

**ONE WORLD ONE VOICE:
A READING OF 'SO THERE' BY ROBERT CREELEY (1926 – 2005)**

Murray Edmond

Begins with some original sounds, sounds of origin, which are also quotational:

'Da. Da. Da da.' (1)

Could be a musical beat, the rhythm of the poem coming first, before any sense, four beats, three strong, one weak.

Could be also the original voice, the child's first articulate sounds to match the second of 'Ma. Ma. Ma ma.' Da. Da. Da da.

Dada itself might have been named after these sounds. Though, as Dada itself said of Dada: 'Dada means nothing.' (2) Dada tried to make the poem of pure sound: 'gadji beri bimba glandridi laula lonni cadori.' (3)

The next line puts words in for these sounds/beats: Where. Is. The song. Da. Da. Da da. Meaning emerges from articulate sound. The poem grows up. (4)

You almost want to say: 'So there!' But it's too soon for that. And also too late. It has already been said, in the title.

And between the title and the first line, there (there!) sits the dedication: '*For Penelope.*' (5) Keep this in mind for later. Odysseus and home.

Now the first rhyme arrives ‘song/wrong’ – ‘what’s wrong’ - impossible not to hear it as a question. It is that question we fend off the world with. But the question is not over: ‘What’s wrong/with life? But the question is not over: ‘What’s wrong/with life//ever.’ The question turns back on itself. The question questions whether anything can ever be wrong. Life is as it is. So there. Life is ‘so there’ – absolutely itself, now and only now, here. So there. There is where it was. Famously Gertrude Stein wrote of her return to the place of her growing up, to Oakland, and finding it empty of what had been there, that ‘there is no there there.’ (6) In contrast, Creeley writes of Auckland that the there is there. ‘So There,’ which starts out as a poem of dislocation, grows into a poem of homecoming, a paradoxical homecoming of a stranger to a strange place. One might venture that Stein’s ‘there’ was nominative, whereas Creeley’s is adverbial, predicative, and expletive. Oakland/Auckland, so close and so far. So there.

That’s the first stanza. Getting there.

Yet again a stock phrase, ‘more or less,’ gets pulled out of shape. ‘More’ becomes a question in itself, ‘More?’ What’s wrong with life might be that you want more from it, of it. ‘Or less’ follows, a line on its own, but broken off with a dash, so it never becomes either question or statement, cut off from completion. Read backwards now, you might even think that it all adds up to something like this paraphrase: ‘There’s more or less nothing much ever wrong with life.’ Perhaps.

Now the rest of the stanza, which spills over into the beginning of the third stanza, ties this talk down to a specific time: ‘days, nights,/these//days.’ It is ‘these’ days – no other days but these days. And ‘these’ contrives a half-rhyme with ‘less.’ Time does not go backwards. The voice of an old friend comes echoing in: ‘*What’s gone/is gone forever/every time*’. Creeley was not at home when he wrote ‘So There.’ This was his trip to New Zealand in 1976. The voices of old friends, as opposed to new ones just encountered, take a special place in the mind of the traveller: ‘old friend’s/voice here.’

Then the traveller's, the voyager's, voice replies, once more looping across the stanza break: 'I want//to stay, somehow,/if I could - /if I would?' Does the traveller want to stay here, in this new land, New Zealand (the last new land begins with a 'z') or does he want to stay, as it were, against time, to stay time's hand, not to move on? Both thoughts inhabit the words as the whole statement turns itself in a question: 'if I would?' And he answers himself with a kind of further question: 'Where else/to go.' But there is no question mark. This is a question as statement, recalling the earlier question as statement: 'What's wrong/with life//ever.'

All the questions have been asked and all the answers given very early in the poem and now it is time to look up, out the window. Where we are. Where are we:

The sea here's out
the window, old
switcher's house, vertical,
railroad blues, *lonesome*

whistle, etc. Can you
think of Yee's Cafe
in Needles, California
opposite the train

station – can you keep
it ever
together, old buddy, talking
to yourself again?

The musical beat laid down in the opening line becomes the blues: for traveller read drifter/hobo/bum, on the road, carrying his bag of existential questions: who am I, why does time fly, will I suddenly fly to pieces like a million shattering atoms, who can you talk to about these things in the whole goddam universe except your old buddy self?

And the poem becomes very precisely located. Creeley went out to the West Coast (it needs capitals) from Auckland city with New Zealand poet, short story writer and novelist-to-be Russell Haley, to a bach (read 'holiday house') on top of the cliff above White's Beach, a beach between Piha to the south and Anawhata to the north, a bach among the manuka scrub and the flax which was a relocated a 'signal box' (read 'switcher's house'), from the Swanson railway station, sitting up hundreds of feet above the ocean. From that bach the ocean, the Tasman sea, stretching away to Australia, sat up before your eyes: 'The sea here's out/the window . . . / . . . vertical.' This vertical land and sea scape invoked another place ('Yee's Cafe/ in Needles, California' – that lovely rhyme of 'Yee' with 'Needle'). Needles' location and *raison d'être* – a way station on the old Atlantic and Pacific Railroad in south-eastern California, on the Colorado River near the Arizona border – amplifies the bluesy echo of the voyager as drifter. Before this trip to New Zealand, Creeley had been living in California, Bolinas, though that was about to end because of this journey. The traveller connects this lost existential new place with the old place called home. But home also connects to the solipsism of 'talking to yourself' as if this journey has woken this self up, to look 'out the window.' Did the switcher's house propose some change of direction, another switch in the tracks? Narrative time and compositional time are now running on parallel tracks, steaming onward together. Steaming can evoke both a railway journey and a sea voyage.

