

Keeping Time

TIM DOOLEY has taught in and near London since 1974 and is Head of English and Film Studies at Rickmansworth School, Hertfordshire. He has reviewed poetry for *The Times Literary Supplement*, written obituaries for *The Times* and edited the small press magazine *Green Lines*. He has also been a creative writing tutor for the Arvon Foundation, Writers Inc and The Poetry School. His first collection *The Interrupted Dream* was published by Anvil in 1985. This was followed by *The Secret Ministry* (2001) and *Tenderness* (2004), both winners in the Poetry Business pamphlet competition. *Tenderness* was also a Poetry Book Society pamphlet choice.

Also by Tim Dooley

Tenderness (Smith/Doorstop, 2004)

The Secret Ministry (Smith/Doorstop, 2001)

The Interrupted Dream (Anvil, 1985)

Three Poems (Many Press, 1977)

Keeping Time

TIM DOOLEY



CAMBRIDGE

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

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First published 2008

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Biddles Ltd, Kings Lynn, Norfolk

Typeset in Swift 9.5 / 13

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ISBN 978 1 84471 333 2 hardback

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



1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

for Jo

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Acknowledgements

Some of these poems have appeared previously in the following publications: *Acumen*, *Agenda*, *Ambit*, *Brittle Star*, *Chameleons*, *Cracked Lookingglass*, *Dog*, *Exeter Poetry Prize Anthology 1997*, *The Heart in Autumn*, *North*, *The North*, *nthposition*, *Numbers*, *The Observer*, *Oxford Magazine*, *Poetry Durham*, *Poetry London Newsletter*, *Poetry London*, *The Rialto*, *Sheffield Thursday*, *The SHOp*, *Singing Brink*, *Smiths Knoll*, *Southern Review (USA)*, *Swansea Review*, *Tears in the Fence*, *Times Educational Supplement*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Verse*.

'Brief Encounter' won fourth prize in the City of Cardiff International Poetry Competition, 1992. 'Pornography' won first prize in the 1995 Sheffield Thursday poetry competition. 'Tenderness' was a winner in the Blue Nose Poets-of-the-Year competition 2001. It is also available on the CD *Life Lines 2: Poets for Oxfam* edited by Todd Swift.

Some of these poems appeared in the pamphlets *The Secret Ministry* (2001) and *Tenderness* (2004) as winners in the 2000 and 2003 Smith Doorstop/ Poetry Business pamphlet competitions.

My thanks are due to Tamar Yoseloff, Maurice Riordan, Maura Dooley and Andrew Waterman for instructive and supportive comments at an earlier stage in the shaping of this collection.

In the palm of my hand

Starting from the new towers' atria and in-house concessions,
you find a way to where this yellow stone stands,
slant and widdershins, not far from the lovely naked bones of
Catherine and William Blake. The scant
non-conformist burying ground of Bunhill Fields (hardly fields,
neat and weeded pathways lead to the chart
that marks the graves of the remembered names)—cuts between
trunkways hurrying noisily north of Moorgate.
Not being the man in the brown ankle-length coat who leaves a
single flower in water here, move on to Spitalfields
past tumbled histories of housing, a church turned concert hall,
estates and enterprises, posters stuck to walls.

Put your finger on the map and start from there, from any there,
to see through the side window of Westminster
Public Libraries (Marylebone Branch) this intent face diving
for the meaning his gloved finger points halfway
down the page towards. In puffa jackets, woollen hats or baseball
caps, carrying their goods in supermarket shopping
bags, faces of all nations, hurry, saunter, cross your path, face
or follow you. The new bagel bar. The chemists
established 1814. Blue plaques for poets in Poland Street
and Polish *Newsweek* in the cornershops. A lowslung
bus snakes and humps round a formal square. Cream walls
steeped in a sudden honey of late afternoon light.

And a river moves through it, walled but washing against
the window of a Limehouse pub, alive to the warming
of the world's waters, the exchanges of currents and currency.

Light flashes intermittently from the pyramid top
of Canary Wharf, and the yellow brown water itself is pulled
into little peaks of reflected light. We saw it from Waterloo
Bridge on that march from Lincoln's Inn to the Imperial War Museum;
then sat on the green lawn near those great guns
as Tony Benn shared memories of a century's dissent.

