

Classic Poetry Series

**Lee Harwood
- poems -**

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Lee Harwood(born 6 June 1939)

Lee Harwood was born in 1939 and grew up in Surrey. He has spent the majority of the past 35 years living in Brighton. In a writing career that began in the early 1960s he has published over 20 volumes of poetry and prose, as well as translations of Tristan Tzara. His work has been widely anthologised and he is regarded as one of the finest poets working in England today.

Central Park Zoo

for Marian

Looking at the zoo the great white park
of a misty winter's afternoon "You're great!
and I love you for it"

All the animals have their thick winter coats on
– the childish humour of this is so enjoyable –
A brass clock strikes the hour of three and
sets in motion mechanical chimes that are
beaten out by rampant bears and prancing monkeys
with heavy metal limbs jerking to the rhythm
– this obviously moves the crowd of children who're
watching – some laugh with "joy", others gasp with "wonder"

Let's call this charming story "A day at the zoo" –
all essays to be handed in by the end of the week

But back to the winter and coats

It's very crisp today and the air is clear

The buffaloes are magnificent and beautiful – they are a rich brown, and the hair
is not matted as it was in summer "alas"

A pair of bobcats lie with their front paws round each other's necks – like lovers –
they lick each other's fur (in turn) – it is a golden yellow

A pair of badgers

A pair of lynx

Two pairs of raccoons

and the grizzlies and polar bears lie sleeping in the sun

Let's call this "The Peaceable Kingdom: A Painterly Reference"
or "Winter in the Zoo" or "A Day at the Zoo"

In fact let's forget what we'll call this

Instead let's . . . returning to

the zoo in the corner of the park

the white mist hanging over the trees

The fact we can become children again

shows how right we were in

believing in our love despite the canyon

which we entered stumbling along the dark bed

of the Bad Water river

But we climbed out the other side
though taken by surprise on topping the rim
never having realised the end was so very near
But there it was – the herd of buffalo
grazing on the lush plains
Geography in our sense is exciting
Plotting the whole course now
Sunlight and the shadows of fast
moving clouds sliding across the grassland
I imagine North Texas or even Dakota Montana

“The end” only of this canyon but a continuation
of something greater compare it to a plateau
of great size and richness laced with gentle
deaths at its edges the spirits of the tribe
waiting with a deep love for us
It’s not so much of a descent either – but these
details can wait you see

“You’re great! and very wise” we laugh as
we reach the top of the rock outcrop
“and I love you for it”

We flower we continue from where we left off before
though the statement of this can only be
something secondary for us and therefore decorative
There’s no worry

“People of the World, relax!”

We walk among the animals
the cages upset you
When I really think I know you’re always right
there’s no worry we’re on the same planet
and so very lucky
that the poem should end like this
is very good

Lee Harwood

Landscapes

The ridges either side of the valley
were covered in dark pine forest.
The ploughed hill sides were red,
and the pastures were very green.
Constable's landscape entitled "Weymouth"
is always in my mind at such times;
my memory of this small part of the
National Gallery surprises even me,
and maybe only I know how inevitable it all is.
The horsemen are riding through the forest
and at dusk they will halt on its edge
and then, after checking their instructions, ride carefully
down into the valley – delicately picking their way
through the small wood and fording the shallow river.
From then on it is not very far
to their destination. We both know this.

Somehow the action has at last gone beyond
the painting and this is for real.
But there can be no self-flattery on this account
– it has all been decided for us.
The illusions of freedom are at last
shown to be so obviously ridiculous that
most people cry at this point.

What it left is a canvas and paints
and a little time for distraction before the event.
It is not so much a justification – but saying
"Goodbye" now appears irrelevant.

All the lists and secret worlds have now been
exposed – there is little left to say.
"I did care, and the love I claimed
was and still is the miracle that continues
to astonish me. I love you.
It is only that death has forced
me into obeying its commands.
I am powerless and in its power."
And that's a personal statement and as true

I and honest as I can force the words to be.

The saddles creak and it's almost dusk.
It doesn't really matter whether this is
the real or a symbol – the end's the same.

