

Poetry of Persons
The Quarto Press, 1976

KNOTS
cf R.D. Laing

These vicious circles
Herakles knots
snake-heads traced with tails entwined,
tangled persons
knit-together
by knots that strangle, knots that bind.

Nature's harmonious
organic growth
pulls at the person to be adaptable;
calculation's
mechanisms
push the person to be predictable.

The pulling and pushing
harden the knots
and split up the fine-spun personal thread[MSOffice1].
Each strand
coils on itself
keeps on fraying that which is dead.

Cut the knots
sharp and final
personality disintegrates;
endless loose-ends
splayed-out, fibrous,
and no painstaking reduplicates.

Yet knots and circles
hold us together
by the links and chains we ourselves prepare
as the pattern of persons
knit-together
which forms the garment of life we wear.

NAPIER COLLEGE

Students so different

Staff are kind
Standards of excellence

Excellent students
Differing in kind
Standard staff

The kind of student
whose standards differ
from excellent staff

A kind of excellence
Staff with a difference
yet student standards

Staff who excel
with different students
by standards of kindness.

THE CUP

The Israeli

'My family all perished'
he said, as he sat in an armchair –
grandparents, uncles, sisters,
brothers, cousins,
aunts, friends –

and the great vacuum
in his life
of people to chat about people
who all know one another
in a web of the personal.

Has it left all men his family
or none? (wife and children
of his own?) – but a withdrawn
intensive life he leads
in a world where 'families perish'.

The Ugandan Asian

'We had to lease everything'
She said, across the table –

and I thought of home,
garden shop and street,
all the familiar places
of daily activity –

and the great separation
in her life
from all that went before
and from the detailed background
to her sketched-in self-portrait.

Has it left the world her home
or none? (a new home
and new work?) – but a withdrawn
intensive life she leads
in a world where we ‘leave everything’.

The Mother

‘My child is dead’
she said, with her sunken eyes –

and I thought of children,
the loving and the birth,
the daily intimate delight
of discovery with them –

and the great abortion
in her life
of her caring, hoping, building,
tending and intending
a unique creation.

Has it left all the children hers
or none?(other children
to be born?) but a withdrawn
intensive life she leads
in a world where ‘children die’.

Jesus

‘I do not want to die’
he said, in the night vigil.

The I though of his life
and what had mattered most;
the forgiving and the healing
and the sharing of himself –

and the great restoring
in his life
at moments of most sorrow,
and at times of exhaustion,
in days of despair.

Has it left all deaths his death
or none? (the suffering
of the world?) – but a withdrawn
intensive death he dies
in a world where to live we die.

HOW THINGS HAPPEN

Our meeting was beyond analysis
it happened
like sunlight catching a seagull
two seagulls
so that they fly in the gleam of it.

We were going the same way
as it happened
although we did not stop to ask
nor did we
think of going separately.

We were hoping the same world
would happen
though we did not compare notes
try to define
the method or the end of it.

We did not think of love.
If it happens
it will be beyond analysis
like two seagulls
caught in a shaft of sun.

BALLAD

In my dream last night

I met you
again
and you forgave me

In my life these years
without you
explain
that you did love me

In those days I thought
you waited
to test
and to torment me

In the game you played
I wanted
to resist
and to content me

In the end from the fear
I recoiled
in which
I found me

In disdain from the shame
you turned
which was
around me

In my dream last night
you saw me
with kindness
and you held me

In my heart today
I know it
was in love
you killed me.

GLADIOLI

And unexpectedly you brought me flowers –
gladioli –
all straight stiff stems and green

sharp leaves.
Tall and crisp, they've grown strong
wilfully;
but loop and lean
with languorous buds
as if such discipline at length gave way
to fragile love.

SUICIDE

It was too late
when she walked into the sea
when she invaded the north-sea
the oil-sea, exploited.
Too late
that New Year's Day
she identified with the sea.

Because despair,
colder than the north-sea
spreading more than industry
numbed her resistance.
Despair
had choked her wish for help
and, like the sea, had drowned her.

It was too late
when despair had flooded her
to talk of keeping afloat
with scoops of hope,
when a New Year's Day
brought no sign of rescue.

