



Collected Poetry Reviews

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Jeffrey Side

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***An English Apocalypse* by George Szirtes
The Good Wife by Georgia Scott
At Home in the Dark by Greta Stoddart**

(Appeared in *Shearsman*)

In the preface to his collection of poems *An English Apocalypse* George Szirtes writes, 'The figure who meant most to me when I was younger was Blake: his burning energetic forms are, I think, the product of a troubled passion and a firm belief in the potential of the human imagination'. It is, thus, rather disappointing that when one turns to the poems in this volume it is increasingly difficult to find any indicative of 'burning energetic forms' or seeded with 'the potential of the human imagination'. What we find instead are examples of the familiar British obsession with poetic description and understatement rendered in a prose-like register – albeit, in this case, with the use of near and half rhymes.

In 'Lilac, Laylock' we have:

A bullfinch perched
on her crown, immaculate
in his feathers. His weight

bothered the lilac, she bent
a little, her small tent
of pleasure collapsing
inward with the swaying.

Apart from the use of pathetic fallacy and the metaphor of 'tent of pleasure' (which in this instance functions as a sort of Hughesean simile) this is merely descriptive prose. Similarly, in 'VDU' we see the relentless recourse to word-photography:

The office seemed melancholy, as do all
offices. An elderly man fingered
sheets of paper, shadows crept under tall
filing cabinets, the typists lingered
over paper cups. I was between
school and college, an adolescent bard
vaguely attracted to the Ginsberg scene [...]

Each of these two descriptions would not be out of place in a work of prose fiction. These examples are not isolated instances. The poems 'Bodies', 'Acclimatisation' and 'Miss Pickering' are really nothing more than short story vignettes with wide margin spaces.

However, the second section of the poem quoted above, 'Lilac, Laylock', shows us that, when he chooses to, Szirtes is capable of poetic writing. This section is pregnant with suggestiveness and ambiguity. Lines such as 'The last place before sleep/ in the changing cave' and 'the queen wasp hovers/about the door' do indeed achieve the Blakean potential of the human imagination.

Such, however, cannot be said of Georgia Scott. In the foreword to her collection *The Good Wife* Philip Hobsbaum writes, 'The visual technique of these poems is akin to that of the camera. [...] They could easily be called "Snapshots"'. Then after citing examples of their photographic clarity he attempts a Wordsworthian-like apologia for this emphasis on the descriptive. Calling into play the poems' formal rhythmic patternings, he says, 'The evocation that one finds here is not a matter of snapshot merely, or even of prose reminiscence. These are poems, patterned into shape and rhythm as prose cannot be'. Hobsbaum, thus, redefines what these poems are. It is curious that he considers that it is only the formal patterning of a poem that differentiates it from prose rather than the lexical organisation. Much doggerel adheres to definite formal and rhythmic structures – would we be correct to call such poetry?

When we come to view the poems in this collection themselves we can see that Hobsbaum's defence is incorrect. For it is as plain as the Emperor is naked that the poems are merely descriptive prose:

Standing in the playground between our homes
we heard the news of the shipyard strikes
from a woman in an apron who came running
from sandbox to sandbox. We cleared the shovels.

('Small Islands')

This time, police charged the sidewalks.
A boy was knocked down by a car.

('News Hour')

The cups on the table are yesterday's
The tea is cold
The cat steps between the saucers

('Single')

As with the Szirtes collection, these examples are not isolated ones; all of Scott's poems follow this descriptive and prose-like procedure.

Similarly in Greta Stoddart's collection *At Home in the Dark* we see all of the characteristics of what could be termed "empiricist writing": accurate description, a prose-like register, and discursive semi-philosophical musings, only this time tinged with a certain sadness:

But you, old bear, will be long gone, having spent
your last days pacing the dusty yard.

(*'Arcturus'*)

and

As long as there is death there will be song

(*'Waving Goodbye to the Elegists'*)

However, unlike Scott, Stoddart does understand the importance of the poetic phrase, as if somewhere deep inside her a poetic spirit is fighting its way through the accumulated conditioning acquired, no doubt, at creative writing workshops. Lines such as,

The rain started when we crossed the border

(*'A Hundred Sheep in a Green Field'*)

We long for the night but it won't come

(*'The Night We Stole a Full-Length Mirror'*)

But this town has its own world
where mist is the only thing that falls

(*'Premonition'*)

are truly poetic in that they are ambiguous enough to evoke a multiplicity of meanings in readers' minds.

Striptease by Susan Utting

(Appeared in *New Hope International*)

The majority of the poems in this collection (although by no means all) reveal a failed attempt to disentangle themselves from the more mundane concerns of everyday life. In fairness to Utting this is merely the latest symptom of the ever growing trend in poetry towards a more prose-like and prosaic register. In 'Flood' we can see this in the opening stanza with a description of the affects of rain:

The lawn is a lake and still it comes down,
it lashes and sluices down gutter and glass,
the yard is an eddy of flowerbeds and dross
and I am reminded of stories of sandbags
stacked on a river bank, four deep, ten high,
the onstoppable Ouse, lost fortunes and lives,
bulb fields and orchards, whole nurseries of glass
swept along, swept away in the rush to the sea.

We see it also in 'Salt' where the protagonist

poured the salt in a steady stream into cellars,
a glass row of thimblefuls, measured for morning,
then brushed what he spilt, over the table into his
cupped hand;

Each of these two descriptions would not be out of place in a work of prose fiction. But as examples of poetic writing they fall short of the mark. This is not to say that they are not well written – as, indeed, they are. But they fail to do what poetry should attempt to do, and that is to provide a lexis that allows for a multiplicity of meanings. The function of prose fiction is the converse of this, in that it attempts to *limit* multiplicity of meaning, so as to better serve the requirements of plot and character development. And I'm afraid into this latter category these two poems must fall.

Alongside the prose-like register of the poems in this volume, is the equally prose-like requirement for accurate observation and faithful description of objects and events. This is evidenced in 'On the Eighth Day' where she describes the affect of dust falling on everyday objects:

they saw it profile objects,
cloud the mirrors, turn black

into grey, they saw a lacquered
box grow dull, the cuts and facets
on a crystal bowl fill up and soften.

This is a lucid and quirky description of the way dust engulfs its surroundings. Yet, unfortunately, it is so effective in its lucidity that it leaves nothing for the reader to imagine. It is interesting that Utting utilises quotations from artists, writers and poets interspaced between her poems. One such is Coleridge's statement from *Biographia Literaria* regarding his conception of "the fancy":

The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space.

This quotation appears on a page by itself, giving the impression (to me at least) that it is in some way relevant to her poetry. If its relevance is to do with the idea of memory, then all well and good, as many of her poems do deal with recollection. But it would be a mistake for us to assume that in this quotation Coleridge is championing the fancy as some sort of poetic ideal. If this is Utting's purpose in including this quotation then I'm afraid that she might have misunderstood Coleridge.

His ideas about the fancy grew out of his wider theory on the nature of the imagination. He conceived of the imagination in two parts: the primary imagination, and the secondary imagination. From these two categories Coleridge further subdivided the imagination to posit the concept of "fancy". For him the fancy is the lowest form of imagination because it 'has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites'. In other words, the fancy involves no act of creation, it is merely a reconfiguration of existing ideas—unlike the primary and secondary imaginations. Another quotation of interest in Utting's collection is the following by Louise Bourgeois:

The sculpture speaks for itself and needs no explanation. My intentions are not the subject. The object is the subject. Not a word out of me is needed.

The inclusion of this quotation seems to suggest the preferment of the object over the subject. And in so doing to synthesise the two: whereby subject/object become unified—or at the very least interchangeable. In other words, the subject (personality) fuses with the object (phenomena) to form an indivisible whole. To be successful such a fusion necessarily precludes a relationship with the reader of the poem. To enter into such a relationship would entail a more ambiguous poetic lexis, which, as I have indicated, is not an option for Utting.

In the poem 'Condensation' we can see an instance of this subject/object fusion in practice. In this poem, she observes that her inability to cry at certain everyday aspects of life (such as

weddings) becomes objectified and replayed through memories of her father who *was* able to cry at

everything the Queen said and when people won
big prizes on a quiz show and whenever any kind of
goal was scored by anyone on either side at any match

She can never cry at

marriages or royalty, at TV jackpot winners
or at sports events unless I am reminded
of the way my father always did.

We see, here, the way in which the subject (herself), via memory and experience, and then reflecting on these two elements, has fused (in this instance via empathy) with the object (her father). The fusion is rehearsed through the circular nature of her experience. She cannot cry at the actual events that made her father do so, nor can she cry at the memory of the actual events. It is only her memory of 'the way' her father cried that makes her cry.

Indeed, the first stanza of the poem where we are given a skilful description of raindrops fusing into one another as they slide down a window can now, in light of what we have discovered from the rest of the poem, be seen to be a metaphor for this fusion. Similarly, the word for word repetition of this description directly following its first appearance can be seen as a metaphor for the circular nature of her experience. We as readers, unfortunately, have been excluded from this process by necessity, and are only allowed to be observers to this union. Our emotional involvement and imaginative collaboration has been short-circuited.

That Utting is a talented writer is beyond doubt. Her use of simile, metaphor and description are skilfully executed. But she is at her best when she allows herself to be free of the constraints of what I call "the creative writing workshop syndrome": the obsessive desire to introduce into poetry the techniques and tone of prose-fiction. Utting excels most when she allows herself to be lyrical and elliptic. It is in poems such as 'The Art of Falling', 'The Quiet Man', 'Here Lies' and 'The Emperor's Last Nightingale' to name but a few, that her real talent can be seen.

Poems by A. C. Evans
***New Poems & Subversions* by Rody Gorman**
***Wild Wings* by Pam Russell**

(Appeared in New Hope International)

After having read so many poems that are obdurately rooted in a firm conviction that describing the real is the main object of poetry, it is a refreshing relief to come across A. C. Evans' short collection, *Poems*. Here we find no mundane observations about the day to day; existential winging about the poet's sad lot; or waxing lyrical about cats and dogs and trees and how corrupt politicians are etc. We have instead poetry that is rooted in the imagination. Not the imagination of fictive prose with its beginnings, middles and ends but the imagination of the poet, and his or her relationship to *words*. Words are very important to poems. Not merely because they can describe things and communicate our feelings, but because they have connotative affects. And Evans utilizes these to the full as can be seen in 'The Eye Caught in a Mirror':

Entrance
Face
Do you look old?
Frozen Time
Terminal explosion
Celestial vapour
Time in transit
Hearts of outcasts
Blank cinema
A perfect game
On the way home
The essence of everything
Identikit people
Unknown warp faction
See you in hell

From the title of the poem you would expect a poem that merely describes what the poet sees as he looks in the mirror, embellishing it with a few phrases about "growing old" and lamenting on lost youth etc. But Evans takes another route. He extrapolates from the particular to the general, from the mundane to the universal. From the reflected face we are transported through a range of human experiences and philosophical resonance to a nihilistic conclusion all within fifteen lines. This is achieved by using gnomic-like general phrases: 'Time in transit', 'Hearts of outcasts' and 'Identikit people'. Each of which contain a myriad of

associations for the reader to fill in the gaps and thereby create the poem for him or herself. This simply cannot be done with the majority of mainstream poetry.

In 'Lost in Mist' this suggestibility is again in evidence:

Leaf skeletons tremble as we pass
Lost in mist this strange landscape
Where lights waver, fading away
To nothingness;
Can you hold my hand?
You are very cold, but near,
Or so it seems.
I think it is you – but your voice
Low whispering syllables,
Is that of another friend or
Someone I thought I knew,
Or so it seems.

Lots of information is left out of this poem – to good effect. Who is talking? Is it the poet or we? Who is being spoken to – a lover or us? Where are they? Are they together? Maybe not, as the question posed is: 'Can you hold my hand?'. These questions allow us to create the poem and to become joint authors with the poet. Not that we have to be but the option is there. All in all I highly recommend this short collection.