Quite suddenly the reason for this journey springs into focus, the visiting famous poet on tour:

Meantime some yuk
in Hamilton has blown
the whistle on a charming
evening I wanted

to remember otherwise –

The reading in Hamilton had been disrupted: 'Creeley's objections to an actor reading others' work, reading in a parody of the speech of another country.' (7)
Competition and jealousy surround luminary figures visiting small countries. The

poem locates this destruction of ‘a charming/evening’ in this fierce competition and contrasts it with the simpler delights that preceded the evening’s reading, picnicking on the banks of the Waikato River which flows through Hamilton:

the river there, that
afternoon, sitting,
friends, wine & chicken,

watching the world go by.
Happiness, happiness –
so simple. What’s
that anger is that

competition – sad! –
when this at least
is free,
to put it mildly.

The self the poem opens with is intensely private, as it turns its existential dilemmas in its hands, and, as it admits, even solipsistic. Now the public self has entered the poem. It has to be admitted, there would be no journey, no private simple joy sitting drinking watching the river flow and the people come and go, if there was no public figure, no name to conjure with. ‘So simple’ is not so simple. Even in making its simple assertions the poem knows it is not simple, just as it knows there is something beyond ‘free,’ which is why the word ‘free’ is used to ‘put it mildly.’ What is beyond free is not mild, perhaps not so nice at all.

And who should come along suddenly for the ride but another poet, perhaps not fierce competition, but a kind of competition –

My aunt Bernice
in Nokomis,
Florida’s last act,
a poem for Geo. Washington’s

birthday. Do you want
to say “it’s bad”?

That would be too cruel, but the poem has already said it’s bad, as if anyone reading had not guessed already. Judgement made and withdrawn is still judgement. Geo. Washington, via the American constitution, launched the idea of ‘free’ into the world and the French picked it up and had a bloody revolution. ‘Free/to put it mildly.’ Beyond freedom, the guillotine – or the gun:

In America, old sport,
we shoot first, talk later,

or just take you out to dinner.

American mythology, the constitution, the wild west and the blues (*‘lonesome/whistle’*) ride inside this traveller who also knows the implications of this romantic heritage – the guillotine, the Colt 45 and the lynching noose: ‘free/to put it mildly.’ Each traveller carries their home inside them to some extent, so the idea of the tourist, cultural or otherwise, that they are somehow ‘free’ away from home, not bound by custom or society, is an illusion. The responsibility of the traveller, which is hard ‘to put it mildly,’ is something perhaps a little terrible. And coming home can be terrible too, like the slaughter of the suitors in Ithaca.

The actual ‘dinner’ (a picnic lunch in the back) the poem stages next (as opposed to the one they might take you out to in America) is simple, homely, ‘old time’ fare:

No worries, or not
at the moment,
sitting here eating bread,

cheese, butter, white wine –

This is homespun food, almost sacramental in its simplicity, but for pleasure, not for forgiveness nor repentance. This simple feast brings the traveller home: ‘like Bolinas, “Whale Town,”/ my home, like they say,/in America.’ Yet by the time the traveller reaches home, here, at what is close to the centre of the poem, ‘home’ needs two quick qualifications: home is just a word ‘they’ use (‘like they say’) and Bolinas is my home, yes, ‘in America,’ as if something has shifted in the traveller through travelling and he thinks that other homes might be possible. In fact he thinks, swiftly, more than this, denying the existence of separate places: ‘It’s *one* world/ it can’t be another.’ This tone connects with the existential tone of the opening of the poem: “I want/ to stay . . . // Where else/to go.’ This means you cannot be more ‘free’ here than in America or vice versa. The implications of this discovery raise questions which the poem immediately avoids.

The scene shifts and stages another altogether different, but equally immediate scene: ‘So the beauty,/beside me, rises,/looks now out window – .’ We know the sea lay beyond this window. And now this ‘beauty’ stands at the window, framed by the vertical sea. Could this beauty seem for a moment like the birth of Venus, rising out of the sea, something wonderful to behold, an answer in herself, also echoing Byron’s ‘She walks in beauty’? Could this scene be a kind of ‘home’ too, the man with the woman? Might home be this, rather than some place? That is certainly the feeling the vision evokes, journey’s longed-for ending:

and breath keeps on breathing,
heart’s pulled in
a sudden deep, sad
longing, to want

to stay –

To stay. But the self who is always talking to the self quickly interrupts and answers, in a mocking tone, the pretensions of the vision and its interpretive voice: ‘be another/ person some day,/ when I grow up.’ The voice satirically says, no, you cannot stay here any more than you can find a parallel life, parallel universe, for you yourself just

said, there is only *one*. And how is this *one* world: is it the home of the rising Venus or the nest of illusory hopes?