It was too late
for friends to start to learn
the mechanics of despair
or study the facts of the case.
Too late
for her husband to withdraw his rig
give up his self-expansion.

Too late then
for her to risk his violence,
for him to bear her endurance,

for others to dare interference.
Despair
had left her grey as the sea,
she could feel no more.

Too late:
for the sea cannot disown its oil
nor the company withdraw
its investment for profit
Despair
kept coming in on her tide
until she followed it out.

TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

She planned to say:
'It's quite alright.
I do – I understand.
There's really no time
nowadays.
Things do get out of hand.
You're very busy
Yes, I know.
And I? I'm so involved
with children, baby,
dog and chores
and problems never solved.

Myself becomes intangible;
the new life
mesmerises mine,
and gently soothing at the breast
saps me into deadly rest.'

She didn't plan to say so much.
Her mind goes wandering on.
Close the inverted commas
at 'solved'. Thereupon
they say conventional farewells
and put to death the final word
(of words they didn't really mean)
with the receiver-guillotine.

1914–18 WAR GRAVES,
PICARDY 1974

Only now have I trodden
the heavy-yellow clay of Picardy
where sixty years later
it still sticks solid
round the short white graves.

This is July
and dull-yellow corn is covering
once lacerated fields
where poppies ever decorate
these wide-wounded plains.

Around the cemetery
bright-yellow mustard is growing
where fell to earth
those seedling men
of sixty years ago.

Those who survived
trace their yellow-lettered memories
carved for sixty years
like words on stones
with deep white pain.

These old men
once came back from the yellow clay of Picardy;
now expect death again
with long-drawn courage
and short white hope.

Their poppy day
will be a field of quiet yellow corn;
their life once offered
was taken over wide plains of living
to the gathering of friends.

BEREAVEMENT

As snow lies on a ploughed field
so does sorrow lie on my heart
O my father,

and it melts, it melts.

It does not melt all at once
but in little patches here and there
O my father,
and no-one sees.

My solid earth is ploughed up
with the sharpness of your dying
O my father,
and it hurts, it hurts.

That you were sick and needed death
that you had lived a goodly life
O my father,
I know, I know.

And people say they loved you well;
they praise you for your ways and works
O my father,
as you deserve.

They cannot tell how close and kind,
how set apart for me you were
O my father
in all the world.

This sorrow lies upon my heart
and sinks into the furrowed soil
O my father,
where it floods, it floods.

But as it coldly does its work
it is nourishing my depths
O my father,
and I grow, I grow.

MIDDLE AGE

Tread tread your Persian wheel with oxen feet
nor let your system function at the pace
it was used to do, with sudden wild heart-beat.

This is an altogether different race:

The heavy waters that you draw are sweet
and bring forth cultured flowers and the grass
of comforts, allow you to contemplate
little perfections for your dwelling-place,
beauty of detail, lovely when complete.

And yet you tread the wheel with blinkered face,
begin to falter in the noonday heat,
slow up and stand there, staring into space.

To hesitate is to admit defeat,
to carry on is ever to surpass
the previous effort, ever to compete.

While yet your children run to your embrace,
while still your eyes and hers you love can meet,
choose now, the Gracious Life or Life-in-Grace.

THE STRAITENING

a sonnet

I say farewell now to hilarity:
One moment it was shouting on the shore
And challenging the waves. One moment more
And it was wound in earth's polarity.
All brightness now betrays barbarity
Which breaks the shell and throws away the core;
No finer shade of suffering can restore
That recent rapture in its rarity.

I do not question such severity
As sharpens understanding, and makes clear
The sects and sections of disparity,
Explores the distant, distances the near;
And yet I cannot with sincerity
Repeat 'Farewell fair days' without a tear.

BLINDED BY A LETTER-BOMB

At the end of the day when others turn to darkness
my darkness turns to light,
for in my dreams I can see clearly
colours, expressions on people's faces,

and I can see myself
as having sight.

When morning comes and others regain consciousness
I must face my night,
for in the day I am alone in darkness,
learning to see with my other senses,
discovering the world
by sheer in-sight.

At the end of my life when it is time to die
my death will be completed,
for in my life I am for ever dying
to people, places and possessions,
my friends and these I love –
are all deleted.

