

# BALLADS

RICHARD OWENS

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eth press • twenty fifteen  
buffalo • toronto • boston  
cincinnati

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## PREFACE TO SECOND EDITION

Drummer boy quarters are not so present as they once were and I wonder now if we are not better for this. Mostly I see in these ballads what I believe might be the kernel of something redeemable—perhaps—even if this is only an enduring a priori energy spring-loaded into the source materials from which these romances depart and start again—and in this way they cannot but participate in processes of sedimentation and renewal—ongoing and unending—objects inclined to register the vestiges of lessons repeatedly learned and unlearned and so endlessly reformulated—what these here are—an anatomy and a grammar—of learning and unlearning, doing and undoing, repeating—as is—the ineradicable will of the form—an order—where no refrain is identical to anything other than itself in the instant of its dissemination—when activated by eyes and ears—and the continuities that keep these objects wired into one another also keep us grounded—like planes—restrained—to be engaged as demand and need determine.

Like the first edition, this second incarnation is dedicated to Michael Cross and Andrew Rippeon. Their Music. Their Labor. Additionally—along with those I have already thanked—I would like to extend deep gratitude to Orlando Reade, whose support for this work resulted in the 6 November 2013 symposium at Princeton focusing on this and the work of Tom Pickard, a poet whose writing has been close to me since I first read *Guttersnipe* in my Paterson, New Jersey apartment more than twenty years ago and whose *Ballad of Jamie Allen* is unquestionably the most significant and inspiring refashioning of the form since Helen Adam. The lion's share of my appreciation must go to friend, poet, scholar and comrade David Hadbawnik, without whose support these irremediably vulgar objects would have long since fallen out of circulation. Thanks are also due John Latta and Andrew Peart for their critical interest in this work, Meredith Martin, who participated in the Princeton symposium as scholarly respondent, and, somewhat more distantly, Susau Stewart, Dianne Dugaw, and Maureen McLane, whose research into balladry continues to inform my own sense of the liberatory possibilities latent within the practice.

Several of the weaker ballads which appeared in the earlier edition have been redacted while other instances have been appended.

Richard Owens  
February–May 2015

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	vi
PREFACE	vii
BALLADS	11
WORKING NOTES ON BALLAD PRACTICE	111
APPENDIX I	117
APPENDIX II	124
APPENDIX III	131



## WAYFARING STRANGER

tidings dost thou tether  
ill will aerial bombings

marked from above  
burly spear & brand

clamorous paeon to place  
ingratiate the local

diminutive—dull thud  
do not remove the rubble

parse out a passive voice  
in the present perfect

THY OLD CLOAKE ABOUT THEE

waxeth cold weather winter  
gone down

blowes his blast—bold  
put thine about thee

shoulders back to build

cover what is bare  
to borrow to lend

true to the pale true to weare

cloth in grain  
poor soule

take a new cloake about thee

## IMMIGRANT SONG

mutual intelligibility—lonely time  
weather wise roused  
mine measured by a foreign model

frændr inhospitably near their own  
throstle song hush—said grief  
far inland from breakers dark frame

come to name wave upon shore  
as before—light that lingers  
still in the state of a whelping birth

tell me friend what ruin gives out  
incongruent but salient worth  
rushing with such shudder from seas

JOHNIE O COCKERSLEE

Braidhouplee—down in Bradyslee  
for water to wash his hands

bound in iron bands—wolves  
they again wryyeth women & men

manhuid shall fail me—sayed he  
who war like called to his gud hounds

to marshal what news my man  
speird sound—whisper pierced down

dun deer feeding aneath a bush  
this benison shall be o the very best

for mine—sayed he—courts lean  
unweighted by pinch of the long haul

BONNIE SHIP THE DIAMOND

lackluster—lady for work  
laying whiskey down

canned goods bottled goods  
packaging presides

—sailors say  
fetch another round

my life my lover my lady  
—sea in passing

bear down bear away  
loaded to the gunwales

—seized under rising tides  
what a good wife you would be

## FOREIGN LANDER

interminably blessed  
merie sungen—heartland

genealogy thrust through the back

marks of distinction  
fixed in a field of exclusion

remainder of an ancient lay:

embattlements—martial  
trophies gathered  
under the mantle of meaning

contour of a condition  
salient countryside patria

## MOTHERLESS CHILD

so little—added to the barrel  
such a small thing  
delicate call of its own landscape

winsome feet to be shod  
string to sound  
through a little body—sometimes

the malt in the house we built  
sits in a barn when  
the ants go marching one by one

sometimes pigs are beat to eat  
sometimes we feel  
like a parking fine & away we run

## BUNKER HILL

among the brave command  
nominally under

captured positions  
state of siege

pitched—immensity cloystered  
iron wills to good

tamey fraile body  
earthen redoubt

boost domestic spending  
fructifie in mee

a refusal before advent  
to control or contest

oedipal parricide  
paradigmatic

stratagem—deceive  
disavow or subvert

tend to the difference  
reckoning

—grandstand fantasy  
I conquered all my enemies

## RIDE AN OLD PAINT

tails matted  
backs raw

purchased  
& tender

paid for  
& stored

among the  
old things

gathering they  
cannot bear it

will not have it  
—to be kept so

in the case  
of having been

## WABASH CANNONBALL

transpierced rounder gliding all  
oblivious at length to advance  
the jingle—the rumble—the roar

struck do strike iron straight rail  
whosoever unknown raises  
cosmologies of scale—rippling fall

indiscriminate on the first parable  
crying out to all—waving  
from the rapid Wabash Cannonball

## MARCHING THROUGH GEORGIA

restrained from breaking boast  
reckon with host reason fled

trumpeted—charge—given arms  
shouted myth of manic death

suspended from a fig tree  
aggregate Pharisees—sad splendor

an expanse habituates divinations  
rat come to see—for itself

buried guilt gilded autumn  
archangelic—like a shield left

strumming guttural stutter  
still without a shape

built of stone—attention stood light  
this was the edge of things

BONNY BARBARA ALLAN

o hooly hooly—gin ye be  
on your death bed lying  
so slowly aye as she put on  
a garland for the dying

## HUNTING OF THE CHEVIOT

sheep shudder in meadow  
rustica—de res pastorelle  
composed decoy to close in

on spectacular contending  
ring & shake the rarest  
then turn your head shining

being wrong forest & forage  
sangis of the antiquite  
an act of war—ecstatic you

ther cam an arrowe would  
unbroken eyes vast rapt  
on ether hand flying flocks

woefull hunting once there  
to drive—encounter  
mischance doth bleed by

distant dim call—billowing  
power to wield moved  
morningside sayd for shame

## ROCK ISLAND LINE

watchdog howling (all caved in  
beyond the pale—tis my home

cold wind implacable driven  
unaccounted sooth shawl of sorrow

unplanned unmapped swallow order  
blunt trees mended like man

even our shadows belabored in light  
commonplace rumble—shaken

alliterative portrait of a ploughman  
struck down cattle thief

contraband—pig iron—intermediate  
between two states & cargo untold

undetected huckster amended airs  
an untapped inventory—catholic

in the tall grass—laughing—mask  
chimerical goods for summer sink in

TENNESSEE WHISKEY

—wipe the blood away  
before I knock him off his chair

(into the courte is lighte  
to resist—they took his hand

himselven—seemly by sight  
fare by wood & echo down

like a fox on the run  
busted flat—to knaw the cause

—down my last swallow  
arrayed that commotion

(long ago & far away  
called his children home

—let my secret go untold  
branded—out in the cold

(that poor old wooden head  
bound on a coach for cumly nighte

## THE HOUSE CARPENTER

nettles—riverside  
to scar the shins  
they can feel the horses

hard hats—concrete  
to pass the time  
around the gorge

they want you raw  
whitewashed—they go  
phantasmagoric

bumpkins in reserve  
trampled under spur  
cold & naked

they want you broken  
furrows drawn heavy  
heavy colts suspended

compadre you want  
to swap—hours for theirs  
where water roars

flaxen hayseed—flesh  
silver eyes pounding  
the face of a landscape

DRUNKARDS SPECIAL

fearfull friends haunt this house  
to collude—mortgaged land

wandered innocents  
bargained with ruffians

(thy friends are all of hye degree  
wrought a beneficial bane

sith I made thee my choice  
quoth hee—between guns:

I don't like a railroad boss  
incapacity to apprehend

& I of meane estate—full hard  
daylight the old groom

innocents in the green  
bad them straitwaye follow

running from the stable  
pushed open the door—save

if thou bee taken under the gate  
trace the strings upward in turn

OLD TOM OF BEDLAM

cut them down to size  
pay them back in kind

with tools & tackles  
furiouslye laid out

forth from our cell  
for pity is not common

out of the compound  
cocked & leveled

blind agency but could  
turn into the yard

underpinning all of it  
swallow to bleed

in an angye moode  
a small walled village

CHILDREN IN THE WOOD

dying charge departed from play  
sore sicke—doleful—controlled

gimme a looke gimme a face  
how deare—brought forth to light

from whence they take their place  
falling to rise no more—buked

scorned—strike thine eyes  
so the pretty speeche they had

now a vow to charge—die in armes  
for executioners be made & oversee

OLD CHARIOT ALONG

that cross on Calvary  
tossed & driven

city called Heaven  
crown cast feet

sinner say—prophesy  
commend de bones

(was a mighty back  
I knowed gwine rise

sarpint quailed round  
ponstrous—for show

without pause or profit  
—to catch the glint

gunned us stunned us  
fo da money—foul

dayaam tenement shack  
their whittles rubbed

pull—shadowes tow  
de stone dem roll away

COMPLAINT FROM THE HOLY LAND

angelicke—nae mair she  
(hath cleane forsaken me

knowe nor change  
not the falling fruit

from his loins a likeness  
to turn thee yet again

thro dun forest sacred dew  
smiles upon a sacred bed

& by a lock of mine head  
dare not lift mine eyes

revives—upon her feet  
walking the cold walls

flame from flaring nostrils  
sultry—forth into singing

my black eyed maid  
behold—I also deal in fury

## EZEKIEL SAW THE WHEEL

noisome beast to pass  
out in the open field

nativity is the land  
ceremonial benediction

thou hast built thy high  
wheel run by faith

spoke was human kind  
wherewith he fed thee

a high place in every street  
delivered to cause

a parable unto the house  
a great eagle with wings

cropped off the top—twig  
clipped to become a vine

taken of the king's seed  
that the kingdom be base

I shall eat coarser food  
go worse—by various arts

to bring down the high tree  
have exalted the low tree

## NAKED IN THE DITCHES

phlegmatic on my bier  
no regrets—my body bears  
truth stem to stern  
beginning with the hips

who am of common stock  
looking to the sea  
face ground—nothing now  
conjured from dust

suffering—hung by the heels  
sought occasion  
as will was never conquered  
to see the host broken

a swinging scythe—the dance  
this most pleasant to me  
so make moan for the old days  
say why should love live

DARLING NELLIE GREY (MAGGIE MAY)

robbed sailors skinned whalers  
cruising down the Canning Place  
wake up Nellie—gadfly mute  
restless in remorseless haste

amused & used at twa pound six  
sleeping like it came to pass  
tethered to his daddy's cue  
where strangers fight to make it last

LES CLEFS DE LA PRISON

comen to this place—develich  
(unable to stretch in the hold)

skies beclouded—triumphant  
our dwellings pulled down

that by resoun the faithful fallyth  
master or not—easily startled

crossed—like spars in a gale  
retreat from roaring loud fellows

when softly a balmy wind blows  
give ear—take luck pon water

clank upon air—buckle with  
well harty—at home—call away

LAST OF THE FLOCK

lusty ewe fetched from rock  
random guest—myself a guide

walk in law—defiled by way

they maketh me to lie down  
for yielding pacifies offense

(were I not thus taught I should

catch from such wild banks  
an account open to every heart

inhabiting the bosom of fools

GRANA WAIL (GRÁINNE NÍ MHÁILLE)

there came to me—fleecy garbs of gold and dun  
a tower built (gown o covered in gore  
stately hull a building high—shadow chair of state  
parting friends a fit retreat) she wore

calm majesty—grave air—advisors by her side  
iron chains clasped round her hands  
(a wisdom in war—damsel fair—scarce repress  
gilt—none her bearing) roving bands

brooch did bind—lo advance to certain kind  
hail brine tears so pale & wan  
come to greet—yield too far—rock built sea girt  
eyrie—cut chord she rung refrain

destructive to trade—curious gaze—cast to sea  
her plaintive wail shot through gale  
gave galley to wind—her tresses fell unconfined  
mid clouds came poor old Granuaile

## BANKS OF THE OHIO

court my love so lily white  
who dravest me headway

plunge (double penetration  
over—qualified to advance

shatter the highest  
(an exchange of currency

extrapolate from stats  
the same everyday algebra

one man away from welfare  
for we be so vicious withinne

lie snug (a soul demands ware  
who seyde women loven best

same trade little esteemed  
an irksome calculation

jolynesse—parcel ground  
merely imaginary iron bar

only say repreve us oure vice  
a natural particularity

in lieu of the main event  
come with me & go—lest

## CUMBERLAND GAP

lay down boys—take a nap  
accommodate custom

bootstrap—family in twain  
heave the blame herd

shatter cones in sandstone  
ain no raf no mo—done

broke loose & gone  
(how the pounding went on

anyways she's a goner  
—come along with me boys

foller em (hear the axel turn  
—cut tongue & trample

(an interest bore them down  
—follow holler to catch

caught—unalloyed pleasure  
splayed against stone

## BORN TO RUN

round these velvet rims  
on the street in a mist  
pinch yourself—mask

or look at the banging man  
banging back home  
stitched in wasting flesh

where sun spends winter  
(the way they fix his tie  
full flowering—little doll

citizen—I feel myself  
(this time spent without you  
slipping down the road

sweet city woman—hold  
like a country morning  
unfamiliar as country rain

something sacred—a tune  
them that got shall get  
who got no bag or baggage

daylight discreetly muted  
—how I'd like to fix his tie  
all the hounds I do believe

please—hear me now  
the show is over—we're alone  
running back to you again

## UNION BURYING GROUND

do not weep—quodidian  
let the mourners come  
made endeavor—sheer will

struggle sport upon shore  
winding sheet wind  
leave no single track behind

an assurance of security  
out of line among  
things that have no words

gnashing dirge—asunder  
(integrated patterns of conflict  
misread—never spoken

undone for duty done  
bones—you alone in the dust  
wrapped in linen—cold as clay

come anyhow with an offer  
take delight in the dirty work  
start—deal out the worst

superior industry standards  
sewn into the earth  
high frequency hardship—this

## OLD COUNTRY STOMP

not my crime—not mine alone  
heaven knows it of all things  
could express carried accents

my faithful friend and servant  
we set ourselves to serve  
welcome the rod—our reason

poorly bread habit come patch  
next day the same—bug  
of wood in the road ways gained

linsey-woolsey—en it jist lovely  
calmer thoughts to iron war  
to attend the axe grace thy end

scattered strength makes the hearth  
bedfellows consigned to sleep  
they sass me in the holy gloom

SHACK BULLY HOLLER

roustabout—listen how it reads  
four and twenty rowdy birds  
well brass abrood innermerica

wurnotjust soshulism—rules  
nor pitty warmes the preapproved  
rocky mind naked about the rump

large bull—askance—hot muzzle  
scratcheth bodies foule & faire  
that owe we much to have throwne

strings or the odd tryst in care  
tis fit—lefftoluvunderstate  
law be arm to cry & does no good

git down anither throw away one  
whistle post hove in sight  
double decked highball stock car

out—crawled—have saw you fore  
ef deys nachulborn tuzzle switch  
done willed narrow in de bed yit

aincha come now chicken a mutton  
flamdonies gwinter harness  
like she rolls her doe to collar a nod

