

## HUNTING A VOICE

John Greening

*Thoughts on the publication of 'Hunts, Poems 1979-2009' (Greenwich Exchange)*

The first of my poems to feel like the real thing was written when I was a postgraduate student, living in an idyllically remote 'tied cottage' on the banks of the River Exe. The remains of an old orchard lay next to this farmhand's bungalow and I found myself one day late in 1976 standing among the trees willing a poem to emerge. Having tried to write the stuff since I was about eighteen, I had come to believe that poetry was the result of intense, almost mystical contemplation, and my reading of William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound had taught me that there were few ideas but in things and that I should go in fear of abstraction. If I could fix my gaze steadily on, say, twigs ramifying on an apple-tree, I might come up with something better than I had produced in the last four years. I looked, I kept looking, and I wrote. So 'The Orchard' appeared and was accepted by Emma Tennant for her broadsheet, *Bananas*. It's not such a great poem now I look back at it and I haven't included it in my *Poems 1979-2009*, but it marked the beginning of something, and my wife still occasionally quotes its last line about the blackbird who 'pecks all the eaters and sings'.

This was perhaps something of a false dawn chorus, although there were other poems which Emma Tennant accepted – the opening of a group of pieces about Plymouth; and later the somewhat bleak 'Baby-Arctic', which foreshadows 'The Winter Journey' sequence. Ted Hughes seemed to like these, too. I had cheekily sent him a batch from Bramford Speke, knowing that he lived nearby and had close links with the university where I was working for my M.A., and he kindly replied in encouraging terms. Since verse drama was the subject of my dissertation, I was less preoccupied with pure poetry at this time and what Hughes called the 'hold-all flexible quality' of the free verse in my *Three Devon Plays* apparently appealed to him (see Christopher Reid's *Letters of Ted Hughes*). I suppose there is a primitive, Hughesian quality to some of that writing and I was undoubtedly under his spell, reading all of *Crow* aloud in a single night, relishing the new volumes as they appeared, and on one memorable occasion in Hammersmith, hearing him recite from *Moortown*. But it was Eliot whose influence most

dominated. I had even learnt *The Waste Land* by heart (to impress my fiancée) and was devoted to *Four Quartets*.

My twenties were spent familiarising myself with the canon. I had studied English at university, but very little contemporary poetry came my way. Curiously, the one living poet I had encountered at Swansea was from Ireland – John Montague, who would later be a powerful influence (‘Like Dolmens Round My Childhood...’, for example, was the model for my ‘Under the Flight Path’). He came to give a reading and I remember still the ‘mythical stammer’ and the mesmerising refrain of ‘Godoi godoi godoi’ from his ‘Cave of Night’ poems. But then I had no idea how someone like Montague fitted into the picture, or indeed what the picture was. Gradually, during my year at the University of Mannheim – where I managed to speak little German and study even less – and then at Exeter and in the subsequent months of casual work as a children’s magician and an EFL teacher, I tried to absorb what had been going on in the last half century or so. By the time I was married and working for Hans Keller at BBC Radio 3, I was discovering some of the less obvious poets’ corners and I was beginning to experiment more boldly with my own writing. Luckily, Hans – a musicological genius with a self-confessed blind-spot for poetry – gave me a room of my own and told me to go and write poetry. The phone hardly ever rang. Apart from taking coffee to Edmund Rubbra and other members of the New Music Department’s score-reading panel, there was plenty of time to write.

But other than those few titles I have mentioned, there is not much from the early seventies that I would want my children to read. Before we were married, Jane and I used to attend an amateur dramatic group in Twickenham, run by Jack Redon, the grand-nephew of the artist Odilon Redon. Jack was an extraordinary man (and I did manage to capture him in a later poem, ‘The Ash’), full of wise saws and anecdotes. Two things I remember: firstly, the heap of unperformed playscripts he had written, which makes me look ruefully at my own similar heap; and his simple remark about the importance of finding a voice. I think that I had not found my voice at that time. Ironically, I didn’t find it until I left radio – when we gave up our BBC jobs, departed London for good and volunteered to teach in Upper Egypt for two years.

I cannot be sure which of my many Egyptian poems came first, but it was probably 'Drive to a Temple', with its rather contrived picture of a taxi driver putting all his concentration into smoking while he hurtles us along a desert road. Some of the language is uncomfortably raw, ill-judged, and my father-in-law was irritated by the suggestion that steering could be put into overdrive (it can in Egyptian taxis!). There are others that are more fully achieved, where my technique was less like that driver's and I actually managed to keep my eyes open while I wrote. This was, after all, my way of preserving the places, the people, the events of those extraordinary two years. In the heat of the Tropic of Cancer, the young poet's senses were all but overwhelmed: men and women and children who seemed to have stepped from pharaonic wall paintings; markets reeking guava, mango, cumin, bassboussa, sheeshah; desert sands running into half a mile of blue; white lateen sails on a frieze of date-palm and bouganvillea; mythology and history beckoning from every dark-eyed tomb, from every drowned temple pylon. I simply exuded poetry.