Lee Harwood

Pagham Harbour Spring

The blur of sky and sea
this white grey morning
before the day burns
moves into blue

the sweet butter scent of gorse
the sweet scent of you
dear daughter ghost in my head
dear daughter

the mudflats and sailings shine
as the children run by
along marsh edge and the high dyke bank
egret and oystercatcher dunlin and sandpiper

In the distance a train passes
where a short neat man
pushes a refreshment trolley
his clean white shirt immaculately ironed
his black waistcoat just right
the quiet dignity of him
as he passes through the hours

You'd know this the particulars
were you here
held in the wide sky arc
the children running on the dyke bank
absorbed in this world

Lee Harwood

The Final Painting

The white cloud passed over the land
there is sea always round the land
the sky is blue always above the cloud
the cloud in the blue continues to move
- nothing is limited by the canvas or frame -
the white cloud can be pictured like any
other clouds or like a fist of wool
or a white fur rose
The white cloud passes a shadow across
the landscape and so there is a passing greyness
The grey and the white both envelop
the watcher until he too is drawn into the picture
It is all a journey from a room through a door
down stairs and out into the street
The cloud could possess the house
The watchers have a mutual confidence
with the approaching string of white clouds
It is beyond spoken words what they are
silently mouthing to the sky
There was no mystery in this - only the firm
outline of people in overcoats on a hillside
and the line of clouds above them
The sky is blue The cloud white with touches
of grey - the rest - the landscape below -
can be left to the imagination
The whole painting quietly dissolved itself
into its surrounding clouds

Lee Harwood

The Seaside

(for Peter Ruppell)

You wrote such a love poem that I was
dumb-founded & left to scratch the sand
Alone in the surf I couldn't join the bait-diggers
I'd left my fork and bucket at home
& I am not rough by nature

You were sitting on top of a boulder deep in the forest
It was taller than a man & surrounded by pine trees
I think there are pine trees on Fire Island
but I've never been to Fire Island, though
I can imagine & we all know what could happen

there, but..
& the world that started in a parked car
was really a fearful one — It would only lead
from one confusion to another
& I couldn't do this to you on the giant highway

She was a reason in herself, & women need
the menace of ambiguity in their actions
so one action might well signify the opposite
— an act of sacrifice really the act of killing & revenge —
& this much was true

The exercise book was green & the distance
saved much embarrassment though you were
in many ways ignorant of this
I still can't find my bucket & bait-fork
but this is only an excuse

Lee Harwood

The 'Utopia'

The table was filled with many objects

The wild tribesmen in the hills,
whose very robes were decorated with designs
of a strangeness & upsetting beauty
that went much further than the richly coloured silks embroidered there could
ever suggest; . . .

There were piles of books, yet each one
was of a different size and binding.
The leathers were so finely dyed. The blues
& purples, contrasting with the deceptive simplicity
of the 'natural' tans.
And this prism & arrangement of colours
cannot be set down - the fresh arrangements
& angles possible can only point through a door
to the word 'infinite' made of white puffy clouds
floating high in a blue summer sky;
this has been written there by a small airplane
that is now returning to its green landing field.

The table is very old & made of fine mahogany
polished by generations of servants.
And through the windows the summer blue skies
& white clouds spelling a puffy word.
And on the table the books & examples
of embroidery of the wild hill tribesmen
& many large & small objects - all of which
could not help but rouse a curiosity.

There are at times people in this room
- some go to the table - things are moved -
but the atmosphere here is always that of quiet & calm
- no one could disturb this.
And though the people are the only real threat,

they are all too well trained and aware
to ever introduce the least clumsiness
or disturbing element into the room.

At times it is hard to believe
what is before one's eyes -
there is no answer to this except the room itself,
& maybe the white clouds seen through the window.

No one in the house was sure of the frontiers
& the beautiful atlas gilded and bound with blue silk
was only of antiquarian interest & quite useless
for the new questions. The whole situation
was like a painting within a painting &
that within another & so on & so on -
until everyone had lost sight of their original landmarks.
The heath melted into the sky on the horizon.
And the questions of definition & contrast
only brought on a series of fruitless searches
& examinations that made everyone irritable & exhausted.

Once the surveyors had abandoned their project
the objects once more took over.
It would be false to deny the sigh of relief
there was when this happened & calm returned.

The bus bumped down the avenue
& ahead were the mountains & the woods
that burst into flower as spring settled.
The plan & the heavy revolver were all quite in keeping
with this, despite the apparent superficial
difference & clash of worlds -
there was really only one world.
It wasn't easy - admittedly - & someone
had to stay behind & ...
The word in the sky had slowly dissolved
& was now nowhere to be seen.
But instead the sun was flooding the whole room

& everything took on a golden aura
- this meant we were even aware of the
band of horsemen now riding through the forest
that surrounded the valley.

The many details may appear evasive

but the purpose of the total was obvious
& uncompromising

Lee Harwood

