In ‘the Ukraine’

A Peter Henry Lepus poem

J.S. Harry

He meets a man with an icicle voice
who says it is ‘Mind’s disease’
to act impulsively; this man elevates
‘Reason’ to a pedestal, where he worships
at a cold, stony chiselled face, from afar
(& sometimes Peter sees him go up close, to peer,
at something old, cold, & slushy, underneath it —
which, he tells Peter, is a high I.Q.-ed
pickled brain, in a jar).
The cold man reads Peter, from his big,
dark blue worn-covered book, about the name ‘Peter’.
Peter knows names are second-hand & jump
onto a rabbit’s back while she or he is asleep;
that rabbits wake up wearing names
they think are their own. He
doesn’t want anything to do
with some
of the people who’ve worn his
name before … that one back in the
dark hole of time gone backwards …
twelfth
century Latin, Petrus, the book says, means ‘stone’
& the other, earlier one, … who gave the name
to a man called Simon, who then probably was
called that — even by his mother —
did she have to put ‘Saint’ in front of ‘Peter’
as the book says, even when she scolded him …
or when she told him to learn the list of DON’Ts?
When the man tells Peter
some of the other meanings — behind his name —
Peter guesses why that one jumped onto him:
to run out as a stream
or vein of ore peters out; to fail,
die out, disappear … Peter knows
all about disappearing … Right now,
doing a bolt
down a burrow,
to get away from the cold man. Suddenly the burrow opens:
blue skies, pale green ears of wheat,
wavering above him. As he scrambles out, up through
the wheat roots he nibbles

a few whitish below-earth stems — in passing
just to test.

Now, either on fours or standing,
he cannot see over the wheat. The ground
under his paws feels flat. There is wheat
in every direction. Singing
voices he hears & the earth vibrates
with the trundling sounds of cart wheels.
He hops tentatively

Towards the sounds of the voices …

It is eleven years to the year two thousand
in the Ukraine … Singing & dancing humans
are bringing in the wheat.
A girl tells Peter:
We have done this for hundreds of years.
Next year we
will not plant wheat, & we
will not eat this harvest.
We are one hundred & sixty k.

north of Chernobyl: this wheat
is death.

Between what you see
& what you say …
there is always difference; the wheat
looks beautiful & Peter
has eaten some …

His body the house
of the unprovable link?
Peter goes, with the girl,
to visit her sister
who lives in a hospital
of tired little children
whose bodies hurt
when they are awake
& when they are asleep; My little sister
is not getting better, the girl murmurs so softly
Peter almost cannot hear.
Outside high brown ears of wheat
wave & ripple under blue skies
wide as those over desert — Peter’s eyes
cannot see an end to it.