

CLIVE WATKINS

Poems by *Clive Watkins*

A Pretty Positon

If knowing when to stop
is the mark of a true artist,

how much might be learned
from an hour's blind

obedience cunningly required,
in which we could lay down

the choices that consume us
and melt into a tutelage of small cries,

each an inkling of subtler nakedness,
more instructive crafts, yet to come.

In the absence of contexts,
categories no longer exist.

Tell me, then, by what insinuating art
you produced, one by one,

those elegant grapes,
those sassy cherries flushed

with invisible sweetness?
Tyranny is a very pretty position.

A connoisseur of such things,
how could you bear

the Midas touch
of so much possibility?

The Guilty Stones

"What one writer can make in the solitude of one room is something no power can easily destroy." Salman Rushdie quoted by Ursula Owner, Editor of Index on Censorship, in the Independent on Sunday, 27th September 1998.

1.

The yellow reading lamp clicks on,
darkness wincing into shadow:
a closed book-lined space-
desk, word-processor, telephone,
an empty cup.

Words must be found
that will lead out of this,
the dream of a common language
coming in the end to a single sound,
a gasp that touches nothing.

2.

Spent paper, fictions of demonic guilt.

A placard the size of a house
affords the bearded face its fixed vantage-point,
the air filled with obstructing smoke,
with furious cries of adoration.

The broken arm dangling at this side,
the others walking away between the houses.

3.

Gross habit of genuflection,
fervid observance,
in a fragrance of haloed candles,
in a drift of incense,
to be snuffed-
mute self-importance
masked as legitimacy-
to be snuffed out.

4.

Yielding in vivid ignorance
we mistrust

CLIVE WATKINS

even our own blank disbelief
its rational blinding
incandescence.

5.

From concrete pits, batted lawns,
from spinneys meshed with wire,
the howls rise up, the wails, the shrieks, the laughter,
the hiccupping roars, heavy animal farts,
slaverings, gnawing of frayed wood, peeled
sexual cries, clashing of teeth, snorts
despairing coughs, spiked foetid sneers.

6.

Meat sings on the hot wire.
Its smoky odours rise
between high courtyard walls
into enclosed spaces of the evening-
iron, stone, the masked attenuated smell
of earth, of broken roses.
Time now to take their wine indoors,
to view the water-colours, the Russian sketches
his clean acids eat into the copper.

7.

What are these engines,
these silent, iterative mouthings?
Well, shall we skip and caper
at the edge of the circle
or will the sharp whistlers whip us in?
Our accusers will not be bashful,
rolling the guilty stones
over and over in their pockets.

Dip oil, dip water, for wounds, for thirst.

Manifesto

"Our words misunderstand us." – Adrienne Rich

The pamphlet wars were not yet over,
the election deferred two fields away

at the far end of a punishing weather
when she lay back at last and thought of England,

that draughty place bowed under winter's furred occlusion.
Night-walkers troubled the streets, and a lascivious eye

winked over the restaurant tables-
frayed roses, bowls of lemon water.

Absolute power is a door into dreaming
(dangerous luminosity), but coercion, Sir,

requires free will - vanquished, to know
the offended tongue belongs now to another.

White shoulders cupped in cool hands,
her angry wing lay folded within her-

bruised grains of light, glittering perishable things
of flesh, of silk, of paper, manifestations

of impotence and desire and whatever
glozing fortune tossed in her musky lap.

If addressed, you will reply with modesty and politeness.
If not addressed, you will not speak at all.

As if trembling on the brink of the next revelation,
the next politic blow, they stare at one another,

indignant dust, each hoping the other will do
what both desire but neither dares propose.

CLIVE WATKINS

Ballad of the Outer Life

... And the children grow up with their deep eyes,
Eyes which know nothing—they grow up and die,
And everyone goes on in their own ways.

And the bitter fruit turns sweet and in the night
Tumbles like a dead bird into the grass
And lies a day or two and starts to rot.

And ceaseless is the wind, and without cease
Our heads fill up with words, we utter them,
We feel our limbs' delight and weariness.

And streets run through the grass, and here and there
Are places full of ponds and trees and torches,
And menacings, things dying, dust and char...

Why were these built? And none of them alike?
So many, too, they never could be counted.
And laughter? Weeping? Death? That checker-work.

All this, these games, how can they profit us,
Who are not children and wander without aim,
Eternally alone, in this vast place?

Having seen so many things, what good can come?
- Yet he says much who says that one word "Evening",
A word from which deep sense and sadness run

Like heavy honey from the hollow comb.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874-1929)

Clive Watkins was born in Sheffield, England in 1945. His poems have appeared in a number of magazines including Agenda, Outposts, Poetry Durham, and Poetry Wales. His collection of poems, *Jigsaw*, was published in April 2003. The *ALR* is the first U.S. publication to publish his poems.