## LOST AT THE COUNTY FAIR

to frenzy by grief night weareth old  
feeds the canker oft but since

gars them all look sad—wark lifted  
bitter days bridled like a horse

by way on the edge of the wilderness  
short strictures conceal a sense

on the full of the moon—mean ways  
ground out with a trenchspoon

stubbed—tainted—jostled to chase  
suffered publick tumult

shimmering constraint—alike of earth  
this system of truncated orders

how some wasn't even scared  
undaunted by no one knew their names

BABA O'RILEY

tangled up in foreign hands  
disband—this back into our living

unforgiven (loth themself to blame  
crepuscular mind for mercy

shiver to hilt the proper way  
riven—sway onward cross land

yonder view open plain to gain  
unredeemed—stand to be bleed

mount again a stronger steed bare  
check the rein—reign in

(apostolic in their own vile faith  
beckoning—might well forbear

who thundering comes round  
to scathe by brunt—the weight of it

advancing along the rocks  
let us flee the face of this trembling

## HENRY THE POACHER

you wicked & wily youth  
companions beguile my ome

who know me well—betrayed  
(pilots ferry supplies

freebase—to get some game  
tripping along the pathway

faine methylbenzoylcgonine  
they took us there by speed

like Job we stood with patience  
accorded thore—tooke way

chainéd hand in hand  
called to stray from land

there a gentleman took me  
my master likes me well

black water—full four months  
we ploughed the raging main

## SHEPHERDS LAMENT

a good tree gives me shadow  
pretty—behēoldon Pæt ęngel

koumfort wid she hann tek  
de soffness—outwardly distant

tax-gatherers sent to scold  
to meet & deal with us

messengers in their presence  
embraced envoys—took stock

we were all very good friends  
well disposed one to another

rapidly burning through reserves  
for our part made no peace

having sewn such by such fed  
quarterly losses—thence under

expected to match concessions  
she stood turned to slip away

made me fast to assume cunning  
tongue to the moving herd

now afield no longer standing  
wræccan—with no hope of return

## LEVEE CAMP HOLLER

darkened air silent loam  
spare us to go back home

solemn debates below  
a sacrificial extension

lilacs—your cross in rye  
returning unquenched

traveling in good company  
nourished by the mud

storm—cut into the music  
hath risen to an occasion

public faces a yard long  
drop shouts facing traffic

come round to collect  
a plenty worth the getting

each found their own  
gone far beyond the strand

THOMAS THE RHYMER

over fernie brae betide me weal  
me woe—blude to the knee

braid braid road beset with thorns  
weed-clotted marauding militia

disappeared—this for thy wages  
synoptic scale low pressure storm

occluded—bosky den forest & fen  
compacted in cheap triumph

outrun poorly minted blighted relic  
thund'rous—cleave in twain

the weight of nimble necessity  
touch & gild—hurry & go—bestow

fail to budge—the road—by grudge  
toppling bales spanning ground

safe on second breathing spell  
please—take your rest upon my knee

BENT SAE BROWN

gang and see tween my love & me  
bauld sons I say gang & let us be  
my love long tall—built for speed  
he shout & cry my berry-brown steed

entreat win up get up off your feet  
be my brand this goddamn town  
my sweet baboo—am deeply sworn  
aye you're a good man Sally Brown

for a kiss o your lovely mouth  
auld sons way darna speak to thee  
forbid us rest o north & south  
broke your hame sae stole your me

## LEESOME BRAND

what breeze proudly hastes  
of an odd dawn  
to draw on a market day

no—not the man I used to be  
stronger underfoot  
driven into dissimulation

two eyes offered to bandage  
(bloom becomes you  
this feast in your father's home

tis fair—that we lye there  
croon large & wide  
let fly these cudgeled memories

## HONKY TONK ANGEL

ways & means—doing alright  
sad women on low ground

my country girl moves me  
screaming in the hallways

poppy blooms—skrotum  
don't say much for syntax

some sort of capital rapport  
variety of discombobulation

she's growing cold—a head  
to pound on—a shiny egg

come with me—we'll go away  
imagine a new locomotion

## STEEL LAYING HOLLER

diminished resistance  
sleeping on byways

in anny kase a gelding  
—full liberty quoth

examine the work flow  
observe local custom

polarized patterns of use  
—magnetic metals

anything but accidents  
manage narrow lanes

& who to lick our sores  
this sack full of spurs

tractors bought at cost  
—eviscerated colts

measured in horsepower  
—graze on nostalgia

trace sweet muzzle & bit  
headless trade winds

picking the rodeo clean  
buck—gallop & break

traverse the course—see  
no deviation from the mean

## IROQUOIS STEEPLECHASE

this wicked gallon of rye  
when a man loseth  
in his commodity for want

take like recompense dear  
by providence  
where there is scarcity for

for now is the hand of God  
upon the commodity  
infuriated by the light sum

of man—common coasters  
unprofitable fowlers  
armigerous families forsooth

more calibrated than colored  
beyond yon wearie hand  
vast forces variously at war

saints deep in their ecstasies  
wrastle to extricate  
thousands of fencible goods

outward piety & inward purity  
subdivided ad infinitum  
like some kind of wild scripture

EL ABANDONADO

me abandonastes—near the public road  
or the stars across the way  
copper or tin—a bellwether calls me home

these Albuquerque kisses—near misses  
or a fella needs a car  
to call on the bright tin women & pitches

figs & oranges from the more mature trees  
or your mother is watching  
from the caboose of an old military train

RETURN OF DJANGO (IVANHOE RHYMING)

wreck a pum pum—his hands  
are completely broken

can you hear this—gypsy  
manouche—cascading

arpeggios—broken chords  
caravan to disinterred clouds

shottas—Django shoots first  
shantytown tempo di massacre

dis bamba clot chop di wood  
such a hard man wanted fe dead

JOHN THE REVELATOR

an advocator—bot wi blude  
bound for some  
what shortly comes to pass

companion through affliction  
as of a trumpet  
who was detained among you

for their power is in the open  
between hands  
an indivisible wilderness

idol clothed in precious raiment  
waiting in glory  
a fire come on thee as a thief

a nakedness kept from the hour  
come & see  
deep in the rocks of mountains

that hath an ear let them hear  
these against thee  
world to rent—a living so bent

## ROCKING CHAIR MONEY

worries & fears—sure—so called  
tipping sights for a straightened gait  
a cardinal question—capital gains

rollover advection feedback  
contribution limits—so solid & still  
saved money measured earnings

an assortment of mutual funds  
that changed the lock on our front door  
so much better than no house at all

but we done let the deal go down  
clear—collectivized investment pools  
ordinary factory farms—associate

incentives—kolkhozy—an open  
ended stampede circling assets invested  
beyond the limit of taxable events

a list of deferred compensations  
a hole in our bucket—an option to buy  
such stable risks that never return

SWEET HOME ALABAMA

will remember—southland shoals  
spilling swampland black belt

river shallowing southward  
gravel—silt—cobble—shingle

will remember—tidal flats  
water gates natural dams big wheels

beaten down in honor to promote  
sedimentary herringbone structures

## GREAT SPECKLED BIRD

despised by the squad  
mine heritage assembles me

in this bour dwelling  
to devour come what day

say by & by—by & by  
beasts of the harvest field

round about against her  
saying peace when there is

shame in ways—stumbling  
my hand upon inhabitants

full of days on the wings  
blush—her name is recorded

## COCAINE BLUES

down just about midnight  
all the angels  
rapt—what—to fetch out

thrilled in skinned brass  
calling him home  
built on edge—still at ease

up with his old sweetheart  
& I ran laughing  
home before the landlord

she knew—how to move  
ain't never seen her  
hustle the same run twice

## FOGGY MOUNTAIN BREAKDOWN

nervous conditions conturbat me  
mounted bey der hand  
despoiled planks of the aviation

ascend disembodied—unaccounted  
costs earmarked for sidelines  
settled into states cut off from tribes

compared & ranked insofar as use  
neurologically grounded  
raises what holy ritual from the hills

