

POETRY & FICTION

Simon Armitage – one poem and a letter

In a letter accompanying the following poem, Simon Armitage offers the story behind the poem:

4 Aug 98

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Reading Grevel Lindop's article from December 97's issue brought back to mind a really odd event. I was writing a paper for the Science Festival in Edinburgh last year, and remembered being at school with a boy who later emigrated to Australia. On one particular day we had to conduct a science experiment which involved him shouting from as far away as possible and me lifting an arm to let him know I'd heard him. I found the memory very vivid and set about writing a short poem about the incident, called "The Shout". I somehow had the recollection or the vision of the boy killing himself in later life, and his became the essential point of the poem—the lifespan of audio-memory outliving the actual occasion of sound.

So, you probably know what I'm coming to by now, but I hadn't read the Graves short story at that point, and a couple of months later, when I did, I can tell you that the hairs on the back of my neck didn't just stand up, they walked around and bumped into each other. And not just because of the way in which the details seemed to cross-reference, but also because of the supernatural aspects of the story, and the way that coincidence is one of its subjects. Reading Grevel's article made me turn white again.

The Shout

We went out
into the school yard together, me and the boy
whose name and face

I don't remember. We were testing the range
of the human voice:
he had to shout for all he was worth,

I had to raise an arm
from across the divide to single back
that the sound had carried.

He called from over the park – I lifted an arm.
Out of bounds,
he yelled from the end of the road,

from the foot of the hill,
from beyond the look-out post of Fretwell's Farm –
I lifted an arm.

He left town, went on to be twenty years dead
with a gunshot hole
in the roof of his mouth, in Western Australia.

Boy with the name and face, I don't remember,
you can stop shouting now, I can still hear you.