Much of it remains unread, shoved in an old file marked 1979-81. Handling those coarse yellowing sheets with their blurry carbon lettering brings back the magical power of the place and the period. And yes, I am still pleased with some of them. 'A Date from Nubia', the portrait of our dear Nubian porter, Shukri, for instance – and not only because these days I find it more difficult to capture people in words. Or 'The Crack', which emerged after I had read the whole of Louis MacNeice's *terza rima* 'Autumn Sequel', and which originally went on for several more stanzas after the image of the heart stopping, was perhaps my first inkling that I could do a satisfactory bit of formal work. 'Ozymandias' had been one of the first poems I ever learnt by heart and this seemed to inhabit the same territory. It was a way of fixing that Aswan granite quarry in words, too. I can still see the obelisk lying there with its fatal crack just as it was when it was abandoned thousands of years ago. The poem is just as much a personal souvenir as the slab of pink granite on my study shelf (where you can see the marks from the wooden wedges the quarrymen used to cut it).

I was always conscious, of course, that it's easier to write about the exotic, but that didn't hold me back. I no longer had to go out looking for apple-trees; I had been handed a subject. All I needed to do was what Jane did with our trusty little Instamatic

camera: point and shoot. Consequently, there are ‘snapshots’ in that old file of everything I saw, heard, smelt. What made the best of them spark, I believe, was that I was setting – albeit simplistically – rich against poor, past against present, myth against reality. The contrast between the modern tourist promenade or ‘corniche’ and the humble streetlife of open sewers and bare electric wires right behind it provided the template. ‘Westerners’ – certainly one of the very earliest poems I wrote out there – plays on the Ancient Egyptians’ name for the dead and was always going to be a crucial poem. Inevitably, it became the title of my first collection.

Our Egypt years coincided with my discovery of the Ulster poets, who similarly had a very clear subject laid before them; and I can recall sitting in our flat in Aswan with Michael Longley’s *The Echo Gate*, which one of our many visitors had brought with them for me from the British Council Library in Cairo. The Heaney of *North* and (particularly) *Field Work* I had already begun to explore, although his impact on my work was less immediate. Nowadays I regard him as the most pervasive influence of all. Books were scarce in our part of Egypt, so we treasured those that turned up: Pound’s versions of Confucius stay with me from that time (I stumbled on them in Alexandria), and it was not entirely surprising that the first review of *Westerners* (in the *TLS*) compared it to early EP (although WCW’s *Selected*, which I also had with me, was probably more responsible for the prescription-pad quality to many of the poems).

Young poets have very little idea how good or bad their work is. That is why they tend to like to try poems out on people. Certainly I did a lot of trying out, as our old VSO friends will testify, although it seemed a much more natural thing to do in such a context. We had no television or radio: I could at least offer an alternative to the Nubian dancing in the Palace of Culture. Anyway, I’ve always enjoyed reading poetry aloud. There were a good number of language and literature graduates among the volunteers and I received some heartening responses from them. Sometimes I would send poems back home for my parents to distribute to magazines – Roger Garfitt took several for *Poetry Review* – and just before we were due to leave Egypt, I heard that I had won first prize in the Alexandria Poetry Festival. I was to be awarded a papyrus certificate and a gold medal by Jihan Sadat, wife of the president, on the site of one of the Wonders of the World, the ancient Pharos. Unsurprisingly, we stayed on for this. Although the event was star-

studded and televisually striking, the achievement wasn't quite as spectacular as it sounds: I suspect that the second prize-winner may have been virtually the only other entrant in a competition arranged by a wonderfully eccentric American diplomat, who wined and dined us during the weeks leading up to the presentation. But the winning of what sounded like a very prestigious poetry competition must have helped my first publisher – the aptly named Hippopotamus Press – to commit to *Westerners*.

