

After the Goldrush

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Peter Carpenter

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Peter Carpenter's fifth collection, *After the Goldrush*, follows *Catch* (Shoestring) and *The Black-Out Book* (Arc). He is a Visiting Fellow at the University of Warwick and was Creative Writing Fellow at the University of Reading from 2007-08. His most recent poems have appeared in *Poetry Review*, *London Magazine* and *Poetry Ireland Review*; he is a regular reviewer and essayist for *Use of English*. He has co-directed Worple Press since 1997 and is currently a trustee for the Poetry Society.

He has performed and taught at many venues including the Aldeburgh Poetry Festival, Ways With Words, The Troubadour and the Poetry Café. He contributed to Iain Sinclair's *London: City of Disappearances* (Hamish Hamilton) and *La Isla Tuerta: 49 poetas británicos: 1946-2006* (Lumen/Random House).

For Amanda, Zoë and Beatrice

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To paint's to breathe,
And all the darkneses are dared

– Elizabeth Jennings

An Unidentified Man

He's not petting a marmoset
or stroking the breast feathers
of a hooded falcon.
His hat-badge is blank
and his livery is unknown.

Behind him no roses
or marigolds, no hidden clues
in a fusion of oak and vine,
no sectarian motifs, nothing
to suggest that he's a cleric,
barber or surgeon to the king
or member of the Hanseatic League.

There's no obvious ennui
or resolution in his features,
no helpful foot-note
to say he was imprisoned
for his beliefs, yet still
we share his space,
find ourselves in his presence.

Mister Memory

Forgive the chemical glaze to the eyes,
the clammy handshake, the *how's it going, mate*,
and for god's sake don't square up to him.
That's close enough. Ignore the sappy grin,
the turned-back Burberry baseball cap
(complete with Cross of St. George patch) –
too late, we're shuffling down Adelphi Road,
him doing his thirty nine steps routine,
and me collared with the Mau Mau, the great
surge of fifty three, whalemeat, those legendary
pre-match antics of Budgie Burridge.

From the Smokery

Through the miracle of the smokery
it comes out fresh on the enamel plate
a full forty years on, stinking the place
to high heaven. I turn it from pipistrelle
to a woman's leather gloves to giant insect –
a stag beetle, cleavered, legs in the air, opening up
like a good short story.

Its armoury of bones
and deflector shields is surely cast in bronze.
A spine to work under and lift clear
with the line of the knife before the flesh
can be enjoyed: the intricacies of a whole life,
worth taking time over.

My long-dead grandfather
puts it there in front of me. Windows run
with condensation. The grill's still on for toast.
I make a start as he's creasing flat his *Mirror*.

The Swing

Simple construction: one sawn branch set between the Ys of adjacent apple trees, cookers, part of the orchard plot divided across the gardens of four new houses. Thick nylon cords to take the plank, three paving stones specially laid into the turf beneath. I'm in my stride, a good rhythm from legs extended up front then feet tucked in behind, rocking the whole thing, encouraging sudden late fallers. Mother's framed against kitchen windows that drip with condensation. Today it's her steak and kidney thing with the suet topping.

I stare out to the crab apples down by the crazy paving and swear blind it's Uncle Jim, vast pleated trousers held up with crimson braces, buffed cherry brogues, collarless shirt, huge rear facing my way. His left arm waves me forward. He's stuck, that's it, like those parachutists at Arnhem, and all he needs is a really good shove on his grand derrière, obvious really.

'Give us a hand, smartish, young Pete, jump to.' I glimpse curls above the short back and sides and those special glasses that turn dark in sunlight. But what about the 'massive attack' that did for him one night in front of the set back there in Worcester Park? It's too late now – he's into an Arthur Askey routine: twiddling the shades between thumb and forefinger, dribbling slightly: 'I'm a-thanking you, I'm a-thanking you, all you lovely people, I'm a-thanking you.'

Keith Standing

Field mushroom ears. Monday's callus of snot
or mashed potato still there on frayed Airtex collar come Friday.
John Lennon specs bleared by fingerprints, ice-rink scoured;
basin crewcut, involuntary half-grin, right arm braced permanently
in the air. Class fall guy, back-up anarchist when General Science
with Doc Death had passed its sell-by date.

'Sir, sir, I've swallowed some copper sulphate, sir.'

A frothy lisp of ocean-blue cola. Epsom District. Sirens, the works.

You grew on us. A trouper. For P.E. repeated offence:
coal-dust socks, no House vest. Punishment: in sheeting rain
to pick flints off terraced pitches down at Priest Hill. Undaunted,
you deliver them in a sack to Norris's desk like Millet's Sower
in steamed-over cartoon specs. Every day, arm aloft, the grin.
'Erm someone else... no, not you, Standing.'

'Sir, sir, I've got a rubber stuck up my nose, sir.'

But here's a question for you, Keith – how did it go? Not
the extraction of that tough khaki-green lozenge, but all those
after school activities – your late teens, employment, raising
a family, bank statements, the long haul, your life?

You can put your hand down now.

Orion

You have to see me to believe me or so I'm told.
I was up there when Dorothy was writing her journal:
Moonlight lay upon the hills like snow.

Examine me now
and remember how your father fixed my position
in his calculations over Essen before the incendiary drop.
He thought I'd gone, but I came back for him years later,
unceremonious, no big deal, after that poached egg
on toast he'd fancied and a Sunday repeat of *Morse*.
On his side of the bed I touched him – sent him tumbling
past the face of the alarm clock, luminous, circa half
four in the morning. Had he been able to part the curtains
he'd have spotted me back up there, a nonchalant thief
on a clear night lining up for the identity parade, ready
to hold his gaze as sirens and blue flashing lights broke the peace.

Tour

After all the rigmarole – certification, house clearance, crem, the final scattering – there’s just this tacky plastic concertina of a wallet to show for you. A different heading at the top of each expandable compartment: car, bank, insurance, war pension, licences. We think it’s all there, but hidden away in a top drawer under coils of M&S socks and pants, we find an address book, clover green, dimpled, the size of an old petrol lighter.

On the back inside cover a list of targets from the tour you survived: Gelsenkirchen, Essen, Stettin and so on. Also, in your precise angled hand, black ink gone mauve, other stuff: digs, crew, first names of women crossed out, addresses with no postal codes, four digit telephone numbers. Tracer lines of a life before us.

The Going

Tottenham Corner 1913

Last year all the talk was about a filly.
This year there was good money on the King's horse.
We were done up with the best of them.
The sun came on strong. Away from the booths
by the Grandstand over past
the gallops there were larks way up high.

Matt Wake, Phil Connor, Tom Mack –
all of the big names were out there
on the course. The going was officially good
to firm. You don't realise how lush it is,
the grass, how well-watered and green,
how steep the slope is, how much
it falls away at the turn, until you get really close.

Before the starter's call there's a silence
and then the roar. We follow our colours
until they come to our corner
and we were all thrown. A bundle
in black and white through the rails.
Then she went under. Some reared
and then recovered. Near us the glimpse
of a face, wormcasts in hair.

The charge of sound for the last furlong
came over the hill and we ran to catch
a glimpse of the winners being unsaddled
and led up to the rubbing house,
to get the distances, prices, to find out
what all the fuss was about.

Near Ronda

He came here to breathe –
to live that way must have been
his determination.
Trace a finger through dust
on the marble-topped chest –
from the master bedroom,
crutch-angled, the legs
of two easels, rust-splashed.
Behind stringed piles
of *The Listener*
canvasses face into one
another. A gecko scuttles
across the baked terrace.
Squint into the light
he worked from
a nailed tautness to these
as it took his breath away.
Drawers are wedged
with mauves and lemons,
oxidised solid in their tubes –
a brush you expect to give
flicks against your thumb-nail
brittle as fish-bone.
It used to swim
with the movements
of wind through leaves.

Locust

Part of some crack marine crustacean airborne fleet,
shorn of antennae, mistaken for a flying lobster
by some shredded Roman gauleiter on the retreat
from North Africa – you are the missing part
of the equation (with no Pythagoras to unpick you),
some low-life extra in an eighties boiler suit
yomping across the stage with your charnel house mates.
Riot shield humour, copper-wire jaws, reinforced
perspex body armour: your crew know just how
to spread the shit: famine, havoc, death... you name it.
From another thousand-plane daylight raid you dump
birds and borers into our gobs; compound eyes in the zone,
riding a dirty hunch, clamped until kingdom come
on your partner's back, short on social skills as a sandstorm,
cranking up again for one last fucking rampage.

Lines for the Trial of Saddam Hussein

this dead butcher – Shakespeare

he survived for days on Mars Bars in his shallow pit – CNN

We had some fun over the years. And, yes, I'll happily talk you through it: underground facilities, the instruments of restraint, stainless steel gullies for effluence (ash, fat, fibre and so forth). The palaces would have stood the test of time. My systems will go on: the irrigation will allow orange-groves, fruit to pluck. And some day when you flatten out your maps, trace supply lines, study my blueprints for the people in the marshes, it'll be me you see, like a watermark on a note held up to the sun. Me, as you sprinkle chalk-dust to dry black ink from the fat Mont Blanc.

I was right.

You may nod if you agree.

I have their names, you know.

The ones who set me up then swung the wrecking-ball, who leaked the faces of my dead sons. And me, when I emerged from my pit – incisors inspected as if I were a horse come to market. I allow myself a smile though at some of you. Twitching like cats in your power naps as my official face comes out of nowhere into those air-conditioned quarters.

The advice is simple: don't flinch – there are no blows to avoid. Just show due deference, feel the force of my fingers around your shoulders.

Brace your spine, stand tall,
plant your feet in the sand.

Study me.

Like so.

Sand Person

all that remains are stains in the sand

– Sutton Hoo Information Pack

I challenge you. I live alone
now in symbols: crossed
arrows through a crown.
Then people knew my name.
I had no sword but I led them:
in the face of other forces
I went out to do battle,
staff held high in one hand.

For days after, I swung
on gallows: pelvic girdle
skewed by the pull. Birds
of prey tucked into soft flesh:
they did for me, and some.
Now I'm a shadow curve.
Then people knew my name.
Make me out. I challenge you.

The Facts of Life

One book given; the other found. The first an HMSO publication. Government-approved guide to puberty – sequences of bodies in black and white, naked, standing, chins raised, ill at ease, palms parallel to hips, faces morphed away to preserve anonymity. Man from boy, woman from girl: genitals, pubic hair as deemed fit for adolescents. Black and white line drawings, regimented, neat diagrams – one option for parents wanting to sidestep awkward questions. A killer of fantasies.

The second initially dwarfed by Churchill's hard-back history of World War Two. Dried glue in spine going – a thin paperback. Emaciated face on the cover. *The Scourge of the Swastika*. A plea and a curse in eyes deep-set beneath shaven head. This must be the author: Lord Russell of Liverpool. And what was a 'scourge'?

The chapter on Dachau gave the answers. When I was getting ready for bed, bits came back: skeletal bodies being bulldozed into pits; pudgy, naked women running past birch trees into a clearing; shrunken, bearded heads from Buchenwald; a boy with a hat on, hands aloft, staring up at the adults in uniform with their guns. Behind them a twister of black smoke.

After this, there was no hiding place. Here were the plain, unbelievable facts. This was what we did.

Holocaust Exhibition

After, near bolted-
down wooden seats
around the permanent
stall for ice creams,
fries, other junk food,
by the massive guns
and steps up to
the museum, you spot
a dog, shorn, sleek,
giant jaws, off the lead,
strutting its stuff,
heading for
the Lambeth Road,
no sign of a muzzle,
a terrier, male, neck too
thick for a Border,
(a Staffy perhaps?)
power obvious
in his every move.
He angles a pee
against the trunk
of a London Plane,
its leaf-canopy
shadow-dancing
over rain-mottled paths.

No fuss.

Stain.

Steam.

Comes

at his

master's bidding.

Namings

lines after Neruda

Mondays turn to Tuesdays then weeks to years.
Don't even consider snipping into the hours
With nail-scissors – the names of the days
Will overwhelm you with darkness.

Nobody can really claim to be Will or Dante
Or Beatrice – we are, all of us, specks, molecules,
Drizzled spots of rainwater. Some talk of continents
Or nation-states – what are they frigging on about.
The earth's crust is the only truth and that defies
Any simple tag. Stones clang like bells when I address them.
Roots are a far surer bet than flowers.

Spring drags. It's taken the best part of winter
To get its arse in gear. One year's the history
Of Europe. Time runs barefoot on the cinder-track
At the White City. Set, on your marks – we are
Perpetually new-born. Why fill our mouths that howl
From the off with stumbling blocks of sound,
Modes of address, the rigmarole of titles, and, god
Love us, signatures, possessives?

Asleep, I have no name. Awake,
I'm the same as the man who slept.

Caspar David Friedrich

No need for an incubus
or massive doses of opium
and raw pork. No murals of Saturn
tearing off toffee-apple heads.

It's simple fare – dawns
and twilights, hands held together
in prayer, solitary prowlers
looking for something coded

in scrub against days' old snow.
Or there in those thin green shoots
you didn't notice at first
by the stones to the crossing.

Santa

Not some red-gowned fraud in Hamleys, all fake
white beard and seedy laugh. No, a thin saint,
Spanish, stress on the first 'a' – Galicia his place
of birth – there, with his small ring-shaped cake,

in the market square, by a stone fountain,
not wishing to give offence, hair silver-grey,
close-cropped, he nibbles and picks, incognito
in the gabble of stalls, miles away, replaying

an ascent of steps cut back into a cliff-face,
the swell and suck of tide, a trawler's rainbow
spillage, gulls tatty in its wake. On the actual day

he'll eat fish, lift white flesh from feather-trace
of bone, wet slate of skin. Then he'll break
the bread, listen for ages, wait for his god in silence.

To a Pipistrelle

Forgive us our early evening summer drinks,
our interference to your fine-tuned reception,
our wittering across unoaked Chardonnay,
Stan Getz or Arvo Pärt drifting your way
with the nicknames you won't get (Big Dee,
Hodge-Podge) past sonics and a titter
of accompanying laughter that maybe
draws you down come dusk: full tilt Billy
Whizz, gut-curving bullet dive, liquorice sheen,
an even giggle and then back on up to an Arts
and Crafts chimney, registering an exit to light.