The same cannot be said for Rody Gorman's collection *New Poems & Subversions* which is heavily anecdotal and prose-like, as in 'Ne'erday':

Well, here we are – another year
and we're still here!
Down in the village,
if you turn off the DVD player
and listen carefully,
you can hear the sound of the odd person
cracking away
in languages they call their own.

And in 'Nitromorsing' we have:

Aunty less than a week dead,
I was back in her house with Mother,
Laying it out for sale
In a fortnight's time –

Nitromorsing the tables at first,
clearing the shelves of their
contents, packing them all
into old boxes, buried
under all the dust

This is nothing other than prose. These two examples are representative of the poems in this collection. To a more or lesser extent these samples from Gorman's work are representative of much of British poetry since the 1950s. They are top-heavy in descriptive lucidity at the expense of connotation, leaving nothing for the reader to imagine.

Pam Russell's collection *Wild Wings*, despite a tendency to florid syntax and to over-describe nature, does manage to balance the particular with the general. In 'Almost Asleep' we see a fine poetic register:

I see the loch, the hills upsweep,
patches of bracken, a rushing stream,
smell rowan blossom, warm rich cream
in honeyed slowness, almost asleep.

And in 'Evening Sea' we have:

Come follow me,
to where the high tide flows,
to where the suck and crash of waves
is deafening,
where turmoiled turbulence of foam
is dizzying,
the rocks stay still.

But Russell does tend to wallow in over-romantic effusion, as in 'Dark Clouds':

Dark clouds have filled the sky
because I miss you,
rain weeps in torrents,

the trees have shed their leaves
because I miss you,
all colours leached away.

***Boris by the Sea* by Matvei Yankelevich**
***Eschaton* by Michael Heller**

(Appeared in *The Colorado Review*)

Matvei Yankelevich's *Boris by the Sea* (Octopus Books) is not, as Rosemarie Waldrop says in her blurb on the book's back cover, so much a collection of poems and dramatic sketches (although they are these formally) but rather an amalgam of various literary modes ranging from children's story allegory to theatre of the absurd to philosophical reflections.

The central character (or literary device) integrating these modes is "Boris"; an "entity" that is described in such a manner as to leave us uncertain as to the nature of its form or substance ('Boris got a crazy idea in his head to build something and he began with himself. He said to his right foot, build yourself. And it did. The left foot followed suit', p.4), its gender ('Enter Boris form of a woman', p.14), its distinctness ('At this time all the other Borises in the form of women gather around the first ones', p.14), and even as to its actuality (Boris looked at himself over and realised there were many parts of him that he could not see', p.5). This is more explicitly addressed as follows:

Is there anything real about Boris?
Better to wonder, is there anything abstract about Boris?

(p.49)

It is this indeterminacy of the entity's material nature that forms the basis for the book's philosophical and existential ruminations. As a literary device, cast in such a way as to suggest a problematical relationship to existence and the phenomena, Boris is well placed to act as a cipher for the book's engagement with aspects of existential angst, and with questions of "beingness" and "nothingness". Boris's anxiety about his innate solipsism is well expressed:

The world was reflected inside him, somewhere inside his skull. And it hurt. It hurt something awful. Boris lay in bed and thought: is it my skull that is hurting, or is it the world around me that has fallen ill. [...] if you don't look at the world then your headache will go away, thought Boris. And everything vanished in the room. (p.8)

and:

Boris felt that he could not grasp reality.
It glimmered outside the window in questions' broken branches.

(p.11)

The book's concerns relating to "beingness" and "nothingness" is most marked when it engages with concepts of "identity" ("Without a role a person is as good as dead". p.21) and "otherness":

People want someone to lie beside them.
When there's someone else under the blanket,
in the dark, then you know who you are
in relation to this someone who lies beside you.

(p.21)

It is this desire to assuage the psychological discomfort born of such existential concerns that motivates the necessity for self-definition in the presence of others, which the book partially addresses:

People need each other, thought Boris, to check each other for ticks. People need each other for solving the problem of what is inside. (p.5)

Consequently, this reassurance enables a moral empathy with those "others" that define "you".

Other aspects of the book include neo-philosophical musings:

And then for the first time in his life Boris said aloud: There is a limit to everything everywhere. (p.11)

absurdist elements:

And he began to bite his fingers. He started with his nails, first his pinkie. He had bitten through all his nails. Only their traces were left. And he proceeded to rid himself of the traces. He bit off the top of his pinkie and thought: But it will stick in my stomach! What sort of thing is this. In this manner I will never rid myself of the traces of chewed-off finger nails. (p.11)

romantic disillusionment:

That was not what Woman was to Boris. To Boris she was neither rain nor shine. She was fake as wooden sheep, false as snowflakes, fraudulent as kitten sneezes. (p.6)

bathos:

But people need each other to open each other up and see what is inside. And to scratch their backs. (p.5)

humour:

It took a while to get going. But once he got going, he was pretty much gone. (p.12)

imagery:

Whenever time went by, Boris felt it going by, much the way a rock feels the river going by, changing him a little at a time. (p.7)

Perhaps a weakness of the book is its actual mixing of literary styles, in that I found the constant need to change reading-gear distracting and ultimately unnecessary for conveying the book's philosophical and absurdist aspects. But this is a minor point. On the whole, it is an interesting book with some unique observations on the nature of reality and our creation of it.

Eschaton by Michael Heller (Talisman House) is a collection of largely philosophically discursive poems many of which are, perhaps, rendered in too much of a conversational tone for a through appreciation of them—by myself at any rate. There are, however, many poems that are more poetic in register, and it is these that should be emphasised. They include: 'About the Capitals', 'Creeks in Berkley', 'At Word Brink', 'Florida', 'Events Sporting' and 'My City'. 'My City' is particularly interesting, it initially concerns itself with the entropic apparentness of phenomena but later hints at a an underlying unity. The poem opens with:

This constellation is a name
before words
no god has a hand here,

and distillates of memory

crystallize then reveal
structural flaws

unplanned as cells
gone wild in a tumor

(p.21)

Here the initial observation of chaos is expressed. There is no beginning or end, for to have these, the 'constellation' would, indeed, require a name before words—a command or program to precipitate its actuality; but it does not have this ('no god has a hand here'). However the lexis used, here, appears to belie this, with the words 'constellation', 'name' and 'words' being redolent of the biblical passages relating to creation, and the statement at the beginning of the gospel of John:

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

(John 1:14)

Instead of "creation", we have 'distillates of memory' crystallising to reveal 'structural flaws'. Here, memory, rather than being characterised as a permanent connection to a tribal past and, thus, forming a continuity with present traditions, is seen as initially ephemeral until they 'crystallize', or are made stable and significant by human perceptions of them, to reveal 'structural flaws'; a condition, again, with biblical resonance, in this instance, that of "the fall of mankind".

However, a turn in the poem occurs with, 'but now a morning dove/coos on the window ledge', again, biblically resonant of the return of the dove to Noah's ark after the flood, symbolising a new beginning, or order arising after chaos. Even the sky, now, takes on a new significance:

The hole in the downtown
sky is of another order,

purchased from the fractals,

Even the damage to the ozone is now seen as inextricably linked to a sense of order and design, alluded to, here, by the word 'fractals', which are geometric patterns that are repeated at every scale and so cannot be represented by classical geometry, but rather, as some experimental mathematicians have suggested, imply an underlying intelligence sustaining their operation. These fractals are,

made one with the incalculable
past tense about to conjugate a future

Here, we see the poem's earlier disjunction between the tribal past and present traditions now resolving through allusion to a temporal unity whereby the past and future are seen holistically in almost theistic terms. Heller has been described as a 'latter-day Jewish Yeats', and from what can be gleaned from this and other poems, one can see why.

The Picture Never Taken by Sam Gardiner
Flight Patterns by JoAnne McFarland
Adversaria by Peter Dent

(Appeared in *New Hope International*)

Sam Gardiner's collection *The Picture Never Taken* contains some very well crafted poems. He maintains a pleasing lyrical register throughout the volume and successfully manages the difficult skill of finely balancing the descriptive with the abstract. This can be seen in 'Believe It':

Look at you now, like a blind
ass in an olive mill being led
by another's tail, xylophoning your prison bars,
conjuring up small blue icebergs peppered with
grit in eau-de-Nil lagoon.

And this from 'Orithea':

Last spring, April, actually
the sixteenth, Boreas the north wind
carried Orithea of to the mountains,

where she bore him many little breezes.

'Dedicated' involves the reader in a surreal-like litany of dedications (too numerous to mention), which seem significant experiences for the poet. Surrealist images such as, 'to those who ordered/Edgar Allan from my chamber' and 'to Eileen for fetching me a pound/of hyphens jangling in a plastic bag' are counterpointed by the more prosaic, such as 'to Sunday League supporters, including a maple/from whose packed grandstand a thousand flags/wave in the home teams colours'.

'All things Are Becoming' is a meditation on the nature of time, using as a symbol a derelict rural house overgrown with weeds, shrubs, and other things of nature:

This end of the room, now given over
to a dead leaf dance, was once a grove
of wooden legs, a table and four bony chairs

At one time the room was vibrant with life:

But whatever
the generations underfoot stood for,
lied for around that vanished table,
went weaving off in eight-legged coffins
to the gate where time has no passage.

The allusion to the grave with the words 'underfoot' and 'lied' is subtle and effective. This collection shows writing that is both considered and spontaneous.

Peter Dent's *Adversaria* is a collection of poems that were written over a three-month period and read like the charting of an individual's consciousness. Like Sam Gardiner, he manages the balance between the specific and abstraction skilfully:

Up with time to spare not insignificant
If you say it fast just hear things ripple

In from the casement like a new day
Down on the corner and excuse the dust

I must keep meaning ... to a minimum
Life's what it says today will make you

(‘Mock Heroic’)

Note, also, the allusion to Coleridge's 'The Eolian Harp', with the rippling in from the casement being heard as, similarly, the wind in Coleridge's poem ripples the strings of the lute to cause them to vibrate and produce sound.

We also see reference to older poetic styles with Dent's use of capitalisation at the beginning of lines, despite frequent use of enjambment. Inversion is also present in 'Doing Nothing':

Now forward now into reverse with such
A song to sing it listens knows I never

Here, the inversion is heralded by the phrase 'now into reverse' – which in turn spells out one of the themes of the poem, which is "flux", as is hinted at in the poem's various words and phrases: 'remix', 'fix nothing', '(repeat)', 'All change', 'removed' and 'never in one place'.

There is also frequent use of ellipses – both in the poetry's formal aspects and semantically. The formal aspects are plain to see in the already quoted samples above: with their noticeable gaps between words. Where Dent really comes into his own is with the semantic use of

ellipses in combination with enjambment. For instance, take the following stanzas from 'Containment Unalloyed?':

Five Ladies putting another time to shame
Yet waiting someone there must be here

To report on quieter tones the excited air
In a field that riddles order with escape

When we examine the lines 'Yet waiting someone there must be here/To report on quieter tones the excited air', we are led to believe that they form one single sentence subject to enjambment at the junction between 'here' and 'To report'. This is so in the formal configuration of the stanzas and the obvious semantic use of the line's content. But on closer examination we see that the lines also function elliptically – the ellipses occurring, again, at the junction between 'here' and 'To report'. This, then, not only alters the meaning of the sentence but also splits it into two separate sentences. This use of ellipses and enjambment to cause ambiguity is used throughout this collection.

Dent's debt to High Modernism is also evident in his use of modernistic flourishes such as:

Well who can say how a work goes in
Its wildest definitions of trust how easily

(‘Collaboration’)

All change makes easier the explanation
Don't I register the past?

(‘Doing Nothing’)

Dent, also, is not one to shy away from the oblique. Lines such as 'The precise locations lay in wait and home' ('Congruence'), 'Seeds of a plain experience whether to/Leave' ('Safe Prediction') and 'The shadowy steps down which an answer/Steals' ('Necessary Mode'). The use of the oblique is so rare in much of British poetry that it is heartening to see it represented in this collection. All in all, this collection is well worth a read.

