

The Ambulance Box

ANDREW PHILIP was born in Aberdeen in 1975 and grew up near Falkirk. He lived in Berlin for a short spell in the 1990s before studying linguistics at Edinburgh University. He has published two poetry pamphlets with HappenStance Press—*Tonguefire* (2005) and *Andrew Philip: A Sampler* (2008)—and was chosen as a Scottish Poetry Library ‘New Voice’ in 2006. *The Ambulance Box* is his first book of poems.

Also by Andrew Philip

POETRY CHAPBOOKS

Tonguefire (HappenStance, 2005)

Andrew Philip: A Sampler (HappenStance, 2008)

The Ambulance Box

ANDREW PHILIP



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*for Aidan Michael Philip
born and died*

4 September 2005

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The following are translations of poems by Rainer Maria Rilke: 'Hairst Day' ('Herbstag'), 'Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes.' ('Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes.') and 'Spanish Dancer' ('Spanische Tänzerin').

'Pilgrim Variations' was written for David Martin's exhibition 'Rumours and Revelations' at the Shore Gallery, Leith, in 2005.

'Still' is a response to Alison Watt's painting of the same title in the memorial chapel of Old St Paul's Episcopal Church, Edinburgh.

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fo cheò

islands buried in the sky's white sands

Summa

Even the stones cry out.

Even the trees shrapnelled
into leaf and blossom.

Even the cough of dust
shuffling down a blade of sun.

Even the sunlight itself,
the movement of the air,

the gashed and mounded earth.
Even the tripwire heat,

even the hirpled season's
unseasonable crops ;

even the implacable greenness
of each field, lawn and brae.

Even this caged
and blootered heart

rattling the bars for freedom—
even it is party

to the gathering cause.

Pedestrian

Someone was standing in the middle of the road.
She stood astride it, just beyond
the blind spot on a sharp, countryside bend,
so hidden that I nearly ran her over.
At first, she seemed an ordinary figure
—jeans, a fitted t-shirt, long brown hair—
but for the confidence with which she stood
where any car would slam straight into her.
Almost as soon as we jerked to a halt
and I got out the car to remonstrate,
the space around her ruptured
with the opening of wings
as colourful as the flocks of paradise.
She stretched her hand towards me, said
I know you'll take good care of it and poured
from her palm into mine a sleeping child,
scarcely the size of a nut and sprouting
from its belly a shoot topped off by a tiny leaf.
I tried to ask the obvious questions, but she
folded herself from our vision.
I felt her gift stir slightly, though it slept
as soundly as it does now in my hand.
How can I drive on with this entrusted to me?
I'm rooted here, keeping watch
on the growth of what is planted in my palm—
this difficult, unasked-for joy.

Triptych

I. HIS WADING LIGHT

after Rembrandt's

'The Flight into Egypt: A night piece'

Keep moving!—I say to myself—*Keep moving: by daybreak, we need to be far from where we started and are now.*
Never was I so scared of the dark:
this night's that solid, the trees, bushes
and rocks seem made of the gloom. Never
was a light so heavy as the one
I'm carrying. How can I keep it
from spilling itself into the world?
I used to know where I was with God.
I knew—even through all her visions
and that first strange dream of mine—until
I held the bairn, steadying his head
like it's the last nail for my coffin.

II. A VOICE IS HEARD IN RAMAH

I have to trust him now:
his dreams and sense of direction:

we heard the death squads and screams
as we stole out the town,

the smashed doors
and fruitless attempts to resist,

the inconsolable mothers sobbing
and the exhausted silences of their men.

We could hear it all for ages
as we picked our way over rocks and scrub.

Hardly a word has passed between us since.
What could we say with all that behind us

and knowing that our boy—my boy—
the boy I huddle, feed and coorie down—

is the one they are after,
the cause of all that death?

III. DOWN DARKNESS WIDE

Enough light to see by. I don't want
enough light to see by, not if this
is all I can see. How could we know
we were harbouring a fugitive
among our infants before those beasts
lit torches at the town's edge and tore
the deep black veil from our streets and homes?
By then, it was too late. Now, I am
a man twice my age and adding years
every tiny grave we dig. It's said
the one they wanted missed the slaughter:
may the father perish well before
the son's majority, the mother
live the grief we owe to her offspring's
presumption to be born as one of us.

Wandelvakanties Dicht bij Huis

I.

IN SIGHT

We stopped in our tracks—
someone flicked on the poppies,
squinted at us down
the length of dyke we trod, down
the long-barreled afternoon.

II.

BIRD LIFE ON THE MARCH TO ARNHEM

A stork fled the calm.
Perhaps it saw them coming,
those rains that caught us
marching the edge of the field
to the call *Strengthen! Strengthen!*

III.

IT WAS ON A DAY SUCH AS THIS

A wave of barley.
Poplars painted on thin air.
The light cracks like paint—
a twig beneath a jackboot—
a mind beneath the white lamp.

Child of Calmer Waters

for Noah Nicholson

Child of calmer waters, you come
after the storm.

May your tongue be
the olive branch in the dove's beak.

May dry land always be granted:
a firm place

to set your foot:
a clear but unfamiliar stride to take.

Singularity

I imagine the universe
hefted

in the hands of God
lighter even

than you will be
little hoard of brightness

when you come
squalling into my arms

Hairst Day

Lord: it is time. The simmer gied braw yield.
Lay yer shaddae down upon the sundials
an lowse the winds ontill the fields.

Command the final fruits tae ful the vine ;
gie them twa mair days o southren weather,
push them intil ripenin and pester
the last o sweetness throu the heavy wine.

Them that has nae hous will no can bigg ane nou.
Them that's by their lane has lang tae wait,
tae wauken, read, write muckle letters late,
stravaig the wynds an avenues unquait
when leaves is driftin throu the toun.

The Invention of Zero

What like was it
 this abundant world

where nothing was not—
 no neat ring

shackling us to absence,
 no way not

to count or be counted—
 where everything

filled without this
 empty nest of a number

perched in the mind,
 everything swerved

its wide white oblivion;
 and could we

given the state of our knowledge
 live with the lack of it

unable to quantify
 certain populations

in the wild, the exhaustion
 of our reserves,

the number and intensity
 of cries in the night?

Saxifrage

seed with a sharp eye for the tenderness
that can open a drystane mind

(sole voice voting for the impossible
delicate light going on in the darkness)

seed that shows how slight is the sustenance
a life can grow from

(a life no less

and yet never enough)

The Ambulance Box

No one can swear how it fell
into our hands. No one

can fathom its substance or build.
It mystifies all

who think of themselves as whole
but those of us huddled

round our various wounds
are at home with the box

and all it contains.

Hear us,
shoulder to shoulder in the dusk,

celebrate life—sprained and splinted
broken

bandaged

set to heal

Cardiac

for Alexander Burrough

You ask the reason why we've just one heart:
dear friend, I am surprised that's not enough.
Perhaps you have forgotten how it's built:
the doubling of each chamber, of each beat,
which means that dialogue and argument
—for all that can be said in detriment
of this—are ever basic to our quick.

And think how heart rates quicken with deceit
as much as with the first gasp of desire.
What separates a lover from a liar
if nothing in the heart? Even the pick
of those we share our pulse with shares this jolt
beneath the ribs, this double click of love.
How could they cope with even one just heart?

45 Minutes

time enough

I listen to my wife and daughter breathing through the night

time enough for three shots at fame

the night that opens round us like the latest film

time enough to travel between certain major cities

a film released to eager crowds across the globe

time enough—or so we were told—for the unthinkable to strike

this globe that shudders through the depths of space

time enough for the hero of the show to avert disaster

the depths we see as the dark between the stars

time enough to dream the outline of a better world

the stars that furnish the dust of our bodies

time enough to be born and to die

these bodies we surrender every moment

time enough to learn that no time is ever enough