor of *Resurgence* and editor of *Earth Songs*, the first Anglo-American anthology of contemporary ecoverse. He has published seven volumes of poetry including *Icons of Time*, *Personae* and *Viva la Vida*. He is currently Research Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Sussex.

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)

Viva la Vida (2005)

The Flowering of Flint: New and Selected Poems

PETER ABBS



CAMBRIDGE

PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING
PO Box 937, Great Wilbraham, Cambridge PDO CB21 5JX United Kingdom

All rights reserved

© Peter Abbs, 2007

The right of Peter Abbs to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Salt Publishing.

First published 2007

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Lightning Source

Typeset in Swift 9.5/13

This book is sold subject to the conditions that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

ISBN 978 1 84471 313 4 paperback

Salt Publishing Ltd gratefully acknowledges
the financial assistance of Arts Council England



1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

For D

Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xv
FROM FOR MAN AND ISLANDS 1978	
Prelude	3
The Word	4
It	5
The Death of Three Cocks	6
Evening after the Maelstrom	8
FROM SONGS OF A NEW TALIESIN 1981	
Good Friday	11
This Nomadic God	12
FROM ICONS OF TIME 1991	
Prologue	
Who I Am	19
Fragments from a Catholic Childhood	
Premature Birth	23
At the Oak Woods	24
Unread Signs	25
The Look-out Tower in the Oak Woods	26
Myrtle Cottage at West Runton	27
The Other Child	28
Waiting for the Harvester	29
The Loss of Faith	30
Father and Son	
Tongue-Tied	33
Language!	34
Generations of Farm Hands	35
Predicament	36

Winter Visit	37
A Conversation with the Doctor at the Time of the Chernobyl Disaster	38
Crisis	39
November Garden	40
Other Memories	41
FF11506 Driver	42
The Singing Head	43
Coda	
The Buddha Statue	47
Open to Change	48
FROM PERSONAE 1995	
Prologue	51
Song of Orpheus	52
Fallen Man with one Wing	53
In Defence of the Raven	54
The Messiah	55
Rembrandt in Winter	56
Letter to Theo from his Brother: June 1889	57
Egon Schiele in Prison: April 1912	58
Stanley Spencer's Beatitude	59
Dante to Virgil at the Entrance to Hell	60
The Love Song of Peter Abelard	61
Emily Dickinson's Declaration	62
D.H. Lawrence's First Lesson: The Apple	63
What God will you do?	64
This Head	65
New Constellations	66

FROM ANGELIC IMAGINATION 1997

In the Beginning	69
A Tempest for our Times	70
On Seeing Vermeer's Kitchen-Maid in the Rijksmuseum	71
Artist's Manifesto	72
The Shadow on Bonnard's Face	73
Intimations of Mortality	74
Too near to Death	75
Psalm	76
Angelic Imagination	77
The Night Journey	81

FROM LOVE AFTER SAPPHO 1999

Post-Modern Love

Incomparable Beauty	87
First Fall-Out	88
Kamikase Stars	89
A Bleeding Wreath	90
Las Vegas Perhaps	91
Under the Burning Sycamore	92
Pisces	93
Descendants of the Fireball	94
Jewels of Consciousness	95
Speaking of Eros	96
At Cuckmere Estuary	97
A Mantra of Accidental Light	98
A Violent Cleansing	99
Navigating Darkness	100

Last Rites

At Cromer Hospital	103
All Night in Hospital	104
Travelling to a Foreign Land	105
Extreme Unction	106
At the Old House	107
On Sheringham Beach	108
A Girl in Sepia	109
The Dance of Syllables	
Alchemists Down the Age	113
The Naming of Things	114
Sprigs of Rosemary	115
The Aura of your Face	116
Massage	117
A White Dark-Scented Rose	118
Love's Unicorn	119
Girl with a Flute	120
The Marriage of True Minds	121
The Dance of Syllables	122
The Song of Words	123

FROM VIVA LA VIDA 2005**Child of Pisces**

Falling like Gulls	129
Head Gardener	130
Aspen Leaves	131
Grandmother Reading at Myrtle Cottage	132
The Glass Dome of Childhood	133
A Catholic Childhood	134
The White Gull's Beatitude	135
Other Gifts	136
The Silent One	137