JoAnne McFarland's *Flight Patterns* is an intelligent and thought provoking collection. It is divided into two parts: 'Signs' and 'Men'. Part one, 'Signs', contains the majority of successful poems in the collection. It opens with 'Brooklyn Caskets', which is a description of the poet's observance of the various aspects of 'the South Brooklyn Casket Company', which she passes on her way to her studio. The first five stanzas are simply photo-like descriptions:

A delivery truck is outside
back door open
coffin on the lift

and:

Workers hang out in front of the factory
taking a break from lacquer fumes

Nothing exceptional so far, but when we come to stanza six:

Few trees survive
in this part of Brooklyn

We see a shift from the prosaic to the lyrical, which continues for the remainder of the poem. In the following stanzas:

The neighborhood speaks
to what one can forge
and the waste from that

Industrial plants without
leaves with no sap
gray everything

The junction between 'waste from that' and 'Industrial plants without' gives the illusion that it is an enjambment. That this is not the case can be seen if we try to carry the assumed sense of the line over the junction. The sense of the line is: 'the waste from that Industrial plant without leaves'. Note how I have omitted the letter "s" from the word "plants" the result of which is to make the word singular. Now that it is singular the line has an obvious meaning whereas before it made little grammatical sense because of the plural 'plants'. Had the poet left the "s" out then this would have been a case of enjambment. But by adding an "s" she has led us to expect enjambment where none exists.

Throughout the volume McFarland is not afraid to be abstract:

Motes fragile universes
consume your gaze
instead of changes that might ruin us

(I Break a Dish')

and:

I weigh creation
against fate
then I begin
(‘Brooklyn Caskets’)

There also surrealist flourishes:

From this vantage point
we sail above the park

(‘A Birds-Eye view’)

At the same time, there are instances of conventional mainstream observation used in an interesting way so as to make the familiar unusual:

Where you sit
light through the blinds
cuts you to pieces
so that you are
strips of a man
instead of the whole man
I married

(‘I Break a Dish’)

When we come to look at the second part of the collection, ‘Men’, there is not as much inventiveness to be found. Most of the poems are too descriptive and short story-like:

I hurt my daughter
as I comb her hair
so I don’t comb it much

(‘Thicket’)

and:

Daniel has his right hand propped under his chin
It is a challenge to draw the back of his hand
folds of his palm
fingers that form the arc

of a full-blown lily

(‘Drawing Daniel’)

Nevertheless, McFarland is a skilful and sensitive poet, who despite a seemingly conservative poetic register is inventive and experimental.

What Hands Can Hold by Ami Kaye

(Appeared in *Eyewear*)

What Hands Can Hold by Ami Kaye is a collection of poems, many of which are narratives, yet not mired in the intense descriptiveness that such a form has usually comprised. They leave room (as all good poetry should) for the reader's interaction with the text. For instance, the poem 'Diya' ("Diya" is a Hindi word meaning "votive") recounts a Hindu ritual whereby a wick made of cotton and oil is placed in an earthenware dish, lit, then put in (usually) the river Ganges to mark purity during a religious ceremony, but the poem has a resonance which belies its effortless account of this ritual:

In the gold light of dusk
she cupped her hands
holding flame in a leaf-boat

she set it afloat on the
pond next to a water-lily
breathing magic

then she followed suit
first the sandals
then the silk

then the wind
loosened long hair
she had

so carefully tied back
with a ribbon torn
from the sky

In the first stanza, we see how the candle in its container becomes a boat in the woman's hands and, by inference and extension, how her hands become the river, in that they hold this boat. The woman and the river, therefore, have become the same. This extension is apt for the female subject, as she is, indeed, a river to the extent that her menstrual cycles, as do the sea's tides, follow a natural pattern induced by nature. This "melding" of the woman with material phenomena, alludes to one of the many philosophical beliefs held within the myriad belief systems comprised within Hinduism, namely monism: the non-dualist belief that the universe comprises of one thing, despite the appearance of diversity.

In the second stanza, we see that the water lily is able to breath magic. The use of the word 'breathing' is also apt in relation to Hindu beliefs. Hinduism holds with the concept of "yugas", which refers to the names of various cyclical eras, the reoccurring regularity of which are likened metaphorically by Hindus to the inward and outward breathing of human breath: the outward breath creates one yuga, the inward breath relinquishes it, the outward breath creates another yuga, the inward breath relinquishes that, and so forth. The water lily is a widespread symbol for enlightenment and resurrection within Hindu and Buddhist cultures, and because of this, it could be said to hold "mysterious" qualities. One natural quality it has is that, when looked at very closely, it appears to "die" at night, being "born" again in the morning, with the advent of sunlight. This natural ability for it to appear to die and be reborn can appear "magical" to most observing this. The poem's second stanza alludes to this by describing the water lily as 'breathing magic'.

With the third stanza, we seem to be observing an "outward" alchemical change in the woman's physical status, which reflects the metaphorical allusion to this in the first stanza, namely, that she is a unity with the river. In stanza three, after placing the lighted candle into the river she undresses ('first the sandals/then the silk') and enters the river. We now have a physical unification of the woman and the river, paralleling the metaphorical amalgamation alluded to in the first stanza. This entering of the river physically, also has resonance regarding various religious rituals involving spiritual rebirth, the most obvious one being that of Christian baptism, which, in the evangelical tradition, involves a full emersion of the believer into water, traditionally a river. In eastern cultures, silk is a symbol for luxury, therefore, the woman, by disrobing of her silk attire, can be said to be renouncing her former connectedness to the material world, similar to the renunciation that monks and nuns experience when relinquishing their personal possessions before joining their particular religious order.

In stanzas four and five, we see how the wind, which is a symbol for enlightenment or spiritual rebirth in many cultures, loosens the woman's hair that she had 'so carefully' tied back. This "loosening" can be likened to the almost involuntary changes in the former modes of behaviour and attitudes that any sort of spiritual awakening seems to have on a person experiencing it. Such changes are said to be gradual but certain, once the path to enlightenment has reached an assured stage. Here, the woman's hair, once tied with a 'ribbon torn/from the sky' ("sky", here, being contrasted with the river) is no longer captive to that sky (or the worldly realm) but is now conjoined with the river, which in itself is conjoined to phenomena and the universe in a non-dualistic monism.

This connectivity is also reflected in 'Nexus', which concerns the emotional attachment of a mother towards her offspring:

I thought they cut
the umbilical cord,

but no matter how
hard I try,

it will not let me
untangle myself

from its
invisible pull.

Even when you
are far away

I feel it pulse.

Every time
you hurt

–I bleed.

Here we see, as in 'Diya', how notions of unity are viewed as almost inexorable, and beyond the wilful control of the participant:

but no matter how
hard I try,

it will not let me
untangle myself

In the poem, phrases such as 'umbilical cord', 'invisible pull' and 'far away' suggest an otherworldly aspect that extends the poem towards a platonic ideal; for these phrases connote an extra-sensual domain that is accessible via the human body. For instance, to those familiar with the concept of the "etheric body" (in some spiritual beliefs said to be an exact immaterial replica of the physical body, and joined to it by a "silver cord") the poem's 'umbilical cord' will have a resonance, not least because the "silver cord" of the etheric body is envisaged by many as being a non-physical parallel to the physical umbilical cord. The poem expresses the inevitable frustrations, yet overwhelming joys of this connectedness between mother and child, so much so that the experiences of the child can be intimately felt by the mother:

Every time
you hurt

–I bleed.

This seems, to some extent, to convey a sense of the interconnectedness of the repercussions of our actions, and it would not be unfitting to see it as similar in essence to the idea known as The Butterfly Effect in Chaos Theory, whereby, according to Wikipedia, the metaphor of a butterfly flapping its wings,

encapsulates the concept of sensitive dependence on initial conditions in chaos theory; namely that small differences in the initial condition of a dynamical system may produce large variations in the long term behaviour of the system. [...] for example, a ball placed at the crest of a hill might roll into any of several valleys depending on slight differences in initial position.

In 'Pen', this connectedness is rendered more localised and intimate, where the physical, and, in a particular sense, the "non-physical" become symbiotic. There can be no denying the force of this poem to render almost palpable to consciousness certain tenets of British philosopher David Hartley's theory of "associationism". This theory posited an explanation for the physiological basis of the human ability to establish mental associations; as such, it is now an established part of medical and psychological theory. As is well known, Wordsworth's early poetic output was largely influenced by this theory, as were most of Coleridge's early poetical ideas.

In his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth refers on several occasions to mental associations, and it is possible to see how Hartley's theory is the source of his interest in bodily sensation that is evident in passages such as 'our bodies feel, where'er they be/Against or with our will' (in 'Expostulation and Reply') and 'sensations sweet,/Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;/And passing even into my purer mind' (in 'Tintern Abbey'). Similarly, in Coleridge's verse we can see references to Hartley's notion of a physiological process causally linking mind and matter, as the following lines dedicated to him in *Religious Musings* illustrate:

he of mortal kind
Wisest, he first who marked the ideal tribes
Up the fine fibres through the sentient brain.

We see something of an echo of the last line of this Coleridge quote in 'Pen':

Inside this bone
burns marrow fire
it cannot
be extinguished,
only spent

a shadow

dizzied by
"tabula rasa"

Here, the physical marrow within the physical bone is rendered as 'fire' or energy (or "life force")—if we extend its scope to include one of the classical elements of ancient Greek thought. Because of this, the marrow is no longer envisaged as being physical; it becomes a force, or power, that travels through the conduit of the physical bone to the thinking centre, the brain; here alluded to by 'tabula rasa', which, although contingent on an absence of consciousness, nevertheless, has connotations of the thinking process and the physical brain, which facilitates this. In light of this, we can see how Coleridge's 'Up the fine fibres through the sentient brain' finds echoes in this poem.

Indeed, a further echo of Wordsworth can be seen in 'Intimations of Mortality', which despite its title being an antonym to the one Wordsworth gave his poem 'Intimations of Immortality', shares some of the latter's concerns. Both poems deal neo-platonically with the concept of an immortal soul: Wordsworth's from the position of pre-birth, Kaye's from that of after death:

Sing, my friend, exult,
soar beyond where angels gather
to scatter feathers from their broken wings.

Tears mingle with rain to nourish earth
in clear voice, pure fountain of the soul,
framed in pulsing silhouette
as songs bleed into the hungry air.

Where do souls flee when death
absorbs their radiance?
When time shrinks on itself
blooming like a treacherous flower,
so innocently cruel?

Whereas Wordsworth deals with the matter philosophically, Kaye does so from a more emotional standpoint, in a register that is knowingly archaic and redolent of William Blake. The poem ends with a fittingly moving stanza, which is readily relatable to by everyone (a yardstick of effective poetry):

Sometimes the fallen enter memories
of those who live on wings,
like when you visit me, and my dreams,
which you inhabit fully.

Perhaps my favourite poem in this collection is 'Heart of a Dragon', which is rich in connotation and allusion. In the first two lines of the poem,

During the darkest hours of night,
the heart can no longer hold out.

we see that the use of the word "heart" is redolent of that in Emily Dickinson's poem, 'Heart, We Will Forget Him'. In that poem, Dickinson personifies and externalises her heart, or more accurately her "passion", to form a dichotomy between it and herself, in order to project her individuality onto it, as can be seen in the opening stanza of Dickinson's poem:

Heart, we will forget him,
You and I, tonight!

Similarly, in the opening of Kaye's poem the heart becomes a separate entity, which, unlike in Dickinson, is referred to in the third person ('the heart'). Both poems in their opening refer to night. In Kaye, the night becomes the period when 'the heart can no longer hold out'; in Dickinson the same period is the time 'we will forget him' (presumably a reference to a loved one). This "forgetting", which is apparent in Dickinson, is only alluded to in Kaye: 'the heart can no longer hold out'.