And upriver—wisteria on white walls, gated communities,
joggers and rowers glide past a jazz club, a cricket pitch
the entrance to a canal, public gardens, palaces.

And something like this was in his mind when he turned from
that enormous blast, looking for those in his care
that he'd ferried through Islington and Finsbury, and saw
twisted metal upstairs on what now looked like
a tourist bus. So that when help arrived and what could be
made good began to be done, what was there but
to follow those walking away, westward past the dome that
keeps Jeremy Bentham's mummified remains,
past busy hospitals beneath the telecom tower or Arab cafés
along the Harrow Road, until somewhere near
Wormword Scrubs a stranger saw the blood on his jacket
and helped him to the Casualty in Ducaine Road.

If we open the door, if we open our eyes, everything here
seems paved or clothed, labelled or priced, stamped
with its destination, encrypted with its time of arrival.

It is the sidelong looks more in recognition than
desire that release the unchanelled: the palest hint of
a blush, sky in the mirrorglass of offices, what
a girl called 'that Thomas Hardy kind of foolishness'.

The bite of the pickled chilli in the pitta salad
in Gig's fish bar in Tottenham Street has it. The heron
standing on the effluent pipe looks out for it.
Daily we brush against it or glimpse it beyond our touch.
What we walk through, fail to say, or try to hold.

The length of spring

Peace is possible. The Amnesty dove's
still stickered to the window of the house
we didn't buy from you. And now you're housed
in a wicker coffin, a hamper of
the good things you were and will be, in the love
of your still friends, in the Friends' meetinghouse.
We stay to watch your children shoulder the spades
they dug into the moist earth to cover you;
and talk as if words could recover you
to the cold air, to the light's sharpest blades.

The same fierce brightness picks out the parade
against the war, and we remember you
at the month's end as we move shoe and shoe
ahead along the Embankment, early
arrivals buying new badges, nearly
losing one another by Westminster tube
and dawdling down Whitehall, enjoying the true
absurdity of *Make Tea Not War*. Dearly
the young in black entwine themselves for warm,
lest love fail, should nothing stop the war.

Another world is possible. As the war
draws near, a slogan on a lapel draws
smiles and nods, but subdued by will and force
we stumble in. I block out the war,
listening to Jacobi's *Iliad* not the news,
until the statues start to fall across
the screens and grudging praise of 'moderate loss'
is heard beyond the dusty haze
of crazed cuneiform tablets, wrecked houses
and orphaned children's distanced cries.

Cellular

We'd grit our teeth in trains as the brash
human resources manager turned the seat
next to us into her office, or blush
as privacies invaded
our poorly air-conditioned space.

But we had also seen a strong jaw soften,
a head tilting towards its own shoulder,
murmuring to the small world
it cradles and creates. And smiled
as the straight-faced colleague
danced in the car park,
her head back, laughing
like someone living on another plane.

And later would hear how,
in Manhattan, a husband tapped again
the digits he had tried to reach all day
beneath rubble, atoms, ashes, dust
until the voice mail's memory could take
no more spoken words or text.

Digital

Like a girl with a new pony,
she's happy enough to pose
for the lens. The fun's on pause

but it's something for the folks
at home; a souvenir of the tour
to speed ahead of her on-line.

It's asked of her; she looks
almost bored in her boyish
t-shirt and camouflage pants,

which is so like a uniform,
it takes a while to see
the casual clothes are army

issue. This is a dog-lead
not a bridle. This is no
pony, just a naked man.

The TPA Bar

The door frames its establishing shot, lit
by the last June afternoon: the glitter of
rained-on pavement punctuated by platform
heels, instrument cases and, as backdrop,
the guitar shop with the sign for drum lessons
upstairs. The girl from Australia in period
makeup tells the room: *I'm in a race
with my wallet.* They're smoking their

last cigarettes. We're feeding the jukebox,
in this little bubble from the last century,
looking only now and then at the soundless
screen with its strapline *Breaking News*
and a car in flames entering the terminal,
guessing the songs from their first few chords.

In the Street

Sometimes he's tired of being a man.
The reflection he sees, in shopwindows
or the cinema screen, takes on a sad
substance, tired and withered: ash-stains
on a shiny piece of suit cloth.

The gents hairdressers, with its cocktail
of smells, stings him to tears.
He wants the sleep of wool or old stones,
to see nothing of enterprises or gardens,
nothing of merchandise, spectacles, lifts.

