



Richard Buckner

*The Hill*

2000

Overcoat Recordings

# Excavations: On Richard Buckner's *The Hill*

Matthew Woodman

"My boy, wherever you are,  
Work for your soul's sake,  
That all the clay of you, all the dross of you,  
May yield to the fire of you"

--"Emily Sparks" from Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*

On January 18, 1870, Matthew Woodman, under contract for the burning of ironstone, died when the rope connecting the wagon train snapped, leaving cars to careen down the quarry before toppling near the kiln bank and burying him beneath the grey fleshly cleaved rubble. Such a cloud of dust. Such fractured veins. Such banded ferruginous sediment.

In 1996, Richard Buckner was traveling to Tucson to record *Devotion & Doubt*.

"down this stretch of 99  
that takes so many lives  
one of them was mine  
hand me that lil wallet picture  
in 1985 one more time"

Is this the same Highway 99 that stretches from Bakersfield to Chico? That stitches Mettler to McFarland? Tulare to Turlock? The garage in which Buckner stopped had been converted to The Ranch Olancha Motel, near the entrance to Death Valley, between Lone Pine and Dunsmovin. The motel room had no phone, no television. With his guitar, a four-track recorder, and a copy of Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, Buckner spent a week giving voice to and recording the poems on a cassette that he then interred in his truck for four years until, fortuitously, an exhumation. How does one come to be haunted? What stirs the murk that churns between our ears, behind our eyes, beneath our feet? How to inhabit, aspirate the page, the mind that preceded the line, the life before that?

In 1683, Matthew Woodman, a former rector at Slinfold who was ejected in 1557 for religious nonconformity—the Corporation Act having driven him out—but who had continued preaching *gratis*, took his final breath, leaving behind over 400 books, a miraculous accumulation of verbs and nouns. Woodman was considered a fragrant presence even in absentia.

In 1914-1915, Edgar Lee Masters—under the pseudonym Webster Ford—published in the literary magazine *Reedy's Mirror* what later would appear as *Spoon River Anthology*. Each entry appears in the form of an epitaph of a former citizen of the fictional Spoon River, a lightly fictionalized version of two actual Illinois towns: Petersburg and Lewistown. In Masters's telling, each denizen has become defined, condensed, distilled by unresolved trauma, by psychic scars of what others did or did not do. What he, she, or they allowed or precluded. Tom Merrit's murder at the hands of the adulterous Elmer

Karr. Julia Miller's suicide after having entered a marriage of convenience meant to legitimize her pregnancy. Death an eternity of entangled resentments. One can take a self-guided walking tour of The Oak Hill Cemetery in Lewistown to witness the graves that inspired Masters, to circuit the grey stations of declaration, the headstones still above the shorn lawn.

On February 22, 2013, Matthew Woodman, a longtime resident of Sanford who worked in the family motorcycle business, died in Burlington following a short illness. Woodman seemed to be born with an encyclopedic mechanical understanding he manifested working on a wide variety of motorcycles and other iron-alloyed transportation vehicles. When it came to the inexplicable and random, Woodman would find the solution, and if one couldn't be found, he would create one.

In 2000, Richard Buckner gathered the musicians Joey Burns on cello and Arco bass and John Convertino on percussion to help him summon 18 voices from *Spoon River Anthology* to create *The Hill* (released on Overcoat/Convent Records). Though Buckner sequenced the cd as one 34-minute track, *The Hill* alternates nine instrumental performances with nine vocals, the near a cappella "Ollie McGee" as a particularly haunting track, Buckner's voice trembling: "In death, therefore, I am avenged." Sonically, so many of the songs seem soaked in venomous, serpentine snares, the trance drone of locusts, and guttural squeals of small creatures suffocating in coils. These oppressive cycles and repetitions of dissonance and chord progressions shatter or open or clear when Buckner's voice releases "Ruben Pantier"—"The eternal silence of you spoke instead"—and "William and Emily": "There is something about Death / like love itself." Whatever we read has already happened. The voice emanating from our speakers is a sequence of ones and zeros, a grooved spiral etched in vinyl, freed by needle. We experience the past. We cannot know the present.

On November 5, 1999, Bonfire Night, fourteen-year-old Matthew Woodman was playing with friends on the gates at the Stokes and Parry sheet metal factory in Kelsey Close, Attleborough, suspending himself with one hand and then the other to feel the pull of gravity, when one of the gate arms sheared in half—for given time, oxygen, and moisture, any iron body will eventually corrode to rust and disintegrate—and a metal spike pierced his skull. Woodman died at the George Eliot Hospital, his organs donated, distributed, released, bequeathed for transplants, for bodies needing to breathe, to filter toxins, to see.

On February 18, 2017 Richard Buckner, traveling a West Coast Living Room Tour, stopped at the home of Matthew Woodman, signing *The Hill* in silver ink against matte black.