In the next lines of the poem,

Dark as the hunter's dragon
in some enchanted weyr hidden
as I stand on the edge of night.

the heart is described as "dark"; a word already alluded to in the two opening lines of the poem, in the context of 'the darkest hours of night'. This time, the heart's darkness (redolent of Joseph Conrad's title for his book, 'Heart of Darkness') is compared to that of a hunter's dragon. Again "night" is mentioned, yet it is not quite night, as there is some ambivalence at play, as suggested by the 'the edge of'. Could this stand for a feeling of indecisiveness, or perhaps one whereby the poem's speaker feels pulled in different directions simultaneously, producing some sort of aroused tension? Could it be that the heart/passion well hidden in the 'enchanted weyr' is, in some sense, at odds with the speaker position of only being at the edge of night, or less hidden? Of course, who can tell? Yet, this sort of ambivalence is what makes poetry, poetry.

In other parts of the poem, it is possible to hear faint echoes of imagery from other poems. The following lines, for instance, almost chime in concordance to Blake's dystopian view of London, in his poem of that name, 'London':

Pungent, acrid flames emerge

to blow my heart upon the hearse
floating in the silent black lake.

The phrase 'Pungent, acrid flames emerge', and the words 'hearse', 'black' and 'lake' have something of a shared register with these lines from Blake's poem:

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
Every black'ning Church appalls; [...]

Blasts the new born Infant's tear,
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse. [...]

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow, [...]

These lines by Blake could almost be the responsive notes to the call of Kaye's, if it were not for historical chronology.

In a review such as this, it is not possible to fully convey the entire delights this collection holds. I have merely skimmed the surface. No one who delves further into this collection will be disappointed, I can assure you.

***When You Bit* by Adam Fieled**

(Appeared in *Jacket*)

When You Bit, Adam Fieled's new collection of poems published by Otoliths, was inspired by an incident Fieled experienced after a book reading in Chicago when a female poet (for some reason) bit his arm. This suggested to him the overriding theme of the book, that of "vampirism", as he explains: 'The "vampire" theme has to do with the way in which lovers devour parts of their mates; the process of eating can be emotional, physical, psychological, or spiritual. So it's vampirism on many levels'.

The book comprises of three sections named: 'Sister Lovers' (concerning a ménage Fieled was involved in), 'Dancing with Myself' (concerning Fieled in isolation) and 'Two of Us' (concerning Fieled and one other person). The first two sections contain 20 poems each, the last, 21 poems. Each of the poems in all the sections apart from 'Splat' (p.38) and 'Severance' (p.64) are 14 lines in length, in what is perhaps an homage to the sonnet tradition, indeed this could be inferred from a line in 'Severance' ('Oh you are elegant, for/you know each sonnet/backwards that was ever/spat...'). All of the poems comprise a single verse paragraph apart from 'When You Bit' (p.32), 'Cake Walk' (p.55) and 'Hooded Eyes' (p.70), which form three stanzas and a couplet; 'Hips' (p.54), 'Mouth Around' (p.59), 'Salmon' (p.60) and 'Love Poem' (p.65), forming 2 verse paragraphs; and 'Straw Rut' (p.63) forms one verse paragraph and a couplet.

As with Fieled's other published works, the poems in this volume are welcomingly elliptical and multi-resonant, such that trying to force a particular critical exegesis for each poem would be unhelpful to those readers who prefer poetry to "speak" to them rather than for it to tell them things. Such readers are often stifled by such a critical methodology rather than one that enables an interactive approach, whereby reader and text can find equilibrium between personal significance and authorial "intent". Therefore, I will only endeavour in this review to look at those parts of the poems that achieve this ideal for me personally. To speak of the appreciation of poetry in other than personal terms is to stifle the poetic impulse of both reader and poet.

The poems' semantic and lexical formulations offer the reader a wealth of interpretative strategies to enable an "opening out" of the texts in order to appreciate their multiplicity of meaning/s. This can be seen in the poem 'Tuesday' (p. 24) where this multiplicity is played out in terms of time, geo-physical space and memory, as the poem's "speaker" ponders on the certainties/and or uncertainties of an unnamed "other's" absence:

Yesterday don't matter:
it's gone. Now: cut. I'm

aghast. You're there, or,
you're here with me.

The collocation of 'Now:' immediately subsequent to 'it's gone' creates a tension between past and present in terms of the speaker's emotional engagement with their memories. The use of 'cut' following the colon of 'Now:' appears to be a decisive element that settles this tension, as it functions as arbiter in deciding the relevance of 'it's gone' and 'Now' as utterances that can be relied upon. Yet, this definitiveness cannot produce absolute certitude as the speaker is still 'aghast', which signifies an air of bewilderment brought about by the uncertainty regarding the relative proximity between "the past" and "the present". This doubt is extended into musings on whether whoever the speaker is addressing is in reality present or not—either they are somewhere else or 'here with me'. The speaker cannot seem to resolve this.

Indeed, we cannot know for certain if the speaker and absent other are not in actuality one and the same, as is inferable from:

[...] Look at the
big blue water: it's us, &
us alone, together, here, now [...]

Here we are introduced to the possibility that the water (or whatever it symbolises) and 'us' are either one, or else so closely entwined "symbiotically" that distinctions of subject and object become irrelevant. Yet, again, we cannot be certain of this as the "us" is qualified by '[...] alone, together, here [...]', which by the inclusion of "together" reintroduces the notion of a subject/object divide, whereby the separate "other" is able to potentially give 'Micro hand-holds' and 'Micro lip-twists'.

Incidentally, the use of the word "twists", here, begins an extended allusion to two songs from Bob Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks*: 'A Simple Twist of Fate' and 'You're a Big Girl Now' — songs that both deal with aspects of time, memory and a lover's "absence". In the poem, the appearance of the word "twists" immediately preceding the word "simple", which in turn immediately proceeds 'I'm learning it these days' (a direct quote from 'You're a Big Girl Now'), connects both 'A Simple Twist of Fate' and 'You're a Big Girl Now' to the poem's concerns regarding memory and doubt. Similarly, the poem's expression of doubt is a quality redolent of some aspects of the better love poetry of Thomas Hardy, which also deals with aspects of memory, doubt, certitude, a lover's absence and their perceived "presence".

In 'Apartment Pizza Guy' (p.11), we see an inspired use of elliptical phrasing to represent the totality of solipsist experience:

Apartment: I'm lost.

Here a bed, there a
bed; no everywhere.

Here we have a language that partly takes on the appearance of descriptive observation, yet functions wholly as non-descriptive. The descriptive elements ('Here a bed, there a/bed') could be termed "neo-descriptive utterances" which are formally similar to empiricist modes of discourse but like all good poetry empty of empirical significance. The overall tenor of the lines quoted exudes an atmosphere of existential confusion. The "bed" could be two beds, or just one bed that becomes two alternately in the speaker's mind as this confusion is experienced. He has already acknowledged that he is lost, and is likely to be in something of a dissociative mind-state, as reflected in: 'no everywhere', a word combination that simultaneously expresses "that which is" and "that which is not" – a perception not normally accessible to everyday consciousness.

Although the poem doesn't expressly convey it, one senses the presence in the room of another person, possibly female. This inference is derived from:

Couch: seat between
two, silk-skirted, red.

'Silk-skirted, red' suggests this to me, as does 'seat between/two', which has erotic overtones connotative of heavy petting on a couch. It is important to stress that it matters not if this rendition of this imagery is correct or not. The strength of such lines is that they allow for such interpretations.

In 'Grudge-Fucks' (p.19), we see one of the hallmarks of Fieled's poetic style. It is a style that draws you into a chaotic linguistic fandango:

[...] I
hang on the end of clothes-
lines: I'm ten sheets, each
dripped w grease, blood,
butter, milk, a catalogue of
epic grudge-fucks.

This kaleidoscopic tumult of surrealistic imagery, with its litany of body fluids and food stains serves to intensify the frustration the speaker feels in his persistent quest for emotional serenity through sexual acts:

This, crazy, water-leakage:
I slip-slide away into you,
out of you, into her, out of

her, we're oil-slicked birds
squawking out minor-key
laments for lost closure.

The culmination of which is the 'catalogue of/epic grudge-fucks' mentioned in the lines quoted earlier.

In 'Dark Lady' (p.31), we have a possible allusion to the "Dark Lady" of the Shakespearean sonnets, transposed onto the speaker's current romantic involvement. As with some theories regarding the gender of Shakespeare's Dark Lady, the poem similarly has aspects that suggest ambivalent gender. This is played out in the poem's puns, which allude to anal penetration:

You're more of
everything, actually, & you're
also a pain in the ass.

And in the concluding lines we have: 'but you'll never know there's a man in you', playing on notions of male-on-male penetration and ambiguous gender orientation. The poem is skilful in its use of sexual imagery and the line: 'I'll wind up in my own/hands again tonight aptly exemplify Fieled's loyalty to plural meanings.

The collection is further enriched by novel turns of phrase, interesting word combinations, varied imagery and linguistic inventiveness such as the following:

'Where mouth's leak rose' ('Hooded Eyes', p.70)
'I'm ready not for bed, but for being sheeted' ('Sheet Covered', p.69)
'I sharpen my teeth on pictures of you' ('I'm Down', p.66)
'Don't do anything, but open yourself as a door' ('Love Poem', p.65)
'Window-pane lizards' ('A Web, A World Wide', p.8)
'I show off rope-length for your amusement' ('A Web, A World Wide', p.8)

I highly recommend this collection to the poetry reading public and also to those who don't read poetry, as to read this will show them what poetry can be.

Beams by Adam Fieled

(Appeared in *Galatea Resurrects*)

Beams by Adam Fieled is an e-book from Blazevox. It is a multifaceted work that is both formally and typographically inventive, as well as being linguistically intriguing. To do full justice to the poetry in this volume would require a much longer and detailed review of essay length; such is the complexity and multifaceted nature of this work. So all I will attempt in this review is to isolate certain features that can be readily recognised.

Beams comprises four titled sections: 'Beams', 'Apparition Poems', 'Madame Psychoses', and 'Virtual Pinball' (this latter being composed with poet Lars Palm). Each of these sections contains poems stylistically different to those of the other sections. An important aspect to the 'Beams' section is Fieled's poetic aesthetic regarding it. The poems in it represent his concept of the poetic "beam". The following is an extract from his exposition of this poetic, which can be read at <http://artrecess2.blogspot.com/2005/08/beam-hypothesis.html>:

[A beam is] a short poem, 8-20 lines [not] necessarily impersonal or personal, but it must transcend mere subjectivity [...] single lines interspersed function as "beams of light". They're pure shots into poetic space, flashes of imagery, insight, gist-phrasing, etc. Light-beams illuminate built-beams [ie architectural structures], built-beams support and buttress light-beams. Together, they posit the BEAM as a kind of "light-house" or "light-structure".

The manifestation of this poetic aesthetic in the 'Beams' section applies to all of its poems, but other aspects tangentially related also pertain, particularly where colour (light) and matter (objects) are made to amalgamate in such a way as to produce an almost iridescent affect which draws attention to the "variability" that underlies phenomena (according to quantum theory). The aesthetic result is that material objects are seen to display less than palpable qualities: light becomes semi-palpable in 'Creep' (p.7) where it is described as 'Sponge-light', and in 'Leaves' (p.12) matter becomes semi-iridescent:

Leaves tonight are leaning
spots of light [...]

The use of such affects serves to give us a sense of the underlying subatomic volatility that forms the objects of the observed world. It has a sort of Blakean sense whereby the visible world is seen to envelop a subtler one. The world is not all it seems to be. In doing this with words, Fieled makes almost tangible to our senses what can but remain only rational inference if we are reliant on same from a study of quantum physics. No small achievement for a poet.

However, the poems are not limited to such affects. They also manage to concisely represent the vicissitudes of human experience in all their variations. In 'Razor' (p.8) we find lines such as,

edged like needle-scars along arm-veins
everything I can't puncture is there

which in association with the lines,
bottoms grow hardened from rubs
& sharpness be a baby's candy

not only produce an interesting juxtaposition, but also represent birth and death. They suggest the bitterness, regret and frustration that is the lot of humanity, yet they also suggest hope in that we become hardened in order for that suffering to become almost as acceptable to us as candy is to a baby.