SWEET LADY JANE

you give you give  
smile you give  
marked by a light

faint single mouth  
fade to dim  
where the clouds

face away the field  
rest in dark  
far echo to stand

moisten your lips  
pause to land  
afraid it all began

OTHER SIDE OF TOWN

meet me on the corner—to spare  
(some say) den live opprest

the need here always for more  
who don't live around

them blow—dust & ashes long ago

they teach at ease  
these termes fit for the Devill

cast away when we came late

convinceing returne none the lesse  
run ourself to death

at every turn—afeard of the road  
crosse to foreine soyle

TIE SHUFFLING CHANT

ears ope wide—jaw the team  
they cannot ride

(blindsight turtle ditch

legal—tender—the flesh  
granted to claim difficult ways

uninsured—no wayes carefull  
employed about

unhandsome work—to assist  
mistake our interest

(inasmuch as they were people

glossing over several points  
plotted to map

we were cold then—we read  
fully restrained

to have such credit with Thee  
further to extend

(inscribed upon these very feet

## POOR MAN LAZARUS

his wounded side tells naught  
but defies by bonds  
the high sheriff or hanging tree

debtor in possession—troubled  
project financing  
buy back settlement spinoffs

to our relief—we are not willing  
to be bondsmen  
never at our own cost—gardens

thrust back into the common gaol  
which is all at present  
what you owe & refuse to yield

## HOMeward BOUND

when I was a young boy  
we ran dog & bell—lingering windes  
cut down ancient codes  
outward—for these were the worlds

unavailable exit strategies  
wastefully conceded to make sense  
in economic doldrums  
struck through with an old embrace

divine force stood waiting  
responsive to our dire need to escape  
to another place—there  
to avail a defiant share sweeping eyes

## COLUMBUS STOCKADE

turned as we lay sleeping—our antiquities  
sent their herald with a letter  
harvesting new centers—they too turned

from Genoa—followed by atrophy still  
some distance from headway  
unblinking as I believe they fought against

too many mornings to waste a good deal  
their effect grossly mistaken  
for the ludic rest of a murtherous wildness

LES MARINS DE GUERRE

not the smooth ways polite & cold  
pull with a will—rumbelow  
undercut the volatility of work at flow  
domiciled some time ago

heave away—disembark having round  
that old uneasy conviction  
hailed away to grind a thought to pass  
a dire strait or erring predilection

SAIDE TO HIS MAMMY

racke to back a kindness til they tired  
the broken cold don't envy me  
but pity the limits—better for to tarry

disguise our unshieldedness that this  
so familiar fades—what  
changing breast held against lesser shades

ONCE THRESHING WHEAT

split properties—our calaboose  
(living labor time kicks  
all those lives so to tow the heart

tethered to a moonlit apparatus  
passing beneath the frame  
of a rhyme for the same old same

## BORDER CATTLE THIEF

regrettable loss of butchered kine  
contradicts its character  
midst mild spoke endemic increase

ride hard on capacities for abandon  
torn loose from we build  
settlements in a comforting nostalgia

subdue the disease constitutive of  
we cannot move today  
or be restless till warm weather comes

who never settle down to the task  
but snatch it from behind  
insist on the security of spot price stock

## MAY DAY CAROL

we bring you a branch of May  
budding out against September

with the disturbance of spring  
distempered—at the heart

plies the stone apart then goes  
into the dark—interstellar

vacancies offer unimagined  
recourse to action—an applied

physics built on a shaky surface  
that offers no secure purchase

claim yourself a branch of May  
to line your living well within

## TULLOCHGORUM

like ole philosophorum  
cut down these crops

they ascend in steady sun  
or tender a long march

flesh out the heaving chest  
coral the salvages

crowd out dynamic scoring  
flag down the barmaid

disconsolate—run to the tap  
go hold out your glass

BELLE OF BATON ROUGE

little girl—tree among trees  
settled below  
the clean coils of a rich thicket

of all the whorish crews  
encounter  
none—but cowards by mast

to avert their shining eyes  
go laughing  
precise—length of a coffin

land over at the loading dock  
to die now  
marshaled—such sprite lumber

last nail driven immaculate to  
forward with  
to be—replaced & so quietly lay

gently rocking to final rest  
a cold expanse  
buckled gangplank of the town

CARRICKNABAUNA

hoist melodius musicke—pleasant roundelaies  
fit out a good barque as it fell on a holy day  
ambling nag—spouting & sporting—trow it be

for only the breadth of a farthen cut the curtain  
split the seams—what bayberry kame glashet  
for both a crowning courage a canon plide roaring

## COMPLETE GENTLE WOMAN

each creature in all respects unfolds aright  
(dainty sweets found deare—without defense  
as alms turn us toward an unstable hearth

to freeze by fire side without a curbing bit  
our unfolding bitterness unbridled—unleashed  
lassitudes to aggravate the welladay fog

scrape the cables grease the wagons wish  
we was dead to serve the grieving heart sore  
an empty milking pail or luckless chance

these rural words bewail what never comes  
by mail but might be made from small beades  
disposed perhaps of the power to pardon

sufficient to convey the whole—quietly  
to traffick in the qualitie of a terrible mistake  
provided we ride through a gentle assembly

## GREENFIELDS OF FRANCE

how do you do—without a name  
emblazoned on poor housing projects  
extended to a state of emergency

what mosque in Saint-Chamond  
fire bombed—as if they had a part  
(to all things their leaf assigned

such running an almost normal  
situation—an ugly race whose lips  
are so fat they hiss with no tongue

Clichy-sous-Bois—another isle  
where thy Cross is common wood  
without our good meat to bear

nevertheless a people live there  
in power substations—across the grid  
& for wickedness suffer such shock

## HAUL AWAY JOE

towed away frames from the fat on down  
spoiled his constitution—poor soul  
no flesh no bone but a mask far worse  
than ten deaths waiving their right to hold

a simple juridical observance remarking  
this dismemberment toward the state  
unwilling he represents the necessary proof  
of an abandonment fueled for shame

I work says he to keep the good ship rolling  
a commonly adopted—mode of action  
he is so much more his own peculiar person  
an accustomed half getting no satisfaction

UNDER THE GREEN WOOD TREE

converge—birds see no enemy  
whatever rough weather  
marks out the landscape—spread  
in all directions or in a bird's

molting feathers watch disease  
undercut sweet song so  
all fish have their net—regret  
reconfigured in struggle

how harsh praise offered against  
inadequate endeavor sounds  
cosmetic—or under a tree—crawl  
haul away from our own good

## BATTLE OF BULL RUN

variable constituent—that awful rebel yell  
how she lay in the willows dead

movement becomes crucial—demands  
mechanisms & the circulating

contour of a cosmopolis—to begin with  
or the bitter crises that emerge

by way of an overconsumption that strikes  
the libido down—we belong

upon the face of the earth but for a mo-  
ment  
mein kinder gaze in wonder

their way was not a road so we fell down  
through a fissure in the image

they walled us up in mountains—warned us  
for if we make the least noise

we foolishly disclose the way to these wings  
but living so far below the surface

even when our face is dirty we must decide  
or resign to take them by surprise

NORTH TO ALASKA

from the claws of a bear  
our friends feared  
we might encounter more

& they came to a point  
—an opening  
that carried the great beast

we are in their country  
taken away  
watching the wooden folks

undo the hinges of wings  
to store them  
until they wake us up again

## CHALKDUST FAREWELL

called back slaves bound down  
—less than blest—tis help to live  
occupied in chutes picking slate

din of arms inserted heretofore  
mindest thy duty—do well to give  
the best of every masked conceit

while clinics of the whole diversify  
species into niches—who captive  
take to black chalk or crushed ashes

beneath the arc of fulsome skies  
mines allegorize such a wild abyss  
lost like the ground beneath living