The world's somehow

forever that way
and its lovely, roily,
shifting shores, sounding now,
in my ears.

This world is a place of 'shifting shores' and somehow it is forever this way, making sweet sounds, like the Sirens' song, in the voyager's ears, it's both lovely and turbulent. And though 'roily' means turbid, it holds within it both 'oily' and 'royal,' as if this voyager was both a prince and a slippery customer.

And still the other voice, the old buddy, keeps interrupting:

My ears?

Well, what's on my head
as two skin appendages,
comes with the package.
I don't want to

argue the point.

The terrible self-consciousness created by the internal debate of the two voices turns 'ears' into strange, alienated objects, 'skin appendages' and the person into 'the package.' It is also another 'joke' with the self – the poem is all happening through these ears. Perhaps, for Creeley, there was an echo here of his mentor Charles Olson: 'the ear, the ear which has collected, which has listened, the ear, which is so close to the mind that it is the mind's, that it has the mind's speed . . .'. (8) Faced with this extreme moment of self-alienation, where the body has lost its integration as a whole

listening body and has become pieces, fragments, the voyager retreats into the voyage:

Tomorrow
it changes, gone,
abstract, new places –

moving on. Is this
some old time weird
Odysseus trip
sans paddle – up

the endless creek?

So 'trip' appropriately rhymes with 'up' as the traveller trips himself up. And utters his name at last, Odysseus, to accompany that Penelope, addressed at the beginning, even before the poem began, in the dedication. Cunning Odysseus, prince and slippery customer, who hears the sirens' song and goes from shifting shore to shifting shore before he comes home to his Penelope. And yet, where is this journey going – just another short trip up shit creek?

Whatever journey it is, the song suddenly picks up its opening four beat rhythm, the traveller begins to sing a little, some old sweet song:

Thinking of you,
baby, thinking
of all the things

I'd like to say and do.
Old fashioned time
it takes to be
anywhere, at all.

The traveller moves in real time and departure looms. Can we meet again? The poem moves back to the voyage: 'Moving on.' is the next half line. As Russell Haley wrote about Creeley leaving New Zealand, after Creeley's final New Zealand reading, which took place in Auckland soon after this visit to the bach: 'When he went through the gates [of the airport] I missed him, felt the loss: "You've got to move on."' (9) And as he goes he addresses the one world:

Mr Ocean,
Mr Sky's
got the biggest blue eyes
in creation –

here comes the sun!

As Haley reminds us, in his memoir of Creeley's visit, this line lifts off from The Beatles *Abbey Road* album: 'We were playing *Abbey Road* on Wednesday afternoon, the first day at our house in Auckland.' (10) Rhyme - 'Sky's/eyes, Ocean/creation' - begins to take over the poem at the end; rhythm and music supplant the wrangling argument of the internal voices. And some of that Dada ('Da. Da.') sound and spirit return. 'Here comes the sun.' Here. Comes. The sun. The song's very next 'words' are: 'Da. Da. Da da.' The song goes on. How can there be an ending when you are so much in the present, yet painfully conscious of the present disappearing? As far as any such thing can be provided, rhyme provides an ending:

Here comes the sun!

While we can,
let's do it, let's
have fun.

The wider, bigger, grander questions do not exactly dissolve in some romantic idyll so much as for a moment the moment takes over. There's one world, one voice, if only for a moment.

Murray Edmond: Poet. Teaches Drama and Theatre Studies at the University of Auckland.

Notes:

1. The text of 'So There' I am using is from Robert Creeley, *Selected Poems* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1991) pp. 217 – 221. The poem was first published in *Hello* (Taylors Mistake: Hawk Press, 1976) with the second and fourth lines of each stanza indented.
2. Dada manifesto, quoted in Annabelle Melzer, *Dada and Surrealist Performance* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994), p. 57.
3. Hugo Ball, phonic poem, 'O Gadji Beri Bimba' in Melzer, p. 50.
4. In the reading he recorded of 'So There' with the band Mercury Rev, Creeley puts a very strong stress on the 'is': 'Where *is* the song?' - as if finding the poem in its composition is part of the poem – or refinding it again in the articulation of the reading. The Mercury Rev reading of the poem can be found and listened to on the New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre site, on Robert Creeley's author page: <http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/sounds/sothere.rm>
5. The manuscript of the poem (which can be viewed at <http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/authors/creeley/stanford1.asp>) has a dedication 'for Margo Richard and Stephanie.' The printed version of the poem in *Hello* is dedicated 'for Penelope Highton.' The *Selected Poems* chooses 'for Penelope.'
6. Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 1993) p. 298.
7. Russell Haley, 'Here Comes the Sun,' *Spleen* No. 3, 1976, p. 19.
8. Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse,' in *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*, ed. with intro Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 18.
9. Haley.
10. Haley.