Throughout this collection, a recurring motif relating to sexual struggle is evident. In 'Sex Hex' (p.9) we have a deft account of man's unremitting desire for sexual fulfilment described in almost "biological determinist" terms, yet alluding to the nuances inherent in any discussion of male dominance within a given society, as is suggested by the mention of Foucault:

take her up, stroke her belly
she'll think of Foucault

The biological controlling impulses of the male driven to physical action is counter-balanced by the cerebral passivity of the female who, by thinking of Foucault, both gives in to the male's seduction ploy but also demonstrates an intellectuality that is not evident in the male at this particular moment in their relationship.

The problematical relationship between the sexes is further evinced in terms of consciousness in the 'Madame Psychoses' section. In 'Sarah Israel' (p.33) we see how memory almost reinvents or remodels the past regarding a yearned for "other":

I saw her in a seeing not seen by any eye,
& the "I" that saw, saw my eye not at all.

Here, identity and perception become entwined as the punning of 'eye' with 'I' demonstrates. This punning acts as a poetic device to illustrate the very real inextricable union that identity and perception must necessarily have. It is a union so binding that the two become mutually exclusive causing the poet confusion as he struggles to wade his way through something of a

solipsist maze. In 'Paula' (p.37) we see the ultimate expression of male sexual and emotional yearning that represents the lot of Everyman:

chaos, order, clipped bird-like into
wings & cries. I could only ever
think; paula. all the thrusts &
pumps that could never be. "all"
that must be withheld, & that
it might be better that way.

you gave me the gift; savouring
wanting. how it really was you
I wanted. not a body but a soul.
I tell myself I've "been through
you", forever & never. zero here,
same as two. empty. saturated. dark

I have quoted the entire poem. Such is its universality pertaining to male desire, any commentary by me would be more than superfluous. Indeed, it would not be outlandish to suggest that in this poem Fieled has articulated more than John Donne allowed himself to in those poems of Donne's that evince similar concerns.

***Walking Out of the World* by Mathew Mead
Fire Station by A. B. Jackson
Crossing the Outskirts by Julian Turner
Guest and Host by Joe Winter
Adonis Blue by Donald Ward**

(Appeared in *Stride*)

Mathew Mead's *Walking Out of the World* (Anvil Press £7.95) is something of a curate's egg. It plays with a range of poetic forms (villanelle to triolet) but to very little effect except to demonstrate a quirky versatility of style ('An Unrhymed Villanelle', 'A double Villanelle', and 'A Badly Bloated Villanelle'). Most of the poems are derivative and slight (as far as poetic significance is concerned) and seem to exist merely to show off Mead's sense of the playful. The poems where this is most obvious are those comprising the sequence 'Eleven Little Poems'. Most of these are so frivolous they go beyond anything that could be thought of as "nonsense verse". For example:

Teeth to which other teeth were fixed
Teeth on which other teeth were hung
Are drawn and gone and leave unmixed
A total triumph to the tongue

('In the Mouth')

and:

A spectre is haunting Germany
The spectre of Germany.

('From the German')

Neither can these lines be thought of as insightful or witty in a gnomic or epigrammatic sense; and they are insufficiently self-conscious to be considered postmodern. There is also an anachronism (which I doubt is ironic) in some of phrasing of the more serious poems that is redolent of Georgian poetry:

Playing beyond that mortal shade

('Grown-ups')

Men like beasts but born of woman,

False to all but flesh and blood,
We shall face the day with doom on –
Beast like man like manlike god

(‘With a Styptic Pencil’)

For men with early deaths to die
Crossing four hundred yards of mud.
Exploding on a tracered sky
A lot of God went west for good.

(‘At the Turn’)

Other poems have phrases reminiscent of Eliot (‘I’ll lie and hear the old refrain/Of empty buses going by’ – ‘Villanelle of the Unslept Night’) and Coleridge/Blake (‘Who in their man-made fibres dare’ – from ‘The First Cold Mornings’).

But not all the poems are derivative or merely technical feats. Poems such as ‘After the Break’, although formally conservative and conventional in tone and register does facilitate hermeneutic possibilities:

The time left hers
and all again in order;
we wait as we must wait –
the unborn
to be born,
the undead
still to die

As does the following from ‘You in Your Small Corner’:

noise and news from far and now
sounds unheard and sounds uncanned
breast-beat like a broken vow
base-note like a lost command

And poems such as ‘The Drill’, ‘The Space Where I Stood’, and ‘One: Set Up’ each achieve something of this affect. But the overall content of this volume is uneven.

The blurb on the back cover of *Fire Station* (Anvil Press £7.95) by A. B. Jackson reads: ‘Without being obscure, these poems are harsh, inventive, compassionate, disturbing’. Yet to derive any satisfying pleasure from this collection one would have to be familiar with the

philosophical and artistic references that litter this volume. There are references to the painters Henri Rousseau, Paul Gauguin, Petrus Christus and Rembrandt; the philosophers Arthur Schopenhauer and David Hume; the poets Roberto Juarroz and Charles Baudelaire; the scientists Isaac Newton and Francis Bacon; the entertainers Harry Lauder and Bela Lugosi; and those unclassifiable such as Phineas Gage (the most famous patient to have survived severe damage to the brain), the psychiatrist R. D. Lang and the twelfth century Northumberland monk St Aelred of Rievaulx.

The poems are academic in the sense that they are knowing and nonchalant in tone. They leave nothing for the reader to respond to poetically. In 'David Hume Considers the Moon' the whole point of the poem (framed as the thoughts of Hume) is to reveal that Hume did not think miracles possible. The poem concludes:

Clouds will burst with rain, not pairs or plums.
Miracles make a mincemeat of reason.

To get to this we have six stanzas of lines such as:

Compare the two: a goose feather, a town.
Breezes blow. Imagine the *town* airborne.
The chance of such unearthly violation

is next to nothing

These may, or may not, be examples Hume used in his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* but they have little poetic resonance in the way Jackson has utilized them in this stanza. This is further evidenced in the following lines from 'Arthur's Seat, Edinburgh':

The night air carried nothing but the city;
The sky, a slate grey-blue beyond routine
bankruptcy, the government of loss.
Blackbird, rattling its thicket, had no
ear for trumpets. Spring intuited itself.

This being said, 'The Sleeping Gypsy', which refers to the painting of the same name by Henri Rousseau, is sufficiently connotative and therefore poetic:

My best dream came
And found me as I slept
It came
on four legs with a heavy head
Its ribcage rose and

fell it came so
soft it broke my heart and held me
small within its eye

These lines, although mimetic when read in conjunction with a viewing of the painting, when read independently of such a viewing do have a connotative force that few of Jackson's other poems in this collection achieve.

Julian Turner's *Crossing the Outskirts* (Anvil Press £7.95) is an intelligent collection covering a wide range of subjects ('from the interpenetrating identities of these islands to the fugitive colours of actual love' – Ian Duhig) and skilfully managing the fine balance between the general and the particular. 'Glider Pilot' begins in the standard British mainstream descriptive-defamiliarisation-empirical mode ('the tarmac licked/its long tongue out' to describe the runway) but then diverts to a more poetic register with:

Love sometimes rooted, though, above the mess
where thirsts were slaked and loneliness expressed
in drunken blazes. The tortured will confess
with lips apart beside a pale breast.

And 'The Start of Something New' manages to produce some effective imagery 'her eyes like pike below/the lake-ice of morphine' and:

And now over the hedges, their white floss
of smiling blossoms, a figure
with my mother's hair
beginning her waiting game.

However, 'The Magnificent History of English' is too mimetic and rather mundane in subject matter:

Together, we have trawled through the photo albums
and found Ida – the great aunt I remember
fluttering in her chair beside the fire
in Hitchin, frail, her hands afraid like birds.

But 'White Herd' is more suggestive and poetic with its alliteration and rhyme unobtrusive yet essential so as to evoke an almost Blakean cadence:

As Lilith walks the wilderness in storms,
or flame-tongues wrap around a schooner's mast
to tell the sailors that the worst has passed

when fury rolls the sea to mammoth forms,
they graze the city's rim, their souls revealed

Overall, the collection is good despite, at times, blurring the line between poetry and short story vignette.

Joe Winter's *Guest and Host* (Anvil Press £8.95) according to the back cover blurb 'records the experience of being welcomed into the household of a foreign country' and does so well. But again, we have a curate's egg of a collection. Many of the poems deal with the quotidian, and leave one feeling exhausted by exposure to the mundane:

Uncle Kanai is outside again.
He's slung his shoes off – great wooden boats
That sail the sea-road. When he visits Father
He hails us, marching up the path ...
Then soon heaves to, a hero in a chair.

And again in 'Highway 34':

Sometimes when I walk where trees were tall
I am in a prisoner-of-war camp debating poetry
with Colonel-General Loblein. Hostilities were over
and I was in charge of the German Officers' 'hostel'
outside Jessore. As part of my duties
I re-interpreted the Geneva Convention on canteen rights.

The majority of the volume comprises two long poems. The first a sonnet sequence ('Guest and Host') named after the collection's title, and the other a poem on the 2001 earthquake in Kutch ('Earthquake at Kutch'). 'Guest and Host' is predominantly lyrical in register:

India I have begun to know your stories
as something closer than chaotic dream,
a world more present. To pictured furies, glories,
a little more is breathed in [...]

'Earthquake at Kutch', however, is less so:

Shadows of trees, branch-shadows, shadows of leaves
stray in the dust. Only the trees are standing.
Slight shapes chequer a quiet space of ground.

All in all, this is a good collection if somewhat limited in scope and subject matter.

Donald Ward's collection *Adonis Blue* (Anvil Press £7.95) is firmly grounded in visual description. Nevertheless, the descriptions are so interestingly rendered that the resultant loss of poetic potential becomes irrelevant as you watch how cleverly Ward uses defamiliarisation on the "objects of the real". In 'East Side', the poet is at a railway station waiting for his train. The lights above him are 'Yolks of battery eggs'; and trains that pass 'suck' the rail like snails. Eventually his train arrives and he ponders on the monotony of the commuter's life:

But the same journey for fifteen years
is worse than illness

This is essentially the poem's theme. Yet, it has taken nearly thirteen lines of visual comparison to convey it.

Similarly in 'Cyclist on the Main Road' we see Ward's descriptive powers at work in the way he defamiliarises cyclists and the sound their bicycle tires make on the road:

Each of these drivers is human
yet they sound like the sea.

Both defamiliarisation and inferred simile achieve the affect of comparing the noise of the tyres to the noise of the sea. Having established this, Ward then hones in on the metaphorical properties of the bicycles' tyres:

I lean on air, the heat of their tyres
cremate as they pass.

Both the heat produced by the tyres and their literal contents comprising "air" are harnessed by Ward to create an even more precise visual description. When Ward is not describing things, he writes discursively in a philosophical tenor with few images:

Suffering brings penetration to the mind
Already able to explore distinctions
And achieve fine grains of hope
And even to more passive souls
Suffering brings a presence

(*'Suffering'*)

The best poem in this collection is 'Adonis Blue', which is very short but compensates by being evocative:

More blue than the bluest sky

You do not see the grass
from which they rise –
all, all, is blue

hanging like heaven just above your head
a swarm of angels in the morning sun
brighter than day
before the day begins

Although seemingly grounded in a rendering of the objects ostensibly described (presumably trees) we have instead a subversion of this process. This results in a slight disassociation of meaning away from the “described” referents and in favour of more plural meanings. This is the essence of poetic language yet it appears infrequently in Ward’s collection. This is not to say that he is a bad writer. He definitely knows how to turn a phrase and his poems are well considered.