He's tired of his feet, of toe-clippings,
of hair everywhere. Of his shadow.
He's just tired of being a man,
waking like a root in a dark cellar,
absorbing, thinking, counting the dead.

And Monday is the screech of a tyre,
or a sudden petrol flare.
It sees him coming with his prison face,
sends him to hospitals where bones fall out of
the windows, to damp and vinegary stores.

So he walks around, for peace, for forgetfulness,
past caged birds the colour of sulphur, tripe,
dentures in a coffee pot, surgical appliances,
and old men's underclothes hanging from a line,
weeping their slow, dirty tears.

Y Habra Trabajo Para Todos

Canary, scarlet, oatmeal, azure, green.
I like the green best I think—the colour
of a young leaf or just ripe capsicum—
used here for half a face, or the profile
of a face, all but the pouch under one eye
that masquerades as a full-bellied dove.

A woman's bare arm—impossibly long—
unfolding sheaves of wheat, posters, what might be
rolls of cloth; more faces split by stalks; a clenched
fist clutching a flashlight or pick-handle,
holding up, in the patchy blue,
the bright lonely star of his country's flag.

Among the waxy cookery smears and jagged
blu-tack scars on our uneven kitchen wall,
the caption's bold lettering survives
with this ambiguous promise; for sixteen years
it's earned its place—this message from Allende's
republic—AND THERE WILL BE WORK FOR ALL.

The briefcase

in brown leather
your father gave
me after that last
but one illness
has worn grey
near the handle;
only one strap
fastens now, the
other dangling
useless. It is an
occasion to take
it out, as if a relic,
to feed and polish
it with creams,
placing these few
loose sheets of
paper on either side
of the divide.

Itinerants

In this wrecked country
where dry stone walls
once half built, now
half fallen, protect
nothing badly—you
wonder how it is
the people live. Wind
tears at leaf-stripped
trees and rain bares
rock of a soil that's
scarcely natural.

The van rattles,
rasping with Irish
on this fourth day
of storm. Packs on
separate shoulders,
we neither touch
nor quarrel. I watch
your tongue tracing
the margin of your
mouth as if a smile,
or something, were
suddenly to begin.

The Milky Way

The marble features of the Parthenon frieze
aren't the only things
to seem flatter and greyer since the summer
you were sixteen.

O'Driscoll remembers the white bicycles
those other Provos
left on Amsterdam street corners for free
and common use.

There were pictures from museums on the train
and songs of that time
in the background, the five days we crossed
from the Stedelijk

to Jordaan's brown cafés. It was later though,
with wanted posters
for the Red Army Fraction pasted on a wall
at the terminus.

There were screams in the night, soft cheese
and jam at breakfast.
A tape of Bukka White barely troubled the
glittering meniscus

of your genever, or the couple chopping a black
cube into silver-
paper deals: their downy daughter snoozing
on the bar.

We shared a four bunk room with transients
waiting to buy a car.
Stavros and his cousin were ready to go home
—after a decade

in New York, struggling with electronics and
English, repairing
beat-up radios, lecturing on Ritsos—to go home
to the free use

of their tongue. O'Driscoll is easing his way
into the story
of his second time in Holland—peace week
at the Melkweg.

Did his disarmament play leave the audience stunned
or were they stoned,
like the actors, staring at significant intervals
between words?

He wants to tell us about the boat-trip back to Hull,
how they disposed
of the stuff—fear and the North Sea at night.
I am looking

in your eyes at a different year and the dark
sea off Naxos,
a high glittering sky and its reflection,
like a window

opening in our marriage, the evening's gifts
scattered freely,
like the broad and unmourned highway
of spilt milk.

June

The first weeks of Wimbledon
and the word 'love'
has passed between us like
zero, or some chosen
absolute. That ochre picture
—sunpainted Italy—
a trail snapped from a mountain
in your teens, now
stained by late development
is in my eye again.

Those first times away from him
look empty and unfinished,
as we sort your father's things
and the word 'alone'
opens like a blister in the earth.

Preparing to meet the day

A routine and a rite—
this soaping, scraping away
of the night's crop of maleness.

Rinsing the blade,
as if concealing the evidence—

he catches, in the air,
rank nicotine and silence.

His hand on her shoulder
is no help at all.

A relic from that time
they looked together at the light
we move through, and towards.