

# Riverains: Shoreditch Poems

## Martin Rieser

### **Tea**

*On clippers and on merchantmen  
with sails as wide as fields,  
gull-wing sharp and lifting, it sped.*

*Flew across spume and undulation  
of deep water, lapping inches off  
fragrant memories of the hills.*

*In its dry whispers  
were heard the chant of children  
plucking the best leaves  
into heavy baskets,  
the hot sun burning on strict rows  
across a steep hill's burnish.*

*Brimming boxes marked Assam or  
Darjeeling, cluttered the docks.  
Then genteel fingers mixed the leaves  
in exquisite porcelain or  
horny hands poured out a steaming mug  
for navvies resting on their spades.*

*The Empire ran on tea, and tea  
ran through every house*

*Even when the bare cupboard  
Furnished no nourishment to hungry mouths.*

## **Huguenots**

*We take their shouts as if a gift-  
when selling cloth, its river flow  
reminds us of our river over there.*

*It's far too early to despair,  
but then our spirits lift  
in mornings over coffee smells*

*or in the lace's complex weave,  
we sense our difference and rejoice  
for all we came here to relieve:*

*the rugged persecution of our faith,  
the bloody massacre and rage,  
and see our past in chapbook prints*

*and imitations on the stage.*

## **Romeo**

*We are so low,  
outside the walls-  
the theatre holds us all :  
both cocks and crows.*

*That other boy was good  
with his high quavers,  
his Juliet brought tears-  
her Romeo was all earth and wood.*

*My pen is goose  
my ink is gall  
and with this noose  
I'll hang them all.*

## **Falstaff**

*In some low tavern by the ditch  
where in the mire his jewels are spent  
Falstaff nestles with his bitch.*

*Under the lamp his words are bent-  
too many years to lose that itch  
to versify-his future lent.*

*In some low tavern with his Doll,  
when kings want cash  
he ruffles up a prince's poll-*

*then guzzles pie and mash.*

*So age will take its toll  
of simple youth and tavern trash.*

**1665**

*Listen to me!  
The rumours you hear are not real  
This infection will not disappear.*

*Stay within,  
Take all precaution:*

*A nosegay intervenes,  
And vinegar will drive away,  
As fires do, the bad air.*

*I know that it is tempting  
To leave with the Rich*

*But we can't sustain such flight  
Keep within and hope*

*The Lord will spare  
Your houses  
To mark the doors  
elsewhere.*

**Twice ten**

*Twice ten I counted  
All this night*

*Twice ten or more  
Wagons, rolling past  
Packed with the dead*

*Bells toll  
Above this host*

*We are curfewed and fearful  
All locked within  
And food is sparse.*

*I see my future in the glass  
And frown at its thin ghost.*

## **Mary Kelly 1**

Each slash on arm and face - a sacrifice  
To purify the world of whores  
To cut away their awful sores  
So cleanse the district with her blood  
Which spills around her like a flood

*Rigor mortis had set in, but increased  
During the progress of the examination.  
From this it is difficult to say with any degree of certainty  
The exact time that had elapsed since death*

They call me 'ripper' which I know  
Reveals how little they can think  
When all the world must smell the stink  
Of trade between the Ditch and Bow-  
Women are like a hell below.

*The body was lying naked in the middle of the bed,  
The shoulders flat, but the axis of the body  
Inclined to the left side of the bed.  
The head was turned on the left cheek.  
The left arm was close to the body  
With the forearm flexed at a right angle across the abdomen.*

Each part, each part is laid to rest  
Each symbol of corruption made  
Reminding all that it is best  
To cure corruption in the breast,  
I'm not dismayed.

*The right arm was slightly abducted from the body & rested on the mattress,  
The elbow bent & the forearm supine with the fingers clenched.  
The legs were wide apart,  
The left thigh at right angles to the trunk  
& the right forming an obtuse angle with the pubis.*

Is this butchery or redemption?  
I know they disapprove the means:  
But I will claim exemption.  
Nothing here is as it seems  
I'm cleaning out temptation

*The whole of the surface of the abdomen & thighs was removed  
& the abdominal Cavity emptied of its viscera.*

*The breasts were cut off,*

*The arms mutilated by several jagged wounds  
& the face hacked beyond recognition of the features.*

*The tissues of the neck were severed all round down to the bone.*

## **Mary Kelly 2**

When nothing connects the body to the soul  
They fly to find the maker who makes whole  
I carve with care, I rip and shred:  
Those women who men take to bed,  
Endangering their souls.

*The viscera were found in various parts  
Viz: the uterus & Kidneys with one breast under the head,  
The other breast by the Rt foot, the Liver between the feet,  
The intestines by the right side & the spleen by the left side of the body.  
The flaps removed from the abdomen and thighs were on a table.  
The bed clothing at the right corner was saturated with blood,*

They cry at first and scream-  
I cannot feel the blame of it  
I carve with care, I rip and seam  
In a trance or in a dream  
Where I see fit

*& on the floor beneath was a pool of blood  
Covering about two feet square.  
The wall by the right side of the bed  
& in a line with the neck was marked by blood  
which had struck it in a number of separate splashes.*

## **Big Issue**

*In your eyes  
I see resentment and dislike.*

*I threw the dice and numbers came  
for the long road,  
the burning desert air and clanging lorries  
Bouncing over ruts.*

*At borders they preferred cash, no questions  
but only here do they ignore your story.*

*Never looking straight.  
Hurrying away at each request  
with eyes awry.*

*I stand or sit on cold pavements  
or walk between the hostels  
counting hours*

*Sometimes I regret  
that gamble and wish myself  
back among the bullets  
and the midnight raids.*

## **Jews**

*In Odessa  
they are mourning  
the dead Tzar  
killed by an anarchist,  
an Anti-christ, a Jew*

*Here they say more will come,  
and they do every day  
speaking in tongues.  
With beards and hats,  
nodding and sighing  
singd by pogrom's fiery breath*

*The locals mutter and curse  
but who can deny the rich smells  
from the new bakery  
and the soft boots they sell-  
the finest leather at good prices  
and suits too  
fitted for half the cost  
of anywhere else.*

## **The Ditch**

*It seems right that a god lived here  
in the headwaters of Walbrook  
near the flow of the Soers  
draining the thick marshes.*

*The ditch came later  
running like a sore  
through the poor dwellings,  
Swirling their leavings  
into the lap of a larger god-*

*Tamesis:  
who cleansed the city  
for a thousand years.*

*In water there is life,  
and sweet waters  
separate us from the Stygian dark*

*We used to respect their flow  
both fair and foul.  
Now we hide our shame  
in underground caverns  
built by engineers,*

*forgetting that the gods need us  
less than we need them.*

## **The Plague Year**

*The confusion among the people,  
Especially within the city, at that time,  
Was inexpressible.*

*The terror was so great at last  
That the courage of the people  
Appointed to carry away the dead  
Began to fail them;  
Nay, several of them died,  
Although they had the distemper before  
And were recovered,*

*And some of them dropped down  
When they have been carrying the bodies  
Even at the pit side,  
And just ready to throw them in;*

*And this confusion was greater in the city  
Because they had flattered themselves  
With hopes of escaping,  
And thought the bitterness of death was past.*

*One cart, going up Shoreditch  
being left to one man to drive,*

*He died in the street and the horses going on  
Overthrew the cart  
And left the bodies, some thrown out here,  
Some there, in a dismal manner*

*(Daniel Defoe - Journal of The Plague Year)*