



The T S Eliot Prize 2009

Reading Groups:

The Water Table

Born in Cornwall in 1952, **Philip Gross** lived in Bristol and Bath for many years, and now lives in Penarth in South Wales. His previous collections include *The Egg of Zero* (2006), *Mappa Mundi* (2003), *Changes of Address: Poems 1980-1998* (2001), *The Wasting Game* (1998) and several collections for children, including *Scratch City* (1995) and *The All-Nite Café* (1993). He is also the author of ten highly-praised novels for young people. He is currently Professor of Creative Writing at Glamorgan University. *The Water Table* is published by Bloodaxe.



Severn Song

The Severn was brown and the Severn was blue
– not this-then-that, not either-or,
no mixture. Two things can be true.
The hills were clouds and the mist was a shore.

The Severn was water, the water was mud
whose eddies stood and did not fill,
the kind of water that's thicker than blood.
The river was flowing, the flowing was still,

the tide-rip the sound of dry fluttering wings
with waves that did not break or fall.
We were two of the world's small particular things.
We were old, we were young, we were no age at all,

for a moment not doing, nor coming undone –
words gained, words lost, till who's to say
which was the father, which was the son,
a week, or fifty years, away.

But the water said *earth* and the water said *sky*.
We were everyone we'd ever been or would be,
every angle of light that says *You*, that says *I*,
and the sea was the river, the river the sea.

for John Karl Gross

The Moveable Island

...shifts, like the hull of a boat
left drifting, grounded on a different shoal
each morning, in the midway, out
where the Severn is letting, has let,
itself go into sea, like a thought into sleep:
now you're there, now you're not.
Today the outlook's vague, the weather
iffy. *Precipitation within sight: good... Low,*
losing identity... If God could *dither*
here's how it would look: these grand
tides like a lesson in bad governance, all power, no
fixed purpose. No wonder the island
keeps its distances. Its reticence. Whichever
shore you look from, it seems closer to the other.

It's an abiding absence: in some
lights, a prison hulk; or, grey mornings after
the storm, a lighthouse stump;
a tanker, *stricken* (as they say, as if
the load that leaked, to blight our foreshores,
was heart's-blood or grief).
Sometimes it wallows, half
submerged, King Log hauled to and fro in state
twice a day – a life or afterlife
beyond us, though you can almost
see a way at lowest tides from shoal to shoal
stitched with bird-tracks where a soul
not weighted by its body might – but for one last
narrow channel between – might just pass.

And now I'm closer, in the narrow
focus of my father's old field-glasses, adrift
on a plain of brown wave-furrows
till there: a skirt of mud-rock, un-
approachable by any craft, steepens to paler grey,
with lichen blotches, then green
above the tide-line, grass, almost
wind-dried, salt-pickled, enough for a castaway
goat. A self-sufficiency. Or so
his binoculars say, though what
do they know – army surplus before I was born,
discharged from the ranks maybe
for just such imaginings: seeing a place that is not
for owning, most there only when you look away.

Yalta, 1945

Jigging the text, the torn tracts, till they slot
and settle, the inscribers of the coming age
lean back from the table. One folds a page
down, crisply. There'll be i's to dot
etcetera after lunch. Black pips of shot
in purple pigeon breasts (bred in the cage
for shotgun wars the house-guests wage)
are spat discreetly out, bones picked, and what
shudders of moon cross the lawn, what steel
zinging of bats as they stuka the lake...?
the spoils of peace: the drafts and maps discarded,
numbers estimated who will wake to feel
the margins closing, run, sleep rough, take
their chance, ford rivers; the bridges are guarded.

Buy Philip Gross' *The Water Table* from the Poetry Book Society's online bookshop:
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