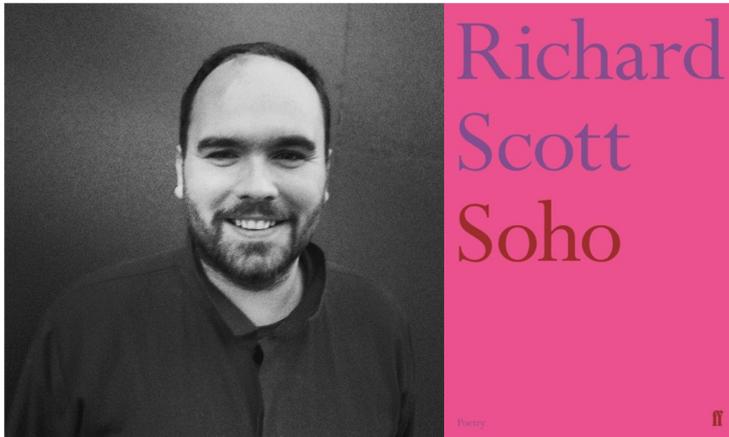


Soho

by Richard Scott
(Faber & Faber)



Richard Scott was born in Wimbledon in 1981 and grew up in London. He studied to be an opera singer at the Royal College of Music and later at Goldsmiths College. He has been a winner of the Wasafiri New Writing Prize, a Jerwood/Arvon Poetry mentee, a member of the Aldeburgh 8 and an Open Spaces artist resident at Snape Maltings in Suffolk. His pamphlet *Wound* (Rialto) won the Michael Marks Poetry Award in 2016 and his poem 'crocodile' won the 2017 Poetry London Competition. *Soho* (Faber 2018) is his first collection. richardscott.info/poetry.html

Reviews

Richard Scott's debut poetry book, *Soho*, comes after his pamphlet *Wound* won the 2016 Michael Marks Award for Poetry Pamphlets. Whilst reading it on the bus, I overheard a woman tell her friend that she hopes her baby son will 'turn out gay' so they can 'watch Ru Paul's Drag Race together.' Queerness has never been more socially 'acceptable', but *Soho* is not a celebration of gay freedom or equality or acceptance per se. It leans hard into the shame that corporate, family-friendly or normatively affirmative representations of gay identity and culture often ignore or sanitise. As the speaker notes in '[you spit in my mouth and I]', 'the opposite of shame is not pride.' Between the hot-pink book covers of *Soho*, intimacy is double edged. Insecurity haunts a desire for erotic abandonment, complicity troubles memory, the intensity of delight weighs against the threat of violence. (*The Manchester Review*)

Throughout the book there is a rigorous engagement with sex, the body and desire. These

include feverish poems which celebrate the act such as 'slavic boys will tell you' whose format on the page takes on the evocative shape of a mushroom. But frequently there is a sense of sex being mixed with violence or death. One of the most striking is the poem 'you slug me and' whose startling invitation "ask the terrible questions of my flesh" describes how violence in sex can be a means towards self-discovery. Another poem 'you spit in my mouth and I' takes on a Jean Genet-like mentality to discover levels of beauty in sexual degradation. An entire section of the book includes poems focusing on shame as a complex attendant to sex, especially for gay people. Scott describes "those pre-grindr days when loneliness stung like a hunger" and how "my head's a cloud and my heart's a puddle". The triumphant final poem 'Oh My Soho!' describes the desultory sensation "I'm chock-full of shame, riven with dark man-jostling alleyways, a treasure map of buried trauma." An ever-recurring need for sexual gratification makes it seem as if we are condemned to a state where "this desperate place... is your home now". But the poem 'the presence of x' epitomises Scott's rejection of religion and "heteronormative bullshit" out of a commitment to "believe in sex the blue hours you've spent fucking me the bruises you left on my arms". This results in an individual who gazes askance at society to resolutely declare "I am the homosexual you cannot be proud of". (*Lonesome Reader* blog)

Crocodile

I know how I will die then
in a death roll scales to my
cheek claws sunk into my pale
shoulders water burning my
throat like whiskey the un-
countable rows of yellowed
teeth ringing in my scalp and
in the heat of the thrashing
river he will press his white
rawness into me like that man
who held me from behind
when I didn't know sex and
gripped my mouth like a muzzle
and unsheathed his anger
stubble grazing my neck see
I have died already and somehow
survived hauled myself up from
the river mud to taste blue air
though I was not the same I
was carrion bleeding into the silt
and didn't I wear those wounds
well pity me the boy who cried
crocodile I have these moments when I
know I wanted it asked for it even

to be special to be scarred
wading along the riverbank feet
in the brown flow flirting with
wildness the green violence in the
shallows and I know he is swimming
back to me his horned body slipping
through sediment and weed for
nothing ever really heals he can
smell the red meat of me
bait lighting up the river

Fishmonger

Every Thursday he came to call
in his blood-licked surgeon's coat
and if my parents were out
I knew to order nothing but eggs
as his prices for fish were far too dear.

Once he took me into his van –
row upon row of gleaming flanks,
the rough brick-armour of crabs,
the stopped hearts of bivalves pickled in brine,
all resting on clouds of ice.

He let me douse his catch in ammonia
a secret to keep their sparkle, he said
and as I sprayed they spluttered
back to life – mouths gurning for water,
gills rippling like Venetian blinds,

coppers and silvers flashing and lathering.
I heard the mighty roar of the sea
surround his van like traffic.
He took me into his capable arms
so I would not cry out.

He fed me prawns to calm me,
wiped the brine from my lips -
let me try my first razor clam
unzipped from its hard pale shell,
the tip – soft and white and saline.

In that battered old Transit
I took the whole ocean into my mouth
and then he sent me home
with a dozen eggs -
so no one would be any the wiser.

green

here's a plastic basket of polyester tulips
plus a heart-shaped card that sings I LOVE YOU
don't recycle them please
be happy with my pound-store presents

I stink I'm pretty sweaty I've been walking
this whole damp night to get here
let me curl around your converse cat-like
and dream of our cherry-days

Maybe I could put my head still burning
from the memory of your hubba bubba kisses
onto your broad chest just till I feel a bit better
perhaps grab some shut-eye while you doze off

Discussion Ideas

- 'pity me the boy who cried / crocodile' – is pity what you feel for the boy in the poem? Is the poem wanting to direct its readers' responses? Do you agree with or resist such direction?
- Look at the form of 'Fishmonger' – regular line and stanza lengths, most stanzas containing a single sentence, although there is one exception. Does this form match the subject matter or the tone of the poem?
- What artist would create a good interpretation of the scene in 'Fishmonger'? A painter, sculptor, musician – or some other discipline? In rendering the poem in another artform, which of the poem's features would they highlight?
- The poem after 'green' in *Soho* is called 'pastoral' and is set in the early hours of a Soho dawn. What makes 'green' a nature poem?
- Imagine a loved one sent you a photocopy of this poem inside your own singing heart-shaped card – what would it be saying to you?

Other books by Richard Scott

Wound, a pamphlet (The Rialto, 2016)

If you liked Richard Scott, try ...

- Andrew McMillan
- Danez Smith
- Daljit Nagra

Richard Scott online

[Richard's website](#)