IN MY OWN SHIRE

if they was sad rue we bore  
—this honorable gift  
struck year by year to remain

a team to plough betrays  
—power on power  
so steeped in truceless light

confide in like conditions  
—profligate divisions  
wedged within what systems

charge this natural basis  
—for their work  
advancing unsettled agendas

pretenders guide us round  
—to have our bones  
planted by force in solariums

## BLIND CHILD'S PRAYER

act like trash—leave be large  
until then no fantasy  
fall all to admire—no use now

how the most was being framed  
ground down to a halt  
cause the house was greater still

master deck managed well  
gone tailor to rig  
stuck behind the wheel—anneal

the crude steel under the hood  
cutting up the road  
how we in our wake brave away

AMERICAN GIRL

a little more to life—alright  
then you are good  
refined in me worthiest thing

how low you lay under praise  
in the dark hour  
sudden care to know then dare

in the dark light—what might  
put our temples  
down without our due discretion

the impression a good girl leaves  
in wake yet hence  
no recompense for what way goes

## SALLEY GARDENS

perverse sex outside agender  
—this transistor radio  
truth value blasted a go go  
—well worn to bend her

hostile stares mock to face  
—a recondite disgrace  
else cure his traitorous gait  
—with a wholesome balm

encompassing no continuum  
—for his mistress he prays  
solid state to snake in repose  
—carry go bring me this venom

## EARLY ONE MORNING

hazard ruine—combustion all sides round  
they do not deceive in the valley below  
when overwhelmed by the deluge they fall  
from sense to skies beating like hearts

till then who knew grace could offer up all  
burning offal against ceiling cracks  
with adverse power opposed—yield unto  
a fixt sum masking settlement patterns

stopping at a well to rest—durst dislike  
but settle for a place so far afield  
stunned by an unconquerable acquaintance  
squarely at the center of this cadence

so it beats—blown away by redacted light  
how people feed themselves at night  
can else inform the blind force of token arms  
scouring settled land for branch or bone

## DAYBREAK BLUES

an account told or enacted  
—tooled into an absence  
on the finest milling machine

tomorrow belongs retooled  
take the dirt road home  
meet undiminisht what untold

to avail though forget we feel  
often an instance to grieve  
do deceive under sovereign pact

four at the foot six at the head  
suffer a surface like blood  
burned before us by permission

we belong to an ordered design  
scaly rind—enraged  
but serving well to bring forth

forthwith the backward slope  
in billows blind by right  
we run with force for morn delay

## DOWN BY THE RIVERSIDE

study my burden—no more  
whom serving hath made  
greater—in my choyce to see

if for once in worst extream  
pursued by thir rowling  
we turned away from the wake

then all might be nonesuch  
floating carcases strewn  
pushed to swelling beyond us

we move in abject posture  
(they mean us to fight  
crumbling heroic constrictor

whom they no longer respect  
but crawl where we stood  
strapped to the heavenly record

## BLOW OUT THE CANDLES

then when you were apprenticed  
on fertile banks—intrencht

bright eyes for decorative padding  
the brisk set turned

enhanced there by stately growth  
down—cast—damp

witnessed all the more come through  
standing like but against

repulsed—assayed in spite of scorn  
lest our noise too bar the door

## DOWN THE HATCH

blow my bully boys  
clear away  
unanswerable style

squared summons  
dropt—rout  
an all access throng

suffer no hat tricks  
lout roll out  
by charge of sound

insufferable light  
so numbered  
below—unsupported

blow out—seaward  
wan pale course  
fairly measured specs

## THERE USED TO BE A BALLPARK

where the kids ate cotton candy  
right here—do you mind  
if I rest for a spell by this stone  
alone or obscene when they  
lowered you down—well done

no doubt there was only a future  
advantages for everyone  
our only support against pushing  
some confused base—hit  
thrown into an anticipated coming

## RAIN ON THE SCARECROW

four hundred empty acres somehow made right  
dangle overhead on strictly speaking  
disentanglements offsetting gossamer forbearance  
rent among fitful threads laid bare

in the cupboard of unforeseeable opportunities  
disordered by the rowdiest tame under will  
blood invites an endowment for just such a past  
slack jawed—fluently scorched—blight

## UNEMPLOYMENT STOMP

our meal was in our field  
—hunger itself  
probably more than mine  
unseen—whose

name in an earlier way  
meant potential  
for new meat hung to dry  
in old smokehouses

## CROOKED TRAIL TO HOLBROOK

intolerable prattle—bid farewell—to the cattle  
eating prairie hay wounded from lip to hip  
—silvern chatter derogations dismissed as before  
wise or unhurried—smoothly unanswered

what plucked at least for them low hanging fruit  
blossoming out of hand on petroleum fueled trinkets  
to mount thoughts that shake the scaffold loose  
—all reasonable things flee unstable embattlements

but residual pulp confounds our ability to perform  
thoroughgoing risk assessments—these barren pastures  
unregistered in the bruit or mistaken for the plenty  
to which we carry nonplussed selves—heavy—to graze

raze the charred land—split it down the middle  
or recognize our fear indeed suffers no wild flowers  
stirred to life on the trail between tracks  
that tremble under the incontinent law of their ground

## TANGLEWOOD SWAMP

brackish entirely to way—by prime of day  
we understand our worthiness

their counsel to play time till we're gone  
riding fealty—sudden command

or that one there to proffer us wrong  
yet—now it is—so openly

abiding analyses held down by the name  
with more than many may do

—well here is our body to make it good  
departing from pleasance

refugees of—low lying—last resort under  
foot stand unique among drainage

basins—though the fish were never quite fish  
nor the waterfowl domestic at all

## HOUSE OF SAD RETREAT

floating rates of exchange remainder  
next of kin—an occasion

intensified thereafter—an internal  
policy—this act of union

fathom stroud waters convey the whole  
—bargaine among thieves

stable reserves—currencies desaturated  
by law—so prepared all treasons

administered justice—fast misprisions  
—felonys—seditions—calumnys

bullbaiting—cockfighting—bear beating  
contract out the public house

## IN THE UPPER ROOM

through tall grasses  
between these names  
& dates & battles  
darkness comes early

forrotian—uneasy  
passing wi gude will  
improved means  
to an undiminished end

it was never unclear  
these—years trusting  
a pace of approval  
twisted into bold rings

distinctions between  
malign capacities—must  
—as ever—be rigidly  
op—dweller—observed

NEVER WALK ALONE

courteously together as frames upon pain  
without a stitch or timely word  
beaten & thrown—walk on—headlong gone

bryght futures so about sold catch hem reste  
feasts spread across heaving breasts  
said then: the sun hath song in sorrow's waste

JOANNIE WORKS WITH ONE HAMMER

then—she goes to sleep  
glaidly to thoill  
n qhua is they hounggrie

when they work with two  
devastated  
by the frost—taken to raise

greit mercie on principle  
to lend—drains  
gude work instrumental to

three hammers simmer  
in the hole  
overnight hotter than coal

orchards link directly to  
four hammers  
quhais power is nocht theys

secured—in the pit—for  
their fude they work  
with five when then to sleep

TAKE ME BACK HOME

not long—before the war  
among children  
these godley sportes to pass

for the razors  
were ever wonder

in the night—like them pigs  
can sing maybe they fly

away from this  
say so long right

never—too late—coming up  
to killit us—now & agin

who will be  
returned—repeated

turn us loose—let us go  
cowering how  
crying—taken so from the till

## BLACK MOUNTAIN RAG

to cling to—smash—smallest thane  
burnished chance to spill  
bereaved so kind of a common world

out there in the dark—we poor thing  
where were we all night  
who could at least come back for good

on these poor legs—taken round  
long—into the black  
lashing blind at rock & thicket flung

och skammen—affection is so often  
an unyielding thing  
maligned by a far more available fruit