***Where the Three Rivers Meet* by Aine MacAodha**

(Appeared in *Galatea Resurrects*)

Where the Three Rivers Meet by Aine MacAodha is a collection of poems linguistically evocative of 17th century Irish Gaelic poetry, although written in English. This is not surprising as MacAodha is an Irish poet intuitively connected to that rich poetic tradition. Her poems are rich with references and imagery that evoke the mythos of Ireland's ancient history and Celtic traditions. She also writes about the landscape with a sincere affection and respect, not only for its actuality but also for its vitality and mystery. In some respects, some of her poetry has a connectedness to the ancient traditions and concerns figuratively expressed in various earth religions, as well as in Celtic Christianity.

The vocabulary of the poems is interesting. MacAodha uses words that are largely unfamiliar to most readers, such as "dander", "beagmore", "alder", "lough", "gaels" and "firbolgs". She also makes copious references to Irish mythic figures and places, such Cú Chulainn, a legendary Irish hero and demi-god, and "Tara", which was the ancient seat of the high kings of Ireland. The obscurity of these words and references should not impede the reader of these poems. Far from it, they function as intertextual metonymic ciphers to be appropriated by the reader for his or her own personal exegesis.

The supernatural is never far removed from the poetry, and is largely expressed in refreshingly rhetorical terms:

I feel its supernatural pull
working its way up from the earth
and out to the universe.

(‘Aghascrebah Ogham Stone, Ireland’)

Into this November air
a supernatural force
draws me to it like a magnet.

(‘Aghascrebah Ogham Stone, Ireland’)

She is the blueprints
of the past,
the wishes of the unborn,
the spirit of the crops

(‘Fire of the Gaels’)

Here, the physicality of the natural environment is “spiritualised” and enlivened by the poet’s consciousness, and words like ‘pull’ and ‘draws’ signify a forward (and perhaps upward) movement suggestive of a monistic narrowing of the “gap” between “heaven” and earth; spirit and matter.

Additionally, the landscape is made to resonate with human and non-human “energies” implanted long ago. For instance, the Sperrin countryside (a region in Northern Ireland) is described as if it can “record” past history, as is seen in the following stanza from ‘The Sperrin Mountains’, where dander (a material shed from the bodies of animals) is imbued with consciousness in order to recognise the latent “recorded” historical energies present in the landscape:

Dander over the peat clad slopes
find the ancient past alive
in the bones of the Sperrins.

This is again seen in ‘Banda’:

In myths we recall our living past,
woven as carpet on the landscape.
In stones, trees and bog;
in birds, horse and dog.

Here, sentient and non-sentient matter become amalgamated and seen as (to a degree) functioning as geological recording devices. Yet, in this poem, the recorded energies develop into personalised “ghostly” manifestations, and accordingly the poetic register is made to complement this transformation by taking on a more archaic and almost biblical tone:

Oh sacred bile, Oh graveyard Yew,
the Hawthorn and the Oak;
the Hazel, Alder and the Rowan,
the Willow and the faery folk.

Pay homage to the spirits of Tara,
the ones who went before
the Warriors, Bards and Kings,
the Queens and many more.

MacAodha's use of poetic language is interesting in that it exists within its own self-demarcated boundaries, not reliant on mere description for its affects. For instance, in 'Fire of the Gaels' we see the lines:

Her stories, etched on the
landscapes of the universe.

It matters not that the universe has no landscapes (it being the sum of space and time); the lines convey the "immateriality" of the "stories" through imagery that signifies solidity and durability. A slighter poet would have taken greater pains to minutely describe what MacAodha, here, has achieved in just two lines.

One of the distinctive aspects of her poetry is that it uses Gaelic words and imagery that, as mentioned earlier, most readers would find unfamiliar. The poem 'Mise Eire' is an appropriate example, with such phrases as: 'Tell me of Cu Chulainn', 'the battles of the Tain Bo' and 'the progress of the firbolgs./The De danaans on the hill'. It is of little import that a reader may not know what these lines signify. It is, of course, easily possible for such a reader to find out what they mean, but to do so, in my view, would not significantly add to an appreciation of the poem's use of such language. Poetry is, after all, not prose and to expect it to operate similarly is to misunderstand the nature of poetic language. The lines are best approached in such a manner as to allow readers to decide for themselves what words like, 'Cu Chulainn', 'Tain Bo', 'firbolgs and 'De danaans' suggest to them, rather than turning to a dictionary or an encyclopaedia with each line.

In 'Oak Lake, County Tyrone', MacAodha displays a more conventional lyricism:

The lake waltzes to and fro
like a child mesmerized
by magical stories voiced
by an old teller of tales.
Its edges flanked with an audience of
purple moss, pink cranberry flower
and the burnt orange of summer gorse,
all paying homage by showiness.

A clump of rushes moves slightly.
I think of childhood tales of
the watershee luring one off
to the silver world of faeries.

Yet, even here we notice a transcendence and mysteriousness, as the poem concludes with the "disappearance" of its speaker; a disappearance which parallels that of the daylight:

The light of the day now slipping
ever so peacefully behind the
peaks of the Sperrins. I shall go now
and take its essence with me,
to sooth my night quests ahead.

We are placed in doubt as to who, or what, this speaker is. Is it a sentient being within nature or is it an aspect of nature itself? Like all good poetry, we are left with more questions than answers. As a first collection of poetry, *Where the Three Rivers Meet* is noteworthy, and I highly recommend it.

***A Fool in the Pack* by Bariane Louise Rowlands**

(Appeared in *Galatea Resurrects*)

The poems in Bariane Louise Rowlands's collection of poetry and photographs, *A Fool in the Pack*, are interesting for the way in which the physical world is transformed into that of the intellectual and emotional:

And we scrutinise bark, stone
organic matters,
and get lost on stringy plains of sound.
Looking up at you, my head
still a cup in the palm-cap of your hand,
you say, "I loved you when you were born".

(‘A Future Full of Tomorrows’)

The stanza begins with recognition of the materiality of nature (‘bark’, ‘stone’ and ‘organic matters’) but soon metamorphoses into an examination of consciousness, as the “perceivers” of this solid natural world find themselves getting ‘lost on stringy plains of sound’. In just a few lines, we have travelled from the physical to the non-physical realm of sound vibrations. The use of the word ‘stringy’ is especially appropriate, here, as it represents the indeterminacy and problematical nature of human hearing processes, where the hearer can occasionally misinterpret sounds.

The second half of the stanza is replete with imagery of renewal and rebirth. The image of the head as a cup in the palm of a hand is a striking example of the way Rowlands takes archetypal imagery and reinvigorates them with new resonances. In this instance, we see how the foetus in the womb is re-imagined as, ‘my head/still a cup in the palm-cap of your hand’: the head standing for the living organism, and the palm standing for the womb. The statement that concludes this stanza (‘I loved you when you were born’) serves to reiterate the nascency imagery.

On the other hand, Rowlands is also capable of producing starkly lucid imagery, as in ‘Who Knows Where’ where the night becomes ‘sharp’, and the grass is depicted as ‘spiking at stars’. However, her overall poetic tenor in this poem is such that it enables a fusion of meticulousness and generality, as can be seen in the following stanza where the human body becomes almost an admixture of the earth:

The infinity of unknown pours
endlessly into my pupils, spilling over

and out across the lawn.

Here, the physical organs of the eyes act as both vessels and refractors for the liquid-like property that 'pours endlessly' into, and through them, onto the earth. The use of an abstract word combination ('infinity of unknown') enables an allusion to an alchemical process that is able to render the abstraction of 'infinity of unknown' into substance that has liquidity.

In 'Dreamcatchers', the problematical nature of meaning in art is broached, as two people, one a painter the other a writer, conclude that art that depends on language to facilitate a psychological and emotional intimacy between people is not as effective as art that doesn'tt. The extent to which Rowlands as a poet, herself, believes this or not does not impinge upon the fictive element of the poem, which is made to articulate certain concerns that all artists must, at some time or another, have, if only fleetingly, considered. The poem's speaker addresses the absent other, thus:

And yet we had struggled
with translation in word,
but in paint we meet.

In the same way that we saw how Rowlands transforms the physical world into that of the intellectual and emotional, this poem achieves something similar regarding linguistic signs and speech:

I speak not words from mouth
but images of mind:
shapes of the heart,
visions of living itself.

Here, the mouth, a physical attribute of the body, allows its semantic signalling to be changed into non-verbal and non-linguistic mental "events". Language is transmuted into mental activity, or 'images of mind'. It is as if the speaker has to do this in order for language to become as effective in communication as he/she believes art that is bereft of language is.

This is a very interesting collection, and at times deeply moving.

The Doves of Finisterre by Julia Casterton
The School of Night by Anne Rouse
The Sorcerer's Arc by June English
The Meaning of Flight by Christopher Meredith

(Appeared in *Acumen*)

Julia Casterton's *The Doves of Finisterre* is an interesting collection in that she manages to unify the ordinary with the surreal as in 'The Composition of Tears':

Tears are blue
and creamy from the glacial floor.
Sacred from the volcanic core
and filtered slowly
through the beads of peonies
that line your lungs.

Here the perfunctory nature of what would otherwise be mere rumination on sadness is modified into a sort of surreal discursiveness on the nature of forgiveness as can be see in the final stanza:

They [tears] transform your landscape into softness.
They are a solution to bitterness.
Liquid where bitterness transfigures itself
into something from the sea.

Casterton has the ability to make prosaic observations interesting as in the following:

I found her perfected by a crystal lake,
her nagging transfigured to angelic advice,
her lumpy veins to alabaster,
her gossip to pearls of music.

('Mother, Dead')

Here the mother's corpse takes on eternal qualities and becomes almost the interface between this world and the next. There is more going on here than merely defamiliarisation. It is an almost Blake-like superimposition of a spiritual dimension upon the material world.

Where Casterton falls short of her own poetic ability is when she succumbs to the pressures of what I call the “poetry workshop syndrome” (i.e. a dependence upon prose description) as can be seen in many of the poems in this collection such as in ‘Blood Wedding’:

Now you can walk to the toilet
As the urgency inside increases
But, stumbling, you forget the two bottles of blood
Draining through tubes from the wound in your belly

However, such weaknesses should not detract from the fact that Casterton is a very interesting and skilful poet and I recommend this collection.

With Anne Rouse’s *The School of Night*, we get some interesting poems such as ‘Cement Mixer’ where the main functions of a cement mixer are seen by Rouse as commentary on the nature of impermanence and the possibilities inherent in change:

Workaholic, dogged,
if it pauses for a minute,
its vitals whiten into rock:
it only rotates to sustain

the old sloppiness
of possibility

This use of extrapolation from the mundane to the less so in order to comment upon the nature of existence can also be seen in ‘Sighting’ where the physical movement of an old man waving becomes a metonym for existence:

and waving with a whole-arm motion,
suggests: a lifetime’s arc, the globe,

the sun’s diurnal course –
goodbye is in there, too – grandiloquent
as ceremonies of the first and last should be.

Note, also, the reference to Wordsworth’s ‘A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal’ with Rouse’s use of the phrase “diurnal course”. She precedes this with the word “sun’s” whereas he precede his use of it with the word “earth’s”. In her use of the word “sun’s”, Rouse makes the phrase poetic in that she alludes to the nature of impermanence in terms of humanity whereas Wordsworth merely observes that nature follows a pattern. With this collection, Rouse gives us poetry that, although not entirely free of the prosaic, manages to elevate the world of objects to something more meaningful.

The poems in June English's *The Sorcerer's Arc* are obviously sincere. Many recount English's experiences during World War II; and as autobiographical testament to that era, they are laudable. However, much of her poetry is really prose, as in 'The Tree That isn't There':

Once I slept through a hurricane
that uprooted an eighty foot
beech tree, sent it crashing
through the roof of our bedroom,
covering us in autumn leaves

However, there are occasional instances in the collection where she is able to write poetically:

The why-child wakes in the cold attic,
where the white moon plays silver tricks
with ferret faces in frosty windows
and burrowing danger scatters fear

(‘Why’)

To say that this collection is without merit would be unfair to English's testimony. Yet, the collection is more in keeping with the tradition of memoir than that of poetry.