When resurrection comes and all will find their losses
I'll find what I have lost –
my sight, my beholding, my comprehension,
an abundance of light and revelation,
and running to an unexpected
welcome at last.

SOLZHENITSYN

On the occasion of his Nobel Prize speech, October 1972

This tree from frozen winter found release
who experienced and witnessed
the felling of a forest.
Among the forests of the world he stands
alone, yet prized throughout the lands
because his leaves are shed for peace.

Like trees, we, in the soil where we belong
think that we can find
in the features of our kind
in a universal standard for all trees;
each one in his own self-shape sees
the pattern of eternal right and wrong.

He in his long pain has learnt to feel
the agonies of others;
has found strange brothers,
who, being freed from hope as from despair,

know they can in being human share
a bond that torture does but more reveal.

His branches twisted, bent towards his friends
to those who could not grow.
And bitter winds we know
he has endured for their and for our sake
to bring forth fruit – that we might take
and taste the truth which heals and mends.

He grew in that gaunt forest, this writer.
He stripped away the curves,
exposed the very nerves
stringing us together; traced the soul
hidden yet evolving in our whole;
it is his works which make our future brighter.

SATIRE

On reactions to the offer of life abundant

Some say – yes Lord – give me life,
but not in face of death.
There's bitterness, bullying,
pettiness, suffering,
illness and pain.
I cannot stand these parts of life
nor understand their place in life,
why they remain?
Give no abundance then, O Lord –
lest evil should abound,
but snippet out the sweeter things
impartially all round!

Some say – Yes Lord – give me life.
I'll take it otherwise.
I'll revel in 'experience',
enjoy life 'to the full',
buffet off the heavy blows,
ignore the bruises that I cause.
And if perhaps to my surprise
my charging like a bull
is side-stepped by life's matador,
I'll use my weighty influence
to trample, toss and gore!

Some say – No lord – no, not life.
Shelter me under your wings.
I'm sensitive and easily hurt
by all life brings.
Do not tempt me overmuch
keep me in the way
of safe and shallow righteousness,
and if this must mean loneliness,
for peace and privacy it's such
a simple price to pay!

The Lord of Life
becomes my life –
(a needle's eye indeed)
May I accept
this given life
as the life I need.

PURITY

seen on the Meadows, Edinburgh

When I make a picture
I will put a black man
in bold headlines
running full-scale across the Meadows –

beside him a white dog
husky and blurred
in wavy outlines
skating the grassy surface in circles.

Sharp edged, bright-black
tropical man . . .
snow-soft, stark-white
arctic dog . . .
superimposed on the antique Meadows.

The trees are tense to the roots,
grass stretches, stones stare
from medical buildings,
as these two in their extreme purity
cut across our Middle Meadow Walk.

DUNVEGAN, ISLE OF SKYE

the castle seen from across the loch at sunset

dying sunlight on Dunvegan
captured from the pale horizon

craven rocks around and moorlands
callous waters of the islands

bright the wing of boat and bird
golden seaweed, fling of cloud

between the hidden Hebrides
and the Cuillins, *Eumenides*

nothing sudden here nor violent
non-committal here and silent

deep the rift of land and heart
sealed with mist all love and hurt

accomplished now the heron's flight
posed and poised for the twilight

croaking takes up his position
we who come will ask no question

Dunvegan now with folded wing
watches its own voyaging

CHINON

Supposedly where Richard Coeur de Lion died

Reaching the white-stone walls of Chinon
Doucement, dying *Coeur de Lion*

Rested his head between his hands
Folded his maps of other lands

No longer mounted the sun-white terraces
Nor entered the chateau among the princes

A house below in the shady street
A grey-tiled house of shattered defeat

Nor petty England nor Palestine
Could ease his pain with Anjou wine

Crouched on its rocks the chateau of Chinon
Shelters the memory of *Coeur de Lion*.

ON READING GM HOPKINS AS A STUDENT

Caught and far-flung in you, tempested, tossed,
Pitched in your darkness and torment and grief,
Comfortless, too, for the prayers that are lost,
Giddy with fear on the cliffs of belief.
Self-racked with thoughts grinding
Ever myself finding
Sorrow besodden;
Cries for one far away,
Stumbling the rutted way
Millions have trodden.
Striving to build, catch, catch at it falling,
Grounded and gone beyond hope of recalling;
Yet fragile with spirit the granite earth,
Laden with beauty Christ's manifold birth.

ON READING NORMAN MacCAIG

MacCaig belittles himself
and Poetry (with a capital P)
dismisses politics,
philosophy, religion,
as tedious jeux d'esprit.

Yet his mocking sense of guilt
drives him to write: his art and craft
directing every dart and shaft
of Celtic intuition, spilt
over his hard-headed Scots
snaps of life in accurate shots.

But when MacCaig belittles self
he leaves all others even less,
who say their nothing very well
or who obscurely try to tell
the meaning of distress.

MacCaig laughs at himself
and his imagination
whose restrained rhythms
and detached lucidity
sentence a generation.

METAPHYSICS

Where was the child
when the mother was a child?
My sweet children were yet to come.
Their beginning was not in their birth,
their end is not in their death . . .
God's will has no end in us.

The long laws of nature
do not control us
my sweet children when you are come . . .
The convenience of culture
does not determine us . . .
We are centres of will-energy.

We are drawn from will-energy,
elements
about to be transformed
into a picture
in which we have no end.

All that is and ever was
in the universe
becomes what ever shall be . . .

My sweet children are yet to come . . .

Now they are come and
there is no end in me
nor am I at any end.
The will-energy is what I am
and my sweet children have become
in what it is –
new centres completed and overflowing
into new centres.

No knowing
the sweet children of ours
always to come.
Will-energy
accumulates in us
reaches its maximum and
radiates free . . .
Yet to come and without end
God's will.
No end
Come and
still become
sweet children of mine.

THE FOOL

When everyone is in his place,
when every move premeditated,
the Fool will step into a space

where he was not anticipated,
where his subtle entry makes
one and all interrelated.

The world shudders, opens, shakes,
its universal patterns range;
its brooding spirit wings and wakes . . .

The laws of balance and exchange,
the perfect and yet incomplete,
the ancient which is new and strange,

both compensation and defeat,
both conquest and assimilation,
the point where opposites can meet . . .

are offered as an invitation
by the Fool, who seems to smile
both at our haste and hesitation.

He stays quite motionless, while
all else functions as it should;
dead-in-the-centre, odd, futile,

no use for anything, no good;
symbolises contradiction,
that which can't be understood,

incongruity, restriction,
disparity and ridicule;
fact that out-imagines fiction,

exception made to prove the rule.
Who can close his eyes to see
the lightning movements of the Fool?

Accepting helplessness, yet free;
call him names, he's undefined,
elusive as identity,

ingenious as the human mind.
His laughter lifting from despair,
welling up within mankind

as if in truth he's always there;
to level us perhaps, and save us
from ourselves – if we could dare –

The Fool, the God, the one who gave us
himself, expressed in one man's face,
the sense of his humour, and called it grace.

POETRY OF PERSONS

We love each other utterly
in sharing what we do not have;
we find each other finally
in losing what we cannot save.

We keep each other continually
in taking what we dare not hold;
we win each other daringly
when every treasure has been sold.

We fill each other with good things
when we hunger for the least
and receive the cup of blessing
uninvited to the feast.

We bring each other healing
in the strong herbs of silence;
we hear each other speaking
in the quiet voice of distance.

We come to know each other
accepting what we do not know;
we come to choose each other
whom we'd chosen long ago.

We see each other perfectly
in the beholding of the night;
we trust each other lastingly
in the unfolding of the light.

We complete each other constantly
but grow to a new whole;
we form a part of all that is
and all that is forms us a soul.

We love each other utterly
in sharing what we do not have;
we gather again abundantly
after the casting in the grave.

TREES

Pledged to live, in rings of growth
each year by year designed,
trees:
giant trees, ancient trees,
aged and ageless,
markers of ages.

I trace the grooves of growth encircling me.
They mark me as I was when I became,
define me as I am
and as I will be when I have become.

Young trees leaping:
each naked new-green stem
shines its fresh feelings forth,
briefly exposed,

until another seasons seals.

I startle in this unprotected growth,
already sealed before I am aware;
still seeking my new self
with each death done and I am onward.