MAGGIE LAUDER

well met—bladderskate—scornful to my trade  
shake a leg—wallop over the field  
break long ways—from—key performance indicators

down at the base—research & regnal hymns  
collected round campfires  
burn white at the aggregate limit of impact factors

## SWEET DARLING

these untuned hues—configured—to play  
in morning light the mile  
walked—side wise—fine shadows trashed

footsteps ground large—set—for begging  
terror bestride uncarved calls  
with love driven to build a rapt summer stair

an incomplete moment lost to the straight  
ways bridled round wise  
decisions—locked—faintly remembered back

apart from rote prayer plundered for gone  
advance of stays fooled  
to bloom by—wise—restricted mass of days

I hear you—hallway bound—walking sound  
grown dear in the dim light  
blunted—treasured against our inability to know

## WAR ON THE STREETS

tonight—mired in the maelstrom  
covered in mud  
out with the noise—alright—settled

into old scores locked tight tonight  
conspired—blindsided  
waged against a cabined community

in a useless heap formed under law  
fell flat on the floor  
to feel small understanding nothing

## BILLY IN THE DARBIES

his marrowbones shackled out  
(ignore paraphenomena  
patterned winds—cycloid—smile

through the trauma in their hearts  
(auguries sound this hour  
so sleep fathoms deep—slake notes

crossing unsurveyed surfaces  
(greasy hogs brood  
on the collateral organs of others

muted—signal bright derivations  
(disendowed questions or  
the congratulated weight of tongues

OFTEN WHEN WARRING

bespoken—thuswise hustled  
wired through juvenile platitudes

unprotected against  
outperforming muscularities

a permissible rage—tendering  
no wise—defenestration

among friends—friendly officers  
attend to the bleakest of species

dragged willingly across  
the scorched earth of having been

## THE COMING OF THE END

an instrument—to get us through the brush  
this guaranteed hush—this bore to take  
coiled—who resolutely lie awake—in sense  
to mend sense—a space—far too willing

•

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## WORKING NOTES ON BALLAD PRACTICE

### I. *THE MAST*

The species of an eye with the neck of an owl—a circumspect specimen that carefully considers the conditions of an outcome. Respectus. The act of looking round or back, to regard or attend to with eyes. The act of looking backwards with an eye that aspires to behold the whole so that when J.H. Prynne speaks of respect it is in the interest of fresh light—of reviewing what the eyes have already seen, a music previously muted by shadows:

Since I crossed the sea just like a ballad, with the one guarded  
hope, to give you this as a totally specific gesture: a respect  
which runs out into time like light.

So he says to Olson, redirecting his gaze, running out. There is no deference here. Only the care of eyes for the potentialities of a buried music. Like Odysseus lashed to the mast—or more appropriately, Marina's father moving across an oceanic expanse:

His kingly hands, haling ropes;  
And, clasping to the mast, endured a sea  
That almost burst the deck.

Shakespeare's *Pericles*—where the ropes that secure sails to masts and ensure good voyage vibrate like the chords of a throat. And the pressures brought to bear on the deck are no different than the altitudes and depths that push the drum of an ear near to the point of rupture. The mast that thrusts up from the deck is where we assemble.

### II. *THE FIRE*

Like sound and sense ballads circulate. And it is the circulation of air that creates the conditions for fire. Too often paper beats rock—but only so long as it stays in circulation, reified, away from the movement of the burning flames that call our

attention to time. And if there is any one collection of ballads that most worked to retard the perishing instant of fire it is Thomas Percy's 1765 *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. Published in three volumes, the collection is built around a seventeenth century manuscript and intended, Percy says, "to inquire by what gradations barbarity was civilized, grossness refined, and ignorance instructed." Although Percy's *Reliques* enjoyed a wide and enthusiastic readership that included Wordsworth and Coleridge, the "ancient" folio manuscript upon which it was built remained in the possession of the Percy family and unavailable to readers for a century until, at Francis James Child's behest, F.J. Furnivall and John W. Hales retrieved it from Percy's descendants and prepared it for formal publication in 1868. Brought out in four volumes as *Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript*, an opening essay contained in the second volume offers an account of the circumstances surrounding Percy's acquisition of the manuscript. Here Furnivall and Hales quote from a note inscribed by Percy in the manuscript itself:

This very curious old MS. In its present mutilated state, but unbound and sadly torn, I rescued from destruction, and begged at the hands of my worthy friend Humphrey Pitt, Esq. then living at Shiffnal in Shropshire, afterwards of Prior Lee near that town; who died very late at Bath; viz. in Summer 1769. I saw it lying dirty on the floor under a bureau in ye Parlour: being used by maids to light the fire.

Ignorance is instructed when unlettered, untutored servants are taught the error of their ways. Or a culture's past becomes the infancy of its present when songs are rescued from children accused of mishandling the objects of their labor. But there are fires to build. And few know better than a servant the value of warmth and light generated by flame in a moment of bitter darkness.

### III. *THE MUSIC*

Children love songs and in fact make them—but music

properly belongs to adults. Adults are the guardians of children and their custody naturally extends to anything a child might make. In other words, employees that produce anything on company time know in advance these objects properly belong to the company. But 401(K) investment plans offer employees the illusion of ownership, suggesting workers are no longer employees but associates that now have a personal stake in the success of the companies they labor for. Apropos: the following passages from a recent exchange with Andrew Rippeon concerning lyric practice:

AR: Lyrical as an adjective, applied to the currency of popular song forms? As if popular song forms aren't innately also lyrical? Lyrical as nothing without a direct object to modify? And I remember here Wordsworth in either his Advertisement, Preface, or Afterward to the *Ballads*, writing that he chooses rude or common life because invention and idiom (cult of "the new...") are often mistaken for truly elevated experience—he calls the affectation of idiom the "hubbub of words." So it seems like WW is trying to reduce the experiment (and I do think WW is experimental *precisely* in the degree to which he mobilizes folk forms, attempts various forms of empathy, and considers his use and circulation of the currency of metrical patterns...) to the lowest common denominator, to cut out Shelleyean whim and explore what remains as the possibility of lyricism.

RO: Thinking about Wordsworth and the mobilization of folk forms—that the ballad as form needs a qualifier in order to somehow recuperate or revitalize it, like the coronation of a peasant—man, my jerking knee coughs up Ives (selling insurance against the wrong disaster). In Wordsworth the modifier serves to elevate, right? I mean, everyone has an idea they know what a ballad is. It's this degraded thing shot through with a sense of pastness, cultural infancy and a charming but sometimes dangerous rusticity that needs to be carefully framed and reined. In the case of Wordsworth, his appeal to ballad practice—and lyric—is, like you say, considerably more complicated. In most cases ballads are nothing more than vehicles hijacked or manufactured to map

a desired past onto the poverty next door—a sort of slumming that brings the black sheep of the family to the funeral that never ends. I mean, ballads are those angelic whores from the other side of town that rich men sometimes marry—but only in fairy tales (the appeal to gender is essential).

Women and children. In the cultural imaginary women are children. Like any good woman, children are pure. They are said to be what we were before the collapse, unsullied by knowing better or knowing at all. Forms are assigned to these children and sirens are the women Odysseus must delight in without being seduced by their song. He knows better.

Nor can we know how many ballads trickled down to common people from court poets through a specifically cultural form of supply-side economics. Wyatt was a poet of Henry's court when he wrote: "Ye must now serve to market and to faire, | All for the burden for pannyers a paire."

Or a culture's modest past becomes the infancy of its wealthy present when children are accused of making the objects rescued through the labor of adults. Adults often play the role of rescue workers that pull bodies from under the rubble of collapse, not so much to save them but rather to preserve and memorialize. Ann Yearsley, the milkmaid of Bristol, is said to have been rescued by Hannah More. But children often know well what is worth rescuing, even when they themselves are the object of rescue. More importantly, they know what is properly theirs. If it is not theirs they actively make it their own, mutilating and defacing the objects in their possession until they can one day be restored and preserved again by adults.

Guthrie and Leadbelly often performed for children and some critics have even called attention to their child-like qualities. Here one can reasonably assume that for an adult like Robert Southey both Guthrie and Leadbelly would have been—as Stephen Duck or John Taylor were—ideal specimens of untutored genius. They certainly were for Alan Lomax. On the

other hand, Bascom Lamar Lunsford—esquire, to be sure—was known to travel dozens of miles on foot through the southern Appalachians of North Carolina to collect the ballads of the people he so loved. Something like a father picking up after his children. And children are never to be trusted with large sums of money—or anything more than what they immediately need to satisfy baser but permissible appetites. Adults handle capital. But servants often know well when to start fires and what to fuel them with.

#### IV. *THE WAR*

Chanson polemique. In the ancient sense polemic—the polemical—is war and the internal contradictions at play within the frame of any ballad make of each a protracted conflict often violently disarticulated from the processes that keep them alive. Like any order of song, ballads are sites of struggle; their production and reproduction are interventions, willful or otherwise, in that struggle.

Music properly belongs to Apollo not Dionysus. Ian Hamilton Finlay knew this well when he had inscribed across the façade of his cottage home: HIS MUSIC | HIS MISSILES | HIS MUSES. Chilean soldiers knew this well when they broke the hands of Victor Jara, threw down a guitar and asked him to play.

#### V. *THE PATHOS*

Per the Greek suffering and experience are one and the same: pathos. But on the terrain of classical rhetoric pathos is neither suffering nor experience as such and is instead a species of persuasion that reproduces experience in order to carry one capable of decision or intervention into a certain condition. It is never more than one component of a much larger whole, a part among parts integrated in an overdetermined complex of ongoing processes. But it is precisely this part that moves one to give the shirt off their back against the better jury of our reason. And this can only be the work of pathological liars or what lies through the grace of a lyre—a set of strings signaling

the coordinates of a distant situation. It is not the whole of a situation but a distress signal that simultaneously sounds and responds to a situation. And depending on their situatedness such signals either challenge or act in accord with other parts embedded in the whole; or like pharmakoi these signals move as slaves among criminals, heroes among rescue workers, whores among men; they are both the cause and the cure, the ochlos—at one and the same time the people and the rabble; they are the ground any successful democracy wholly depends on, wholly produces, publicly celebrates and secretly despises. These signals are the mast we assemble around.

APPENDIX I: THOSE UNKNOWN  
PREFATORY NOTE

From 1988 through 1997—a full decade—I performed with my brother, Bill Owens, in *Those Unknown*, the first decidedly socialist Oi! band in the US. In this we followed founder of Oi! Records, Roddy Moreno of the Oppressed, who insisted: “Oi! = A WORKING CLASS PROTEST (NOTHING MORE—NOTHING LESS).” While the masculinist underpinnings of our grasp of class struggle at that time obviously inhibited our ability to fully articulate the concerns that most troubled us with other struggles, these underpinnings offered us a generative point of departure for what I believe has been a lifelong inquiry into working class masculinity and the role it plays in the social reproduction of capital as an unimpeachable socioeconomic phenomenon. And having played drums—having been committed to the practice of beating percussive objects—I am now reminded of the colonial drummer on the 1976 bicentennial quarter designed by United States Mint engraver Frank Gasparro. This would be labor.

In an essay dedicated to DC-based poet and activist Gaston Neal (1934-1999), Amiri Baraka writes, “The Word is the FIRST DRUM.” Below this he then writes, “The Drum then Follows.” This is contradiction—generative contradiction—such that the drum which comes first follows. This is a listening. At once the first to arrive and the last to leave. For this to be so the drum as object must listen. Here the word as the first drum must listen; it is thus that language designates not a speaking but a listening. And so I listen to others—Dale Smith, Sean Bonney, David Grundy, others—they calling me back to Baraka who lived on South 10th Street in Newark—just one street over from where my father was raised. This matters. This is contradiction. And in his brief 1984 commentary on Bruce Springsteen, Baraka writes:

Would perhaps that there were more American youth independent of the double maw of working-class economic insecurity and lack of education (hence, often, political sophistication) to be as clear as Springsteen on what being born in the USA, for instance, yokes a young white (and black) working-class youth to.

This then would be the task and continued labor of ballad building.  
Perhaps. This.

## DISCOGRAPHY

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*Those Unknown.* 7" ep. 33rpm. Midland Park, NJ: Headache Records, 1991.

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*Distribution.* 7" ep. 45rpm. Sussex, NJ: Pogostick Records, 1995.

### B. FULL-LENGTH LP

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*Those Unknown.* LP. 33rpm. Dinslaken, Germany: Knock Out Records, 1995.

*Scraps.* CD. San Francisco, CA: TKO Records, 2003.

*Those Unknown.* CD. San Francisco, CA: TKO Records, 2003.

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*The Only Spirit is Unity.* 12" LP. Coburg, Germany: Dim Records, 1995.

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*SHREDS: 5 (The Early 1990s).* CD. Hoboken, NJ: Shredder Records, 1997.

*Limited Options Sold as Noble Endeavors: Benefit  
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Recording Corporation, 1997.

*Punch Drunk III.* CD. San Francisco, CA: TKO Records,  
2001.

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2002.

With the exception of a word here or a phrase there, and some minor involvement in developing arrangements, each specimen below written and composed by Bill Owens.

## INSTANCES

### i. NO RHYME NO REASON

There was once was a playground  
Where the children used to play  
And there once was a factory  
Where there fathers worked through the day  
But now in its place  
Stands the proof of capitalist gain  
So whose to say that  
Everything will be okay?

Soon it came to pass  
That the children played no more  
And their fathers in the factory  
Couldn't accept the reforms  
Of longer hours of work  
And a decrease in the rate of pay  
No longer are they needed  
So they're gonna throw them away.

It was said it couldn't be  
But they brought us to our knees  
And we said if this ever happened  
We would fight  
Now we're living off our past  
And we're living off our dreams  
I'm not gonna take it; I really really hate it  
I'm not gonna make it; So I'm gonna fight.

The children soon grew old  
Only to take their fathers' place  
In another time and another land  
To fill an old man's space

No longer shall they search  
For the golden light  
Cause the future's just a daydream  
And tomorrow's just a fright.

[Sussex Co. NJ 1991]

ii. THE ANSWER

All this time I lived a simple life  
No nothing too extreme  
& I told myself as a frightened little child  
Gonna grow up and be something  
But now my childhood's over  
And what remains from those scenes  
It's a question seeking an answer  
What happened to my dreams?

I tried to find the answer & found nothing to believe  
I was told to keep my chin up—for what?  
So they can kick me in the teeth  
The question still remains but one thing's crystal clear  
I gotta keep plugging to get ahead around here

Try to stop it now  
Try to figure it out  
Try to stop it now  
It'll never ever, never ever, never ever bring me down.

You tried to find the answer and found nothing to believe  
You were told to keep your chin up—for what?  
So they can kick you in the teeth  
The question still remains but one thing's crystal clear  
You gotta keep plugging to get your ass outta here.

Now you listen to their bullshit  
Ring, ring goes the bell  
They give you ten fucking minutes  
To smoke a couple cigarettes

& then it's back to your cell  
Well you could have had your own office  
& all your childhood dreams  
But now it's 5:30 go to work  
Think yourself a fucking jerk  
Who never ever learned anything

You tried to find the answer and you found nothing to believe  
So you went to work for a year or two  
& said this will solve everything  
Now time has passed you by and one thing's perfectly clear  
Sometimes you're looking for an answer you don't want to hear.

[Sussex Co. NJ 1991]

### iii. DARKER HOURS

There's a trap door in any pocket you'll find  
Mine's been sprung quite some many times.  
They can take away our homes and throw away our lives  
& wonder why we're so down.  
Don't you worry I won't be patronized  
Someday soon we'll kick them right between the eyes.

But for now there will be darker hours for you and me  
For now there will be darker hours—just don't you give in.

The police are there to protect and serve the rich  
Ticket the poor to build income for the state  
Compound discrimination and disregard our rights  
So don't wonder why we're so down.  
Don't you worry—we won't be patronized  
Someday soon we'll kick them right between the eyes

But for now there will be darker hours for you and me  
For now there will be darker hours—just don't you give in.

Cities and streets will crumble, the wicked swept away  
Be they just and true, eternity be thy wage.

Hoping for tomorrow, getting screwed today  
All manufactured to keep us down.  
But don't you worry—we won't be patronized  
& someday soon we'll kick them right between the eyes.

But for now there will be darker hours for you and me  
For now there will be darker hours—just don't you give in.

[Sussex Co. NJ 1995]

APPENDIX II: PROTO / BALLADS

CINDY HAS GONE FOR A BROKER

—to the tune “Johnny Has Gone for a Soldier”

O Cindy dear has gone away  
so far away across the bay  
my heart is tired & lonesome today  
O Cindy has gone for a broker

shule shule shule agrah  
there ain't no time can heal this woe  
how I watched my woman go  
O Cindy has gone for a broker

I'll set my clock & fix my reel  
& rope them in like netted seal  
& buy myself a heart of steel  
O Cindy has gone for a broker

shule shule shule agrah  
a man that's got no bread  
is better off to stay in bed  
when your love she goes for a broker

but now my tie is power red  
& at the exchange I'll steal my bread  
& at the exchange I'll steal my bread  
O Cindy has gone for a broker

me O my I loved her so  
but I was broke when she did go  
but cold hard cash can heal this woe  
my Cindy has gone for a broker

shule shule shule agrah  
there ain't no time can heal this woe  
to Standard & Poor's I'm bound to go  
so Cindy can marry a broker

[Sussex Co. NJ 2001]

TAPHOUSE NEAR AN OPEN FIELD

so early in the afternoon  
is nowhere to be. Birds

spring upward & a shot.  
Then a draft. We go on

like that for a time. Birds  
on the sill—across from

a field. We go on like  
that for a time. Sitting

along the bar—birds along  
the sill. So many able

bodied men out of work  
so early in the afternoon.

[Pike Co. PA 2005]

CRAZY JAY (CROW JANE)

If there were such a thing  
the truth of the matter  
is the cops were chasing  
all of us down a dead end alley.

But its much larger than  
Any a one of us involved  
who were sometimes cops  
when we needed to be  
if there were such a thing.

BATTY OLD BEN (CRAZY JANE)

Once the summer's gone  
& the leaves turn brown  
I hear the children playing  
& draw the curtains down.

[Pike Co. PA 2003]

HERE COMES THE SUMMER

—to the tune “Buck Town Corner”

Its only when you watch  
the sparrows  
how they fly with speed  
& accuracy

how their wings  
flutter & flail in apparent  
discord when they mate  
that we understand  
*a no jest a mi a jest*  
*nor a guess a mi a guess*

the strength needed  
to stay the winter  
while the geese fly  
awkwardly to the south.

*a no jest a mi a jest*  
*nor a guess a mi a guess*

Roaming herds  
of construction workers  
& roofers nearly  
never leave home  
when autumn gold  
is covered in snow.

They winter over in  
warehouses like the sparrow.

la la la la la  
la la la la la  
la la la la la  
la la la la la

They often steal away  
to Buck Town Corner  
ploughing snow from roads  
to sing a song of summer.

[Pike Co. PA 2003]

#### THE PEASANT'S REPLY

—conventionally measured burden 4/4

So many curious things I saw  
while walking the streets of Jersey  
so many things stuck in my craw  
& caused me to cringe & curse thee.

So many on the streets of Paterson  
start the day with a morning drink;  
things may be worse in Pakistan  
but this must beg a man to think:

what despair finds solace in drink  
or drugs that numb & smash  
senses which writhe & fight & shrink  
at a horror brought on by cash?

Come to the farmer's barren field  
where absurdities grow & ripen  
where the harder he works to yield  
the less his annual stipend.

So you say your lonely & poor  
a misfortunate overworked wretch.  
Come with me & I'll show you more  
of the horrors poverty can hatch.

Come to the streets of Camden Town  
where Whitman used to live.  
Here the children play & gun men down  
for what no man can give.

Run to the well where first you heard  
a lonesome child scream—  
can you save her with a well-meant word  
or charitable thought or dream?

So you say you know the poor  
you're poor & broken too.  
I warn you: throw open your door  
set a table & let the rabble through.

[Sussex Co. NJ 2005]

THE BONNY MINSTREL BOY  
—variation on John Hasted's Streets of London

I'm a roving blade of many a trade  
& I've found work in all the trades  
& if you think you know my name  
you'll call me jack of all trades.

I've often heard of New York Town  
the pride of this big nation  
at twenty-one it's here I come  
with no miscalculation.

In Brooklyn streets where I began  
I found work as a martyr  
but the cops & I had a falling out  
that made my stay there shorter.

Then I took the train a little ways  
on down to Coney Island  
where I became a circus act  
moonlighting as a stage hand.

In Soho Town I peddled art  
in Chelsea Town a printer  
but very soon they threw me out  
so I became a thinker.

At NYU where I went to school  
I met with a professor  
who wrote a novel split an atom  
& danced with a cross dresser.

On the waterfront I worked the docks  
the work there it was slavery.  
I tossed the job & hit the streets  
& soon fell into knavery.

On Broadway Street I was a whore  
on Saint Mark's Street I made songs  
in every street & all streets  
with my banjo I played songs

In Spanish Harlem I did have luggage  
with guns & drugs—I sold it.  
In Tompkins Square a liquor bottle;  
I often failed to hold it.

By Brooklyn Bridge I had a bed  
for all who made their way there  
for intellects of great renown—  
now squatters & addicts stay there.

I'm a roving blade of many a trade  
& I've found work in all the trades  
& if you think you know my name  
you'll call me jack of all trades.

I've tried my hand at everything  
from ironwork to banking  
but at least I can raise my head & say  
I've never been a-scabbing .

[Buffalo NY 2005]

### APPENDIX III: AFTER THE BALLAD (FUTURE ANTERIOR)

#### TURNCOAT

Traitorous mulligrubs vault for charge  
ascend into dry days tomorrow  
strictly on the condition we glibly regard  
today as a rite of passage—bonfires

mounted by guilt then extinguished by  
the allure of what is neither labor  
nor easy only to turn in the night toward  
sleep on it—then come we succeed

under the occlusive stop of achievements  
middling at best against this metric  
shaken—to limply reload the gun if again  
to repeat the traum of caving to them.

[...]

Love comes in every shade—says this ad  
dissembled round the need to obscure  
simple facts. Not the system of waterways  
found on what Titan orbiting Saturn

but the recursive shift in art enacted by  
the Olympians who crushed the  
Titans when the glamor of an interest in  
suffering began to spoil the party.

Love they say cuts above and beyond naïve  
commitments to partisan positions but  
the love we grow to love is built on a model  
too graciously passed down from above.

[...]

Gripped by this fear of a career carved from  
the back of a class politics the wide cast  
of my lesser drives imagined an organ grinder  
proletarianizing a string of marionettes

dancing like gorillas since monkeys were  
spent by the libidinal force of grooming  
their mates—trafficked—through the waning  
of a hurricane beyond our fault but stars.

Embarking on such surrogate fantasies  
segued into living by any means  
necessary when the mild discomfort of  
regret buckled to what advantage.







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