In *The Meaning of Flight* by Christopher Meredith there are many excellent poems such as 'Red Armchair', 'Life of the Poet (index)', 'Lifefugue of Sexual Tension in Bookshops', 'The Solitary Reaper', and 'My Mother Missed the Beautiful and Doomed'. However, in many of his poems he fails to achieve such standards because of a penchant for defamiliarisation; as can be seen in the following description of some divers snorkelling:

Early. The gods enter from above, masked.
Over their shoulders they drag in sky
and hang crucified or fly
above their shadows cast
over rippled wires of light
that shift with the liquid prism of sea.

(‘Snorkel’)

Here, the divers are envisaged as gods because their diving equipment would make them appear so to marine life if marine life could think of such things. Moreover, the positioning of the divers' snorkels over their shoulders, to enable them to have some physical connectedness to the air above the water, is defamiliarised with the line: 'Over their shoulders they drag in sky'. This adds emphasis to their god-like capacities. Furthermore, the divers appear to be

flying as water has a tendency to make people swimming in it appear as if they are flying when viewed from beneath it. Yet, what has any of this to do with poetry? It more surely denotes an ability to observe things closely and to describe them in an unexpected manner. This is, indeed, a skill but it is not necessarily a poetic one.

A similar affect is achieved in 'What Flight Meant' where a bird that has been killed by a car is envisaged at a time when it was alive and in flight:

What flight meant
was the pulsing line of gorging and delight
that drew the smooth blur
of her x on air.

Note how the shape of the bird in flight is like an "x" – again defamiliarisation in practice. There is nothing necessarily wrong with defamiliarisation if it is regarded merely as one of the many tools for poetic writing. However, it should not be made the sole measure for what poetic writing should be. Fortunately, Meredith is able to rise above this so as to produce true poetry, as can be seen in 'Owning':

It's not so much I'm turning into you
but that I was never anybody else.
It was just you had to die and time to turn
for me to shuffle into place.
You knew you never even owned the gestures
that were so completely you.
And while I fell and rose on the passing horse
you never said.

The Theological Museum by Paul Stubbs
Reversal by Kate Rhodes
Worked on Screen by Anne Blonstein

(Appeared in *Poetry Salzburg*)

The promotional leaflet for Paul Stubbs's *The Theological Museum* says that it is 'linguistically challenging and exciting'. This is nothing new. These days most publishing houses try to sell their poets on such a basis. What is surprising is that the leaflet cites Carol Ann Duffy and Alice Oswald as admirers of Stubbs. However, these poets are hardly appropriate endorsements for a poetry that is supposedly linguistically challenging, as their own credentials are derived from mainstream evaluations of their work.

The poetry itself is intelligent, concentrating on the physicality of the human body and its possibilities for a metaphorical interplay between a physical existence and a surrealist and fantastical but Judeo-Christian "other-world":

Above a table of theological
Artefacts; such as the foetus
Of an angel pickled in a jar;
And Satan's faulty thermostat.

(*'The Theological Museum'*)

We have here a fantastical description of nonexistent "objects" made concrete by the brutality of the descriptions. In *'Purgatory'*, he imagines a purgatory where he is woken by a radio playing 'the same old fiery tunes', after which

[...] I
weigh up my options for the day; get

dressed (in flesh) dust off (proudly)
the glass-case hung up on my wall, in

which two jaw-bones awarded to me
to commemorate the echo of my first

scream here from Hell.

Here Stubbs uses biblical buzzwords such as 'flesh', 'dust', and 'jaw-bones', and his inclusion 'weigh' is apt because to be in purgatory one has to have been, first, judged.

This imaginative rendition of an alternative reality is what makes Stubbs interesting more than any putative linguistic innovation. Alice Oswald in her foreword to this collection says that the poems,

speak in a slightly different language, one that hasn't yet come about, with shifting grammatical rules and strange juxtapositions.

Yet, the poems do not demonstrate this. The grammar, word order and punctuation are conventional:

I did not see
the one who abandoned
me here. He was,
however, somebody who must have forced me
to look up and follow
his departure into the sky.

('Head 1')

Moreover, those parts of his poetry where he seems to be questioning conventional syntax are also presented in conventional grammar:

– language here for me is
not grammar, syntax, cadence etc.
it is only my mouth
deployed at such an angle, as to allow
me to masticate on
only the most necessary words;

('Head 1')

Stubbs is saying that language is not reducible to its parts but is a functional whole, easily able to facilitate communication; in which case linguistic innovation would be inappropriate. The mouth represented here, I assume, is not only physical but also a synecdoche for communication in general.

The back cover of Kate Rhodes's collection *Reversal* includes a quote from Don Paterson saying that her style is 'paired to the bone, elegant and precise'; and a quote from Peter Forbes who praises her 'powerful images combined with a real freshness and clarity of language'. That these assessments see precision and clarity as being significant determinants of poetic worth is indicative of the limitations of British mainstream poetry. This is nothing new; F. R.

Leavis was critical of Shelley for his 'weak grasp of the actual'. With Kate Rhodes, we have a poetry that could not be accused of this. We see her firm grasp of the actual in the following:

In the motel it's hard to sleep.
Headlights swim in a circuit,
Race past pictures and stains.

(‘Tarpon Spring’)

The prosaic observation of car headlights reflecting within a room is elevated to poetic significance through a metaphor balanced upon the word ‘swim’. The result is that the facts of the matter (the headlight reflections, the pictures and stains) are more accurately rendered than would be the case if she had simply written:

I can't sleep with the light of car headlights reflected off the walls.

Yet, by making accuracy the measure of this stanza she has achieved little else apart from novelty. We see this also in ‘Out of Water’:

Not far away a man fishes,
shirtless and glimmering.

He spreads his small net
as a waiter casts his cloth
deftly, with one smart flick.
It comes back shaking with life,

Silver beads in a fancy choker

Here the comparison of the fishing net with the waiter's cloth renders both more palpable. The use of defamiliarisation on the image of the fish in the net achieves the same result.

Rhodes's poetry is grounded in similitude. Simile, and to a much lesser extent, metaphor rely for their effects upon a recognition of comparisons. In the former, the comparison is explicit, in the latter it is implied. However, if relied upon as the sole purpose for poetry, simile and metaphor limit it to a merely descriptive mode of utterance—however, novel the description may be.

With Anne Blonstein's collection *Worked on Screen*, we get an extremely difficult work. It is intentionally abstruse in that the poetic procedure Blonstein uses is designed to interrupt the smooth flow of the reading process in order to render what is usually an automatic lineal progression along the line into a conscious act. She uses a method of word interpretation

called Notarion, which interprets a word by considering each letter to be the initial of another word. In the following poem, '46',

Klee rigour
in searching the
amethyst-lit
lips—

Seven tears under forms undetected neglected graticulates

the first letter of each word spells out *Kristall-Stufung* which is the title of the Paul Klee image described in the poem.

In his foreword to the collection, Charles Lock says that the title of the collection alludes to the possibilities for screens to either display or conceal. In this collection, Blonstein favours the latter. One of the difficulties of this volume is that not only do the poems conceal other words but that those words are not in English. Therefore, the responsibility of the reader is twofold: to be prepared to decode the poems and then to translate the results.

Beyond the encoding and decoding operation of the poems, they can be read as examples of recognised experimentally based procedures. The use of portmanteau words, ellipsis, and neologisms is particularly evident in this collection. However the poems in this collection that rely too heavily upon extra lexical signs and not enough upon the text's ability to facilitate a semantic response are less successful as can be seen in the following examples from poem '74':

((
Stop Stop Stop Stop Stop Stop Stop Sto
TOYOTA TOYOTA TOYOTA TOYOTA TOY

and

← ← ← ← ← ← ← ← ← ← ← ←
Boucherie Boulangerie Bar Boutique Bou
○ Information ○ Information ○ Inform

The predominantly extra lexical formal qualities of this text are, perhaps, too reliant upon a visual art aesthetic than on a semantic one. However, Blonstein's acknowledgement of the hermeneutical possibilities of non-linear reading is to be welcomed.

Starfly by Phil Bowen
The Rumour by Tim Cumming

(Appeared in *Stride*)

Starfly by Phil Bowen is a welcome collection of predominantly rhyming poems presented in a demotic register and employing Dylanesque gnomic-like generalisations to enable reader identification— something that is seldom seen in modern poetry but which is the reason for Dylan’s enduring appeal. For instance in ‘Starfly’ we have:

The tail of the Jesus bitch
The gospel of the rat,
Blood on the corduroy
Where the sultan sat

and:

Nine spies out of nine
All heard the bang;
That part of the rosemary branch
Where the vultures hang,

and in ‘A Place Named Ark’:

Where sleep’s overtaken the judge,
And the tea-party’s hi-jacked the jury
And the only thing for Christmas
Is the Power and the Glory

and in ‘Moonlight on the River’

Signs that go on forever,
Never to know what sleep’s about,
Just deep in some concern,
Learn, despite darkest doubt

These stanzas have no meaning outside of that invested in them by the reader. They contain no description of the natural world, political comment or laboured confessional existentialism. Neither do they acknowledge the presence of a single, stable and identifiable authorial voice. The language of the poem has no external referents. We, as readers, are the authors of them. Dylan (like William Blake) intuitively knows this—hence the meaningful

significance of his lyrics to the largest possible audience. This is how the best poetry functions.

Where Bowen is less successful is in the poem 'The Cameo Killer'. This is a true account of the killing, in 1950, of two workers at the Cameo cinema in Liverpool after a botched raid. The poem is too closely influenced by Dylan's song 'Hurricane': with its quick scene changes, vivid imagery, vernacular, witness bullying and police fit-ups etc. Bowen's use of British vernacular to tell the story of the cinema murder is less effective than Dylan's American vernacular to tell his story. In comparison to 'Hurricane', the 'Cameo Killer' is embarrassingly twee:

A man named McBride said Judd had done it,
his wife hiding her nudity from the police.

and:

What with Miss Sixpence-a-trick's botched account,
the police in Preston in two minds over Judd:
you say I was – I say I wasn't,
the investigation played on a hunch

and:

It was spur-of-the-moment they reckoned,
they'd been in the back of the Beehive that night;
the blonde harbouring the nark who fingered Dixon
saying that she felt something folded inside

and:

and it was all concocted by coppers,
constantly associated with the cameo killer

and its chorus:

*And he swears now as he swore then,
he'd never been to the Cameo in his life,
and he swore then as he swears now,
he'd never ever heard of Kelly*

As well as the Dylan influence (Dylan's singing voice is also mentioned favourably in the poem 'Blue Docs') Bowen is influenced by the song form in general, as is evident in his copious references to song and music. In 'Anyone Who's Anyone' we have:

the hardest part is the start of the song

In 'When it was the Ace of Clubs' we have references to Noel Coward, Gertrude Lawrence and the following:

Whatever crew rolled up,
Sailors brought these other songs,
The piano wouldn't stop

In 'The Old Matinees' we have: 'The old hits', 'opening chorus and solo' and references to the musical *The Boyfriend*. In 'No More Mr Nice Guy' there is an allusion to the line 'I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die' from the Johnny Cash song 'Folsom Prison Blues':

[...] and liked to shoot
coyotes to watch them suffer and die

Also in this poem we have:

Two guitars, bass and drums, himself on lead

vocals, smile as cute as those words of love

and:

so the whole world could see he's number one
on the Billboard, hot as Kentucky soul,
nine hits out of nine: Hail! Hail! Rock 'n 'Roll!

In 'Can Birds Sing Over the Sky?' there are these lines: 'their bluesiest tune', and 'Someone is the song of the year'.

The poems in *Starfly* are a welcome antidote to the tired and over-hyped outpourings of many of today's contemporary poets. As Roy Harper once said, in another context, 'There's no need to name them. There's absolutely no need to name them. They know who they are'.

