Classic Poetry Series

Tony Harrison

- poems -

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Book Ends

Ι

Baked the day she suddenly dropped dead we chew it slowly that last apple pie.

Shocked into sleeplessness you're scared of bed. We never could talk much, and now don't try.

You're like book ends, the pair of you, she'd say, Hog that grate, say nothing, sit, sleep, stare…

The 'scholar' me, you, worn out on poor pay, only our silence made us seem a pair.

Not as good for staring in, blue gas, too regular each bud, each yellow spike.

At night you need my company to pass and she not here to tell us we're alike!

You're life's all shattered into smithereens.

Back in our silences and sullen looks, for all the Scotch we drink, what's still between 's not the thirty or so years, but books, books, books.

II

The stone's too full. The wording must be terse. There's scarcely room to carve the FLORENCE on it--

Come on, it's not as if we're wanting verse. It's not as if we're wanting a whole sonnet!

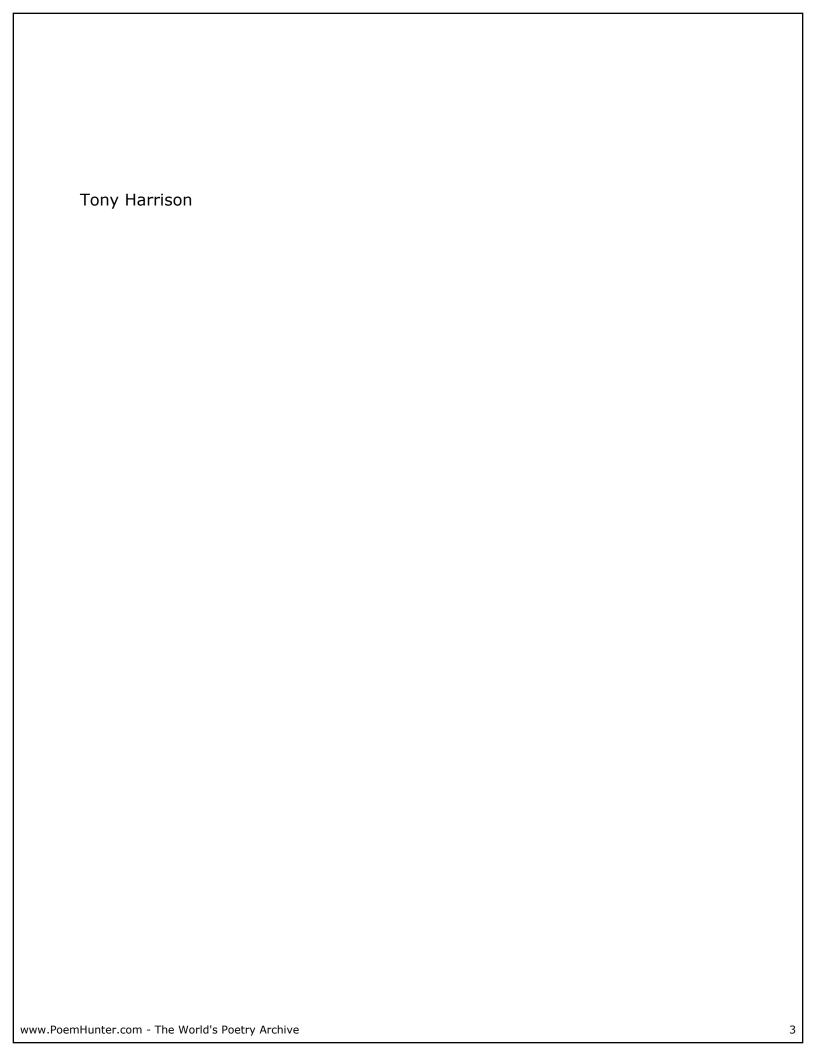
After tumblers of neat Johnny Walker (I think that both of us we're on our third) you said you'd always been a clumsy talker and couldn't find another, shorter word for 'beloved' or for 'wife' in the inscription, but not too clumsy that you can't still cut:

You're supposed to be the bright boy at description and you can't tell them what the fuck to put!

I've got to find the right words on my own.

I've got the envelope that he'd been scrawling, mis-spelt, mawkish, stylistically appalling but I can't squeeze more love into their stone.

Submitted by Andrew Mayers



Heredity

How you became a poet's a mystery! Wherever did you get your talent from?

I say: I had two uncles, Joe and Harryone was a stammerer, the other dumb.

Submitted by Scott Dagostino

Tony Harrison

Long Distance II

Though my mother was already two years dead Dad kept her slippers warming by the gas, put hot water bottles her side of the bed and still went to renew her transport pass.

You couldn't just drop in. You had to phone. He'd put you off an hour to give him time to clear away her things and look alone as though his still raw love were such a crime.

He couldn't risk my blight of disbelief though sure that very soon he'd hear her key scrape in the rusted lock and end his grief. He knew she'd just popped out to get the tea.

I believe life ends with death, and that is all. You haven't both gone shopping; just the same, in my new black leather phone book there's your name and the disconnected number I still call.

Submitted by Scott Dagostino

Tony Harrison

V

'My father still reads the dictionary every day. He says your life depends on your power to master words.'

> Arthur Scargill Sunday Times, 10 January 1982

Next millennium you'll have to search quite hard to find my slab behind the family dead, butcher, publican, and baker, now me, bard adding poetry to their beef, beer and bread.

With Byron three graves on I'll not go short of company, and Wordsworth's opposite. That's two peers already, of a sort, and we'll all be thrown together if the pit,

whose galleries once ran beneath this plot, causes the distinguished dead to drop into the rabblement of bone and rot, shored slack, crushed shale, smashed prop.

Wordsworth built church organs, Byron tanned luggage cowhide in the age of steam, and knew their place of rest before the land caves in on the lowest worked-out seam.

This graveyard on the brink of Beeston Hill's the place I may well rest if there's a spot under the rose roots and the daffodils by which dad dignified the family plot.

If buried ashes saw then I'd survey the places I learned Latin, and learned Greek, and left, the ground where Leeds United play but disappoint their fans week after week,

which makes them lose their sense of self-esteem and taking a short cut home through these graves here they reassert the glory of their team by spraying words on tombstones, pissed on beer.

This graveyard stands above a worked-out pit. Subsidence makes the obelisks all list. One leaning left's marked FUCK, one right's marked SHIT sprayed by some peeved supporter who was pissed.

Far-sighted for his family's future dead, but for his wife, this banker's still alone on his long obelisk, and doomed to head a blackened dynasty of unclaimed stone,

now graffitied with a crude four-letter word.

His children and grandchildren went away and never came back home to be interred, so left a lot of space for skins to spray.

The language of this graveyard ranges from a bit of Latin for a former Mayor or those who laid their lives down at the Somme, the hymnal fragments and the gilded prayer,

how people 'fell asleep in the Good Lord', brief chisellable bits from the good book and rhymes whatever length they could afford, to CUNT, PISS, SHIT and (mostly) FUCK!

Or, more expansively, there's LEEDS v. the opponent of last week, this week, or next, and a repertoire of blunt four-letter curses on the team or race that makes the sprayer vexed.

Then, pushed for time, or fleeing some observer, dodging between tall family vaults and trees like his team's best ever winger, dribbler, swerver, fills every space he finds with versus Vs.

Vs sprayed on the run at such a lick, the sprayer master of his flourished tool, get short-armed on the left like that red tick they never marked his work with much at school.

Half this skinhead's age but with approval I helped whitewash a V on a brick wall. No one clamoured in the press for its removal or thought the sign, in wartime, rude at all.

These Vs are all the versuses of life From LEEDS v. DERBY, Black/White and (as I've known to my cost) man v. wife, Communist v. Fascist, Left v. Right,

Class v. class as bitter as before, the unending violence of US and THEM, personified in 1984 by Coal Board MacGregor and the NUM,

Hindu/Sikh, soul/body, heart v. mind, East/West, male/female, and the ground these fixtures are fought on's Man, resigned to hope from his future what his past never found.

The prospects for the present aren't too grand when a swastika with NF (National Front)'s sprayed on a grave, to which another hand

has added, in a reddish colour, CUNTS.

Which is, I grant, the word that springs to mind, when going to clear the weeds and rubbish thrown on the family plot by football fans, I find UNITED graffitied on my parents' stone.

How many British graveyards now this May are strewn with rubbish and choked up with weeds since families and friends have gone away for work or fuller lives, like me from Leeds?

When I first came here 40 years ago with my dad to 'see my grandma' I was 7. I helped dad with the flowers. He let me know she'd gone to join my grandad up in Heaven.

My dad who came each week to bring fresh flowers came home with clay stains on his trouser knees. Since my parents' deaths I've spent 2 hours made up of odd 10 minutes such as these.

Flying visits once or twice a year, And though I'm horrified just who's to blame that I find instead of flowers cans of beer and more than one grave sprayed with some skin's name?

Where there were flower urns and troughs of water And mesh receptacles for withered flowers are the HARP tins of some skinhead Leeds supporter. It isn't all his fault though. Much is ours.

5 kids, with one in goal, play 2-a-side. When the ball bangs on the hawthorn that's one post and petals fall they hum Here Comes the Bride though not so loud they'd want to rouse a ghost.

They boot the ball on purpose at the trunk and make the tree shed showers of shrivelled may. I look at this word graffitied by some drunk and I'm in half a mind to let it stay.

(Though honesty demands that I say if I'd wanted to take the necessary pains to scrub the skin's inscription off I only had an hour between trains.

So the feelings that I had as I stood gazing and the significance I saw could be a sham, mere excuses for not patiently erasing the word sprayed on the grave of dad and mam.)

This pen's all I have of magic wand. I know this world's so torn but want no other except for dad who'd hoped from 'the beyond' a better life than this one, with my mother.

Though I don't believe in afterlife at all and know it's cheating it's hard not to make a sort of furtive prayer from this skin's scrawl, his UNITED mean 'in Heaven' for their sake,

an accident of meaning to redeem an act intended as mere desecration and make the thoughtless spraying of his team apply to higher things, and to the nation.

Some, where kids use aerosols, use giant signs to let the people know who's forged their fetters Like PRI CE O WALES above West Yorkshire mines (no prizes for who nicked the missing letters!)

The big blue star for booze, tobacco ads, the magnet's monogram, the royal crest, insignia in neon dwarf the lads who spray a few odd FUCKS when they're depressed.

Letters of transparent tubes and gas in Düsseldorf are blue and flash out KRUPP. Arms are hoisted for the British ruling class and clandestine, genteel aggro keeps them up.

And there's HARRISON on some Leeds building sites I've taken in fun as blazoning my name, which I've also seen on books, in Broadway lights, so why can't skins with spraycans do the same?

But why inscribe these graves with CUNT and SHIT? Why choose neglected tombstones to disfigure? This pitman's of last century daubed PAKI GIT, this grocer Broadbent's aerosolled with NIGGER?

They're there to shock the living, not arouse the dead from their deep peace to lend support for the causes skinhead spraycans could espouse. The dead would want their desecrators caught!

Jobless though they are how can these kids, even though their team's lost one more game, believe that the 'Pakis', 'Niggers', even 'Yids' sprayed on the tombstones here should bear the blame?

What is it that these crude words are revealing? What is it that this aggro act implies?

Giving the dead their xenophobic feeling or just a cri-de-coeur because man dies?

So what's a cri-de-coeur, cunt? Can't you speak the language that yer mam spoke. Think of 'er! Can yer only get yer tongue round fucking Greek? Go and fuck yourself with cri-de-coeur!

'She didn't talk like you do for a start!'
I shouted, turning where I thought the voice had been.
She didn't understand yer fucking 'art'!
She thought yer fucking poetry obscene!

I wish on this skin's words deep aspirations, first the prayer for my parents I can't make, then a call to Britain and to all nations made in the name of love for peace's sake.

Aspirations, cunt! Folk on t'fucking dole 'ave got about as much scope to aspire above the shit they're dumped in, cunt, as coal aspires to be chucked on t'fucking fire.

'OK, forget the aspirations. Look, I know United's losing gets you fans incensed and how far the HARP inside you makes you go but all these Vs: against! against! against!

Ah'll tell yer then what really riles a bloke. It's reading on their graves the jobs they did – Butcher, publican and baker. Me, I'll croak doing t'same nowt ah do now as a kid.

'ard birth ah wor, mi mam says, almost killed 'er. Death after life on t'dole won't seem as 'ard! Look at this cunt, Wordsworth, organ builder, This fucking 'aberdasher Appleyard!

If mi mam's up there, don't want to meet 'er listening to me list mi dirty deeds, and 'ave to pipe up to St fucking Peter ah've been on t'dole all mi life in fucking Leeds!

Then t'Alleluias stick in t'angels' gobs. When dole-wallahs fuck off to the void What'll t'mason carve up for their jobs? The cunts who lieth 'ere wor unemployed?

This lot worked at one job all life through. Byron, 'Tanner', 'Lieth 'ere interred'. They'll chisel fucking poet when they do you and that, yer cunt, 's a crude four-letter word.

'Listen, cunt!' I said, 'before you start your jeering the reason why I want this in a book 's to give ungrateful cunts like you a hearing!' A book, yer stupid cunt, 's not worth a fuck!

'The only reason why I write this poem at all on yobs like you who do the dirt on death 's to give some higher meaning to your scrawl.' Don't fucking bother, cunt! Don't waste your breath!

'You piss-artist skinhead cunt, you wouldn't know and it doesn't fucking matter if you do, the skin and poet united fucking Rimbaud but the autre that je est is fucking you.'

Ah've told yer, no more Greek...That's yer last warning! Ah'll boot yer fucking balls to Kingdom Come. They'll find yer cold on t'grave tomorrer morning. So don't speak Greek. Don't treat me like I'm dumb.

'I've done my bits of mindless aggro too not half a mile from where we're standing now.' Yeah, ah bet yer wrote a poem, yer wanker you! 'No, shut yer gob a while. Ah'll tell yer 'ow...'

'Herman Darewski's band played operetta with a wobbly soprano warbling. Just why I made my mind up that I'd got to get her with the fire hose I can't say, but I'll try.

It wasn't just the singing angered me. At the same time half a crowd was jeering as the smooth Hugh Gaitskill, our MP, made promises the other half were cheering.

What I hated in those high soprano ranges was uplift beyond all reason and control and in a world where you say nothing changes it seemed a sort of prick-tease of the soul.

I tell you when I heard high notes that rose above Hugh Gaitskill's cool electioneering straight from the warbling throat right up my nose I had all your aggro in my jeering.

And I hit the fire extinguisher ON knob and covered orchestra and audience with spray. I could run as fast as you then. A good job! They yelled 'damned vandal' after me that day...'

And then yer saw the light and up 'eavy!

And knew a man's not how much he can sup... Yer reward for growing up's this super-bevvy, a meths and champagne punch ini t'FA Cup.

Ah've 'eard all that from old farts past their prime. 'ow now yer live wi' all yer once detested... Old farts with not much left'll give me time. Fuckers like that get folk like me arrested.

Covet not thy neighbour's wife, thy neighbour's riches. Vicar and cop who say, to save our souls, Get thee beHind me, Satan, drop their breeches and get the Devil's dick right up their 'oles!

It was more a working marriage that I'd meant, a blend of masculine and feminine. Ignoring me, he started looking, bent on some more aerosolling, for his tin.

'It was more a working marriage that I mean!' Fuck, and save mi soul, eh? That suits me. Then as if I'd egged him on to be obscene he added a middle slit to one daubed V.

Don't talk to me of fucking representing the class yer were born into any more. Yer going to get 'urt and start resenting it's not poetry we need in this class war.

Yer've given yerself toffee, cunt. Who needs yer fucking poufy words. Ah write mi own. Ah've got mi work on show all ovver Leeds like this UNITED 'ere on some sod's stone.

'OK!' (thinking I had him trapped) 'OK!'
'If you're so proud of it, then sign your name
when next you're full of HARP and armed with spray,
next time you take this short cut from the game.'

He took the can, contemptuous, unhurried and cleared the nozzle and prepared to sign the UNITED sprayed where mam and dad were buried. He aerosolled his name. And it was mine.

The boy footballers bawl Here Comes the Bride and drifting blossoms fall onto my head. One half of me's alive but one half died when the skin half sprayed my name among the dead.

Half versus half, the enemies within the heart that can't be whole till they unite. As I stoop to grab the crushed HARP lager tin the day's already dusk, half dark, half light.

That UNITED that I'd wished onto the nation or as reunion for dead parents soon recedes. The word's once more a mindless desecration by some HARPoholic yob supporting Leeds.

Almost the time for ghosts I'd better scram. Though not given much to fears of spooky scaring I don't fancy an encounter with mi mam playing Hamlet with me for this swearing.

Though I've a train to catch my step is slow. I walk on the grass and graves with wary tread over these subsidences, these shifts below the life of Leeds supported by the dead.

Further underneath's that cavernous hollow that makes the gravestones lean towards the town. A matter of mere time and it will swallow this place of rest and all the resters down.

I tell myself I've got, say, 30 years. At 75 this place will suit me fine. I've never feared the grave but what I fear's that great worked-out black hollow under mine.

Not train departure time, and not Town Hall with the great white clock face I can see, coal, that began, with no man here at all, as 300 million-year-old plant debris.

5 kids still play at making blossoms fall and humming as they do Here Comes the Bride. They never seem to tire of their ball though I hear a woman's voice call one inside.

2 larking boys play bawdy bride and groom. 3 boys in Leeds strip la-la Lohengrin. I hear them as I go through growing gloom still years away from being skald or skin.

The ground's carpeted with petals as I throw the aerosol, the HARP can, the cleared weeds on top of dad's dead daffodils, then go, with not one glance behind, away from Leeds.

The bus to the station's still the No. 1 but goes by routes that I don't recognise. I look out for known landmarks as the sun reddens the swabs of cloud in darkening skies.

Home, home, home, to my woman as the red darkens from a fresh blood to a dried. Home, home to my woman, home to bed where opposites seem sometimes unified.

A pensioner in turban taps his stick along the pavement past the corner shop, that sells samosas now, not beer on tick, to the Kashmir Muslim Club that was the Co-op.

House after house FOR SALE where we'd played cricket with white roses cut from flour-sacks on our caps, with stumps chalked on the coal-grate for our wicket, and every one bought now by 'coloured chaps',

dad's most liberal label as he felt squeezed by the unfamiliar, and fear of foreign food and faces, when he smelt curry in the shop where he'd bought beer.

And growing frailer, 'wobbly on his pins', the shops he felt familiar with withdrew which meant much longer tiring treks for tins that had a label on them that he knew.

And as the shops that stocked his favourites receded whereas he'd fancied beans and popped next door, he found that four long treks a week were needed till he wondered what he bothered eating for.

The supermarket made him feel embarrassed. Where people bought whole lambs for family freezers he bought baked beans from check-out girls too harassed to smile or swap a joke with sad old geezers.

But when he bought his cigs he'd have a chat, his week's one conversation, truth to tell, but time also came and put a stop to that when old Wattsy got bought out by M. Patel.

And there, 'Time like an ever rolling stream''s What I once trilled behind that boarded front. A 1000 ages made coal-bearing seams and even more the hand that sprayed this CUNT

on both Methodist and C of E billboards once divided in their fight for local souls. Whichever house more truly was the Lord's both's pews are filled with cut-price toilet rolls.

Home, home to my woman, never to return till sexton or survivor has to cram

the bits of clinker scooped out of my urn down through the rose-roots to my dad and mam.

Home, home to my woman, where the fire's lit these still chilly mid-May evenings, home to you, and perished vegetation from the pit escaping insubstantial up the flue.

Listening to Lulu, in our hearth we burn, As we hear the high Cs rise in stereo, what was lush swamp club-moss and tree-fern at least 300 million years ago.

Shilbottle cobbles, Alban Berg high D lifted from a source that bears your name, the one we hear decay, the one we see, the fern from the foetid forest, as brief flame.

This world, with far too many people in, starts on the TV logo as a taw, then ping-pong, tennis, football; then one spin to show us all, then shots of the Gulf War.

As the coal with reddish dust cools in the grate on the late-night national news we see police v. pickets at a coke-plant grate, old violence and old disunity.

The map that's colour-coded Ulster/Eire's flashed on again as almost every night. Behind a tiny coffin with two bearers men in masks with arms show off their might.

The day's last images recede to first a glow and then a ball that shrinks back to a blank screen. Turning to love, and sleep's oblivion, I know what the UNITED that the skin sprayed has to mean.

Hanging my clothes up, from my parka hood may and apple petals, browned and creased, fall onto the carpet and bring back the flood of feelings their first falling had released.

I hear like ghosts from all Leeds matches humming with one concerted voice the bride, the bride I feel united to, my bride is coming into the bedroom, naked, to my side.

The ones we choose to love become our anchor when the hawser of the blood-tie's hacked, or frays. But a voice that scorns chorales is yelling: Wanker! It's the aerosolling skin I met today's.

My alter ego wouldn't want to know it, His aerosol vocab would baulk at LOVE, the skin's UNITED underwrites the poet, the measures carved below the ones above.

I doubt if 30 years of bleak Leeds weather and 30 falls of apple and of may will erode the UNITED binding us together. And now it's your decision: does it stay?

Next millennium you'll have to search quite hard to find out where I'm buried but I'm near the grave of haberdasher Appleyard, the pile of HARPs, or some new neonned beer.

Find Byron, Wordsworth, or turn left between one grave marked Broadbent, one marked Richardson. Bring some solution with you that can clean whatever new crude words have been sprayed on.

If love of art, or love, gives you affront that the grave I'm in 's graffitied then, maybe, erase the more offensive FUCK and CUNT but leave, with the worn UNITED, one small v.

Victory? For vast, slow, coal-creating forces that hew the body's seams to get the soul. Will earth run out of her 'diurnal courses' before repeating her creation of black coal?

If, having come this far, somebody reads these verses, and he/she wants to understand, face this grave on Beeston Hill, your back to Leeds, and read the chiselled epitaph I've planned:

Beneath your feet's a poet, then a pit. Poetry supporter, if you're here to find How poems can grow from (beat you to it!) SHIT find the beef, the beer, the bread, then look behind.

Submitted by Andrew Mayers

Tony Harrison