



The T S Eliot Prize 2009

Reading Groups:

A Scattering

Christopher Reid was born in Hong Kong in 1949 and studied at Oxford. He then worked as a freelance journalist and as book review editor of *Crafts* magazine. His first poetry collection, *Arcadia* (1979), won the 1980 Somerset Maugham Award and the Hawthornden Prize. This has been followed by *Pea Soup* (1982); *Katerina Brac* (1985); *In The Echoey Tunnel* (1991); *Expanded Universes* (1996); *For and After* (2002); *Mr Mouth* (2005) and *The Song of Lunch* (2009). He is often cited as co-founder with Craig Raine of the 'Martian School' of poetry which employs exotic and humorous metaphors to defamiliarise everyday experiences and objects. He has also written two books of poetry for children: *All Sorts* (1999) and *Alphabicycle Order* (2001). *A Scattering* (Arété Books) is dedicated to the memory of his wife, the actress Lucinda Gane.



The Unfinished

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Those last few days
of drug-drowse, coma-comfort,
friends came, if not as many
as before, to keep her company,
to talk, to weep.
At each arriving voice,
I thought I saw
a faint, fleeting
muscular effort
adjust her mouth and jaw
as if in greeting,
as if for a kiss.

But how could that have been?

I talked, too, read aloud
from her favourite Yeats,
or played the last, great
Schubert quartets –
the one in G
that, with whole-hearted
ambivalence,
weighs in the balance
the relative merits
of major and minor
and struggles to postpone the choice.

While I cultivated
my clumsy, husbandly
bedside manner,
she lay as her nurses had arranged her:
reposeful beloved,
stark stranger –
or something in between.

A Scattering

I expect you've seen the footage: elephants,
finding the bones of one of their own kind
dropped by the wayside, picked clean by scavengers
and the sun, then untidily left there,
decide to do something about it.

But what, exactly? They can't, of course,
reassemble the old elephant magnificence;
they can't even make a tidier heap. But they can
hook up bones with their trunks and chuck them
this way and that way. So they do.

And their scattering has an air
of deliberate ritual, ancient and necessary.
Their great size, too, makes them the very
embodiment of grief, while the play of their trunks
lends sprezzatura.

Elephants puzzling out
the anagram of their own anatomy,
elephants at their abstracted lamentations –
may their spirit guide me as I place
my own sad thoughts in new, hopeful arrangements.

Afterlife

As if she couldn't bear not to be busy and useful
after her death, she willed her body to medical science.

Today, as a number of times before, I walked
past the institution that took her gift, and thought,

'That's where my dead wife lives. I hope they're treating
her kindly.'

The dark brick, the depthless windows, gave nothing away,
but the place seemed preferable to either Heaven or Hell,

whose multitudes meekly receive whatever the design teams
and PR whizzes of religion have conjured up for them.

My wife is in there, somewhere, doing practical work:
her organs and tissues are educating young doctors

or helping researchers outwit the disease that outwitted her.
So it's a hallowed patch of London for me now.

But it's not a graveyard, to dawdle and remember and mope in,
and I had work to do, too, in a different part of town.

Buy Christopher Reid's *A Scattering* from the Poetry Book Society's online bookshop:
www.poetrybookshoponline.com.

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