A Raw Planting	138
Flowering Gorse	139
Out of Touch	140
It Returns	141
The Flowering of Flint	142
Ecce Homo: On Nietzsche's Madness	
Against the Cold	145
If You Should Meet Socrates	146
Life as Dance	147
Under the Bell-Tower in Genoa: Summer 1877	149
Seiltänzer	150
At the Foot of the Alps	151
In the Piazza: Turin, 3rd January 1889	154
Prometheus and the Eagle	155
In the Psychiatric Clinic: Jena, 19th January 1889	156
Übermensch	157
Requiescat in Pace	158
The Living Word	
Ars Poetica	161
NEW POEMS	
Learning How Not to Live	165
Witnessing	166
Living with Aphrodite	167
In Praise of Chinese Soup	168
Eschatology	169
The Way	170
Finding Words	171

Foreword

Poetry's primary task is to break, blow, burn and make us new. It is also, at other times, to perplex and unsettle, to keep us somewhat unstable and open to change. If some of the poems gathered here bring about either of these states, then I am more than satisfied.

These poems have been written over the last twenty eight years. They have been selected from seven previous volumes, the first being published in 1978, the last in 2005. I have discarded all poems that seemed to me to fail for whatever reason. I have kept revisions to a minimum, deciding (after some struggle) I had little choice but to accept the voice each poem was originally written in.

I have added or cut a few section headings but only to make the thematic concerns clearer or to enhance the flow of the poems. In all cases, the changes have been minimal.

Finally, I have added a number of new poems at the end. I hope these express further developments in my work, so that *The Flowering of Flint* is not only retrospective but, also, prospective—for I would like to think that I am not comfortably settling down, but keeping faith with the ineffable spirit of life itself.

Peter Abbs

Acknowledgements

Some of the poems in this volume have been previously published in: *Acumen*, *Agenda*, *Caduceus*, *Interpreter's House*, *London Magazine*, *Magma*, *International Poetry Review*, *Poetry Wales*, *Resurgence*, *Scintilla*, *Sea of Faith*, *South*, *Stand*, *Tears in the Fence*, *Temenos Review*, *The Poet's Voice* and *Urthona*.

The poem 'The Flowering of Flint' was commissioned by East Sussex County Council.

From
For Man and Islands
1978

Prelude

Where would you lead
me and what
would you have of
me, restless
and enigmatic
spirit? In
the enclosed garden
it is again
Autumn. Sycamore
leaves litter the
small paths—
the jagged leaves'
edges are turned
inwards and everywhere
their yellowness is
marred and blotched
with blight. In
the garden
the lemon light grows
faint. Yet what
are *you* doing
here, lover of
strange mists and burning
aromas,
at the open
gate standing with
the palms of your
hands showing? Will
you wait as
I approach and
let me read and
go where the lines
take me?

The Word

You suggest and
provoke until
I chase,

chase you wherever
you will,
I would, but

where do you
go,
down which

turning, into
which
unused chapel of truth,

so many the turnings,
crosses,
ends, I do not know—

yet, tantalizer, how
can I
forget how

you beckon so, what
you would
promise

in your lithe movement,
not to be mine,
grace

in my city,
out
of my power.

It

It skulks in the mind's undergrowth
in the dark thickets
it quivers close to the bed of rivers
a snake through the conflagration of grass
it is acquainted with stones and roots
has wound itself many times round
the dripping tentacles of nature

at dusk it flies through the warp and weft of shadows
compounds the darkness
till large familiar things loom forward
bulked with strangeness
blackness humped upon blackness
through which it lilts and slips

where do I stand but where it was
and is no longer though
something of its essence always lingers
hangs frailly in the morning
from the bent bough's sodden foliage
pervades a corner of the garden
a turning of the road

disquieted I poke the ground
dank arching grass blank stones
a thistlehead unloads its seeds
a bird flits through the charcoal thickets
the silence drums
I tread near the edge of some archaic memory
I can never reach
and spill a brief life writing
to allay the ache of it

The Death of Three Cocks

He came punctually, at eleven, the hour he said.
I took him to the shed.
He upturned the first bird
And slipped the knife into its neck.

More crimson than its crown,
The blood dripped to the ground—
Shocking in its redness—
And with one hand he kept the rent

Neck down. Mildly, he said
I have seen this since I was a child
Following the heels of the butcher
Round the farms.

With a kind of inward dread I took
The dead bird from his hands.
There was such commotion in its legs
And pinions, it appalled to hold it.

Obedient to the last transmission
Of the will, its mottled wings
Still fluttered, shut and shuddered—
Would not stay still.

Yet I must stand and watch
The next two go, wedged upside down between
The farmer's legs, to know
That somewhere in that ruffled sheen

My neighbour's knife had broken through
And watch the bird's panic and premonition ebb
As across their bright bead eyes
Slowly the coarse lids drooped and set.

Furtively, I shovelled soil upon the blood.
The children must not know nor guess.
It is the last time! Once is enough! I said.
For hours I gathered up the incriminating fluff.

At the farm that afternoon another batch of cocks were bled.

Evening after the Maelstrom

for the Darlington Family

It is evening, after the maelstrom,
After the upturning,
Burning and devastation of cities,
As reported on radio—
And (briefly) on television.
And prophesied in the last newspapers.

The herd stand by the farm's gate,
Dumb and enduring.
Even in this breeze, bitter
With mountain mist and drizzle,
Their ribbed flanks are calm as boulders—
Only their frayed tails twitching.

They have stood there
Ten thousand years, bulging
Eyes staring down
The dark track, trailing back
Through the charred centuries,
To the first spark of history.

Slathering, their warm breath
Wreathes the air; they await
Man's archaic cantic to cattle,
And a half-simple girl who wades
Slowly through the slang's
Slop and mud to guide them in.

The door opens on to dusty hay,
Bedding for a dozen animals.
Through the dark slates' cracks light
Needles the barbarian night—
Inside, at the finger's touch,
Thick milk drums into the pails.

From
Songs of a New Taliesin
1981

Good Friday

And on the Friday
Mary Magdalene
came to her Christ,

hung on the cross,
a noble bird,
stripped of his plumage,

his white skin
ripped, his quivering wings
pinned to the wood,

and she lay with him
and in his great pain
he made manifest his love.

And on the next day
the bloody tree
burst into bud,

and migrating flocks perched
on the outstretched arms.
And there was song.

This Nomadic God

1

When the God was born on the hill we stayed inside.

2

When we spotted in the valley his bloody caul making the
stream all red,
Somewhat repelled, we walked away.

3

When on the same night we stared into his great eye
Glaring through our window we switched off the light;
We said: *There can be no such thing.*
Not in our times, 2000 Anno Domini.

4

When in the darkness he dared to rise through the basement of
our house
We fumbled for the light and cried: *Ah! Dreams!—and their archaic
remnants.*
For we had read the literature. And sighed, relieved.

5

Later, when the trees' leaves shrivelled yellow,
Later, when the bent bracken bled profusely,
Later, when the low snow clouds shed their icy shingle,
Later, when the white river no longer flowed but lay nailed to its
own bed—
If you remember—and to be fair—we were both rather busy;
There were forms to sign, bills to clear,
And the house—it stood in constant need of attention and repair.

6

Yet still the conjuror-god casts his signs about,
Daily scrawls his icons on the shifting sands;
Above reeling cities brushes his gentle ideograms,
On concrete slabs executes his reckless graffiti.

7

And still, on random days, he knocks on our locked door
Many times. Incisive knocks. Insistent. What would he have of
us?
This trickster salesman, this nomadic god? If we let him in,
Would he annihilate our private space?
At our table does he want a simple place?
Is it that he wants a glass of wine? A slice of bread?
Two stale lives to transubstantiate?

From
Icons of Time
1991

Prologue

Who I Am

*He did not observe that with all his efforts he made no advance—
meeting no resistance that might, as it were, serve as a support upon
which he could take a stand, to which he could apply his powers,
and so set his understanding in motion.*

Kant

What is it that I do? This dizzy spinning
Of myself. This geometric cobweb that I make
From my own entrails. Intractable substance,
Obsessively shaped to a fine thread.
Part fact. Part fabrication. An obscure agent
In me fashioning the dark strands into pattern.
A design, somehow redemptive, however difficult.
What was could not have been otherwise.
There's a kind of freedom in admitting it.
Facts are weights. They tether random flight,
The delusions of Icarus, the Romantic type.
Filament by filament, inch by inch, I make
This architecture: a bound and limited life.
What I have struggled with is who I am.

