

1979

The Lapidary Poems

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Recommended Citation

Silkin, Jon. "The Lapidary Poems." *The Iowa Review* 10.3 (1979): 91-92. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2492>

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The Lapidary Poems · *Jon Silkin*

To the memory and work of Merle Brown

Brecht's *War Primer* is written in "Lapidary" style. The word comes from the Latin *Lapis*, "stone" and describes the style which was developed for Roman inscriptions. Its most important characteristic was brevity. This was conditioned, first, by the effort required to chisel the word in stone; second, by the realization that for one who speaks to a succession of generations it is seemly to be brief.

"Commentaries on Poems by Brecht" by Walter Benjamin

The Chisel Grows Heavy

The chisel grows heavy, fewer words
would lighten the hands; and to keep
him who wanders this hard ground
like scurf, scurf the size of leaves,
or who grazes the mild squares
of London, is unseemly.

So who is this?
Earth's fingers revolve earth. Those
who search
will pass through me.

Lapidary Words

Lapidary words: for it is hard
to chisel stone; and to detain
the reader at the tomb
softened by moss, and the lichen's bruised studs
of gold, is not seemly.

You, too, would not want
to take from the wonderer
grazing the mild squares of London
his time you now bear.

There's no more; the lichen's nail innocently
feeds its point
into the child's burying place.

The Lapidary Style

The *lapidary style*, brief as a cut
in stone, for it is hard to cut that.

And for such words: to those spangling the road
like wheels, to speak brief is seemly.
A long life of the short time; we all try.

Out of such a day, the day blazes
of some soft shade its great viridian
branched at the vitreous brick. Fed of

the body's plight incandescence, that works
every inch of this little yard
clasped to the road like a dead bride.