It had been a hard slog to find any publisher: a slog that never ends for all but a few lucky poets. There had been almosts and not quites, there had been volleys of indignant frustration (on my part) followed by tolerantly courteous (and occasionally equally indignant) responses from small press after small press. I knew by the 1980s that the only way to get a book was to have a track record in the magazines. What I wasn't so good at was coping with the Dynastic time scale used by poetry publishers. But I persevered. I knew of the Hippopotamus because the publisher's brother was a good friend in Exeter. Roland John – a Poundian if ever there was one – proved to be one of my more rigorous editors and wisely removed a couple of weaker poems from the manuscript. There simply wasn't room, however, for a fairly long Akhenaten monologue, something I have since regretted: in *Poems 1979-2009*, I am pleased to say, he is restored to his consort, Nefertiti. There is also a very recent updating of the Amarna story. In fact, I have had to head the Egypt section in this book '1979-', since there really is no end in sight to my writing about those years: The 'Tutankhamun Variations' sequence surprised me in 1987, then the book-length story 'Omm Sety' a decade later. One day, I hope to return to where it all began (we never have) and no doubt more poems will follow.

In my beginning was my end, however, since coming back to the UK, without the prospect of a job, and faced by catastrophic family circumstances, there did not seem to be an obvious way forward. In fact, the way forward was to go up – to Tayside, where Jane had found a job teaching Vietnamese Boat People and had tracked down a spare room for us with a young couple called Glyn and Neil. Up to Arbroath we went, with our turquoise Mini 850 and our few worldly goods; soon we had immersed ourselves in Chinese/Vietnamese culture and before long I was doing some part-time teaching of these lovely, traumatised people, and we found ourselves a council flat. We even bought a

secondhand king-size double mattress, bringing it back to the otherwise bedless spare room balanced on top of our Mini – a metaphor, perhaps, for the state of my poetry, increasingly preoccupied with monarchy and history, much more ambitious than was good for it. Some little pieces about our Vietnamese and Chinese friends still hold up quite well and they were published as a pamphlet, *Boat People*. Again, this was writing about the ‘other’, rather than coming to terms with my own culture, which at this period was crumbling and cracking as Thatcher turned the screws. But it was poetry; and there was drama – a play about Stevenson, which won an Edinburgh Festival Award – and some short stories. One about our refugee painter friend was accepted by Peter Ackroyd for a PEN anthology (I have hardly written any short stories since then).

As the winter of 1981-82 deepened and became one of the most severe on record – particularly in NE Scotland – I began to grow very interested in the literature of Polar exploration. I had discovered in a library sale a book about modern scientific Antarctic researchers; this volume, with its enticing pictures, referred a great deal to *The Worst Journey in the World*, Apsley Cherry-Garrard’s account of Scott’s expeditions. When I went looking for this in Arbroath library, I found myself striking up a friendship with the librarian there, who showed me the library’s specialist Arctic/Antarctic collection – it existed courtesy of the Commando regiment stationed near the town, experts in this kind of warfare. This same unit would very soon be in the front line of a war where such expertise might well be required, since Mrs Thatcher was about to dispatch ships to the South Atlantic. While this conflict was stirring and while Jane and I were stranded in a freezingly remote corner of the land, something told me (perhaps it was reading that excellent Robert Nye Faber anthology or just that same over-ambitious spirit) that I should teach myself to write sonnets. And I would do it by telling the story of the winter journey undertaken by three of Scott’s men to fetch specimens of the Emperor Penguin’s egg. It was a 36-day journey and I would write 36 different sonnets, one a day, following that story. Such are the benefits of creative abundance and of not having a 9-5 job (the Scottish Arts Council were soon willing to consider me as an honorary Scot and grant me a Writer’s Award). All art is the result of obsession; and this particular obsession, which culminated early in 1982, led to a set of poems which it still excites me to read. It’s not often that I have ‘performed’ longer sequences, but I was so delighted with this new

arrival that I invited friends to a reading of the complete 36 sonnets ('The Winter Journey') in the drawing room of my father-in-law's house in Hampton Hill.

There was something about those poems and they soon appeared as the main part of a small collection, *Winter Journeys*, published by one of my many publishers whom I have never actually met in person – David Tipton and his Rivelin Press. This sequence it was, I think, that would later catch Neil Astley's eye at Bloodaxe, as he was keen to reprint it as part of my 1991 collection, *The Tutankhamun Variations*. I believe it was Douglas Dunn who recommended me to Bloodaxe. I met Douglas when we were living in Arbroath and he was on a residency at Dundee University following the tragic loss of his first wife.. I recall going to his flat and noting that there were poems in progress on his desk, even one left half finished in his typewriter. He said apologetically that they were just elegies... Living in Scotland gave me the excuse to explore more of the many Scottish poets I admire. I still return to Iain Crichton Smith's *Selected*, which he launched in Dundee when we were there. Douglas took me for a curry with Edwin Morgan, too, when – as we chatted about my time in Egypt – there were jokes about Copts and Robbers. Norman MacCaig is another Scottish poet I frequently turn to for inspiration, remembering how he would go about writing a new poem: sit in his chair and wait (I suspect that there may have been whisky involved too). The densely sown, high yield quality to some of Douglas's own middle-period work perhaps found its way into my polar sonnets. And his disdain for the metropolitan centres ('Remembering Lunch'), his constant concern for the local (*St Kilda's Parliament*) – these were, I think, important factors in my coming to rural Hunts and trying at last to write about my own back yard. It might not have happened. There were two alternative options: one was the writer-in-residence post I applied for in Douglas's old back yard, Paisley (that went, much more fittingly, to James Kelman); the other was for us to take teaching jobs with the British Council in Baghdad.

We did not anticipate staying in Huntingdonshire for 25 years, but it appealed the moment I was driven by taxi down the ungated road from the old A604 to Kimbolton. The spearheads of the park's wellingtonia rose up out of the little valley with their own hint of the exotic. There were little follies here and there; that bizarre double bend as you enter the village. And then the castle, where Catherine of Aragon died, where

Cromwell's right-hand man ran the Civil War, where Popham lived who sentenced Walter Raleigh and Guy Fawkes, and where the fireworks for Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee were made by the school's chemistry teacher... Enough for anyone to spend a few decades writing about. But perhaps what appealed most was the idea of settling in a shire which, though visited by poets from Donne to Cowper, hadn't been much written about and which didn't actually even exist any more (Hunts had become Cambs). My father-in-law's observation that we were 're-entering the womb' has stayed with me, particularly since we started producing children, but if I have produced any enduring poems I think they will be from this time in my life, not least because it is when I came to know my dear friend Stuart Henson. Stuart is, unlike me, a Hunts-born poet and writes about the area with a local's unaffectedness. Nevertheless, his territory has preoccupied this interloper, especially in the three sets of Huntingdonshire poems, with their experimental long hexametrical lines, each slightly more formal than the last, the third set using a species of *terza rima*. It was, ironically, Seamus Heaney's essay about 'Englands of the Mind' that set me off on this 20-year exploit (eclogues became nocturnes became elegies). They have been a way of gauging what is going on in my creative internal engine. I have put them at the heart of my *Poems 1979-2009* and have named the book *Hunts* after them.

Has my voice become that of a provincial poet? I hope not. At any rate, I remind myself that you could level the same accusation ('provincial' is always an accusation) at Wordsworth or Cavafy or Tu Fu. A pastoral poet? Perhaps – depending on what you mean by pastoral. Like the Elizabethans, whose work I count as a major influence, I am fascinated by the tension between city and country. When I write about rural life it is in the words of someone who spent his childhood 'in the great city pent', although I have always been more willing to get my boots muddy than I suspect most Elizabethan poets were. I could never write about the mud and mayhem of nature like Ted Hughes, but I still believe that it is at the heart of poetry. And I believe that the rhythm of verse is closely related to the process of walking: I am a keen walker.

I am not, however – at least, since I gave up fishing in my teens – a huntsman. The title *Hunts* has, like *Westerners*, like a number of my book titles, an unsubtle double meaning. Every new poem is a quest for the poet, but many of the poems in this book are



about hunting for something, be it a penguin's egg, a lost lover, an artefact or the answer to life's essential mysteries. In the hunt for a true poem, in my attempts at 'getting something right in the language' (as Howard Nemerov put it, whose 'Brainstorm' made an impression on me as a schoolboy), I have followed those ramifying branches in the Devon orchard in several different ways: a conversational *plein air* style for sequences from the 1980s, 'The Coastal Path' and 'Fotheringhay'; a more self-consciously artificial and dramatic manner for the 1990s narratives, 'Gascoigne's Egg' and 'Omm Sety'. For my last collection, *Iceland Spar* (Shoestring, 2008), about my father's time in Iceland during the Second World War and my hunt for the site of 'Valhall Camp', I adopted a much cooler, more open style than I have ever used before, and spent years worrying over the poems, many of which were first drafted in 2001. They seemed too plainspoken, too vulnerable. At the same time, I have recently been writing quite dense and contingent pieces about mythology and personal history and music. Like the strings of a violin (an instrument I play poorly but enthusiastically), a poet's voice needs regular adjustment and occasionally might be radically retuned for a folk effect or for something avant garde. The important thing is that one finds the right pitch for the right occasion. The voice itself, if it is that of a true poet, should ring as reliably as the note from a tuning fork – or the note that used to sound from the Colossi of Memnon at sunrise, before (and here is a warning to us all) Septimius Severus came along and tinkered with it.