The overall quality and skill of execution of Tim Cumming's *The Rumour* is good, despite a tendency for many of the poems to slip into discursive prose. In fairness to Cummings, this is more the fault of the pervading influence of British and Irish poetry (which tends to foster a

highly mimetic and denotative approach to poetic writing) than any stylistic deficiency on his part. Despite the poems being content driven and assumptions about the transparency of language, one senses that Cumming is trying valiantly to pull back from the brink of empiricism. In many instances he succeeds. One such success is 'Handwriting' which begins with the customary conversational register familiar to most readers:

He could hardly read what he'd just written,
like he barely remembered
what happened last week.
It was a real effort, like DIY,
though he knew that memories,
like a sense of direction,
came in good time, by and by,
rung by rung, like hardwoods

This is a good piece of prose writing. It is concise, flows well and is easy to read. And it is part of a poem that investigates memory and the way thoughts can be triggered by actions. In this instance the thought associations are triggered by the poet practising his handwriting for a job application form. This act causes his mind to firstly drift onto thoughts of his absent pregnant wife, then onto the nature of the writing process itself, then from this he is brought to a consciousness of his handwriting's appearance on the page which, in turn, causes him to remember an occasion when he'd written to his wife soon after they first met:

He'd written her the month they met.
Months later she sat him down
and went through it, saying
What does this say?
And what does this say?

This use of recording thought processes sparked off by an action, or a visual perception, is a technique Coleridge used in his Conversation Poems – particularly 'Frost at Midnight' and 'This Lime-tree Bower My Prison'. It is based on the dubious theory that a good poem should be triggered-off by perceptual input which is then ruminated upon by the poet, and which then leads to thought, which then returns to perception and back to thought again etc. In this way the thinking processes of the perceiver become objectified and are rendered more palpable to the both the poet and the reader of the poem. This mimesis of consciousness, though, has little to do with any notion of the poem as an artificial linguistic construct amenable through connotation to a plurality of interpretations by the reader. It has more to do with the egotistical notion of the poet as having important insights which the reading public will, in some mysterious way, benefit from by merely being privy to them.

Fortunately, Cumming does not go this far and ends the poem with two cryptic questions:

What does this say?
And what does this say?

It is the presence of these questions that save the poem from being merely prose. They leave us with an ambiguity – an open-endedness that allows us to participate in the creation of meaning for the poem. The poem becomes more than merely the recounting of the poet's thought processes to a largely disinterested audience.

In 'Nets' we have a man and woman in bed. The poem begins with the man waking:

He slept heavily and travelled light,
woke a minute before the alarm,
jerking in his own nets,
feeling as if he'd landed heavily
into the wrong personality

The use 'nets' as a metaphor for tangled sheets is skilfully handled and the expression of the confusion that is present during the transition from the sleeping state to the waking is conveyed originally. Further into the poem we have:

He could feel her skin pressed against his,
the pins and needles of being
in love slipping down the wind
in the blood, its crooked history.

Despite the rather prosaic metaphor of 'pins and needles', other metaphors such as in ' [...] slipping down the wind/in the blood, its crooked history' are well handled.

Many poems in this collection fail, in my view, to fully distinguish themselves from prose. The most obvious example being 'The Hair':

She tied up her hair
then asked him to call a taxi.
He picked up the phone and pulled
one of her hairs from his mouth.
I know you're unhappy, he said
but please stop doing this.
She continued packing her bag.
Well that's it, he said
but she didn't believe a word of it.

This sort of writing is best configured in the following way:

She tied up her hair then asked him to call a taxi. He picked up the phone and pulled one of her hairs from his mouth.

"I know you're unhappy," he said, "but please stop doing this". She continued packing her bag.

"Well that's it," he said. But she didn't believe a word of it.

But overall this is an intelligent and well-written collection that attempts fairly successfully to recuperate itself from its empiricist influences.

***Rearranging the Sky* by Frances Wilson**
***The Dog Who Thinks He's A Fish* by Chris Beckett**

(Appeared in *Orbis*)

Apart from one true poem on page 28, Frances Wilson's *Rearranging the Sky* is a collection of descriptive prose arranged on the page in such a manner so as to leave wide margins on either side of the text, the consequence of which is that if you didn't know better you would mistake them for poems. Here is an example of what I mean:

Years after he'd moved out,
moved in with his girl-friend,
she still couldn't face up
to repainting his bedroom.

When they'd first stripped it,
awaiting the baby, they'd unpeeled
the whole history of the house
in layers of paper, right back

to Victorian roses. It had felt
like walking on graves, disturbing
more than a hint of fingers
left on the brickwork.

('Touching up the Bloodstains')

If we remove the wide margins surrounding this text we have:

Years after he'd moved out, moved in with his girl-friend, she still couldn't face up to repainting his bedroom. When they'd first stripped it, awaiting the baby, they'd unpeeled the whole history of the house in layers of paper, right back to Victorian roses. It had felt like walking on graves, disturbing more than a hint of fingers left on the brickwork.

This is not poetry: it is prose. On the back cover of this collection one reviewer (Michael Laskey) diplomatically says that the texts "honour our ordinary human experience, in language that is vivid, precise and natural". The problem with this, though, is that poetry is an art form that operates through connotation not denotation. "Precise and natural language" is more suited to the prose novel than to poetry: which should use language in

such a way as to suggest a multiplicity of meanings. Unfortunately this collection fails to do this.

Here is another example of text disguised as poetry. This time from 'Living Next Door to a Topiarist':

She saw him from her kitchen window,
shears slack in his grip, eyeing the bushes
as he gulped coffee, unstacked last night's dishes,
programmed the washing. Then she forgot him,
flinging a last angry warning upstairs,
backing the car out, gravel exploding.

Again if rearranged to a prose form we get:

She saw him from her kitchen window, shears slack in his grip, eyeing the bushes as he gulped coffee, unstacked last night's dishes, programmed the washing. Then she forgot him, flinging a last angry warning upstairs, backing the car out, gravel exploding.

That Wilson is capable of poetic writing is evident from the poem 'The Colour of the Man' which is evocative and semantically interesting with lines such as:

Think earths: burnt umber, terra rosa, brown madder alizarin.
Think peat water, fires, torn letters curling;
beechness, crisp and coppered; frost, ground beaten, ringing.

And the final stanza:

True gentlemen who kissed her
once only, the night their house burnt down,
on her forehead, like a mother

This is good poetry that strikes the correct balance between the particular and the general. Unfortunately, it seems that Wilson has become too heavily influenced by what I call the "creative writing workshop syndrome", which demands that poetry be prose-like, descriptive, visually precise and linguistically conservative. The motives for this are still unclear, but it could have something to do with increasing sales.

Chris Beckett's *The Dog Who Thinks He's a Fish* is an attempt to be surrealistically witty, playful and knowing but fails in all areas. There is a pervading superficiality evident beneath the bookish references to Ezra Pound, Frank O'Hara, Elisabeth Bishop, Bach, Schubert and

various characters in Greek mythology. One gets the impression that there is a Francis Wilson struggling to escape from beneath the oppressive influence of Paul Muldoon or Ed Dorn. The poems are thematically prosaic. 'The Dog Who Thinks He's a Fish' tells of how a friend's dog can swim under water as well as on the surface and 'Polyphemus' is about a schoolboy midnight feast.

In 'On Hearing Joshua Bell Play Schubert's Fantasy in C Major While My Left Leg is in Cramp' we have the poet getting a cramped leg while listening to Schubert's *Fantasy in C Major*. There follows the following conceit:

I choke a cry, impossible to tell
if this is pain or just another music,
surely Joshua Bell has been injected
into my leg and is treating every muscle
as a string to bow or pluck,
so that I feel myself an instrument
in the making of his melody

This is the point of the poem's twenty lines: to apply defamiliarisation to the sensation of leg cramp and to combine it with a Donne-like comparison—even Craig Raine could have achieved this in less space.

Like Wilson, Beckett is overtly prose-like:

Next door's couple who were once
so sweet together that we winced,
are shouting at each other now,
hurling insults at the wall,
shaking the floor with angry feet;

('Coffin Cake')

and:

The woman in the next bed
has a daughter and two diseases:
malaria, like me, and elephantiasis.
Her huge distorted legs lie
beached and bloated on the sheets,
as if they'd been fished out of a lake.

('A Daughter and Two Diseases')

But, again, like Wilson Beckett *is* capable of writing poetry as can be seen from the following:

The tree is so much smaller
than my dream. but it is an aberration
which makes the dream seem more realistic,
as if my whole today will be
a miniature of everything I dreamt,
each new leaf perfect as a found foot,
mocking the scale of my imagination

(‘Willow’)

It still amazes me that many poets now writing descriptive prose can also write poetry yet seem to choose not to. Again perhaps this is due to market influences.

Nine Lessons from the Dark by Adam Thorpe
The Solo Leopard by Ruth Padel
Corpus by Michael Symmons Roberts

(Appeared in *Shearsman*)

Adam Thorpe's *Nine Lessons from the Dark* is a finely crafted collection of poems. Thorpe has a slight solemnity of expression that is reminiscent of Geoffrey Hill – although not as laboured. In the poem 'Sacrifice' Thorpe extends a nod in the direction of Seamus Heaney in an attempt to fuse a sort of Wordsworthian confessional with a clinical description of a mummified corpse found in a peat bog. Far from attempting to make the corpse a laboured metaphor as Heaney does, Thorpe explores his own subjectivity whilst in the midst of the natural world:

A walk alone over the fen
as dusk fell had already
throttled me with fear: all

at sea, divining my own death
in heartbeat twitches, lost
among brier and heather
where the sandy paths gave out

He soon senses something else inhabiting the scene with him:

I sensed as a medium might
in some Islington cabal

a second presence, no more than a hint,
watchful of me.

It transpires that the watcher is his son ... or perhaps the mummified corpse – there is an ambiguity placed here. The description of the corpse itself is Heanyesque:

the body shrivelled to the leather
of its stitched hood, stubble

that gave that vexed, late-
night look under the calm

of someone who did not scream

'Cairn' is, again, Wordsworthian in the sense that it records the experience of an individual's subjectivity against the backdrop of nature. But this approach to poetry is, in my view, extremely limiting. In and of itself there is nothing wrong with this approach to the writing of verse. It has much to recommend it, and the general reader easily understands it. Yet its assertion of a recognisable, stable and constant "self" can lead to a poetry that is heavily dependent on a prose-like narrative structure, and a syntax that leaves little room for nuance or connotation. Having said this, however, 'Cairn' does have some very interesting lines:

over the whispering of marram on the brae

it stretched up out of a slew of scree

the peak's thank offering to the sky

Almost half of the poems in this collection are cast in the same mould (in varying degrees) as 'Cairn' including 'Message in a Bottle', 'The Proposal', 'Troubles' and 'The Blitz in Ealing'. But poems such as 'Nine Lessons from the Dark', 'Aux Jardins', 'Recent Summers' among others have more poetic foundations. All in all, this collection presents poems that are skilfully executed, thoughtful, and well phrased.

Ruth Padel's *The Soho Leopard* is a kaleidoscope of linguistic invention. Yet one review on the back cover fails to do it full justice with comments such as:

Colloquial, beautifully cadenced, popular and vibrant [...] The glamour recalls *Sex and the City*: this alone would make her voice an original one.

This was written by Stephen Knight in the *Independent on Sunday* – presumably so as to keep in harmony with the marketing strategies employed by the bigger poetry publishers to sell their poets as non-intellectual, "chatty" and fashionable. Padel, to her credit, is none of these things. Her poetry is, as another reviewer says,

Highly seductive, as if Wallace Stevens had high jacked Sylvia Plath with a dash of punk Sappho thrown in.

(*Times Literary Supplement*)

The collection is full of references and allusions to such things as the Socratic dialogues, Greek mythology, Mayan myth, Burmese history, anthropology, zoology, Tudor England, Buddhism and Siberian archaeology. This may seem off-putting to those who like their poetry written by short story writers such as Jackie Kay and Carol Ann Duffy but Padel's poems also allude to the more demotic. The post-modern hallmarks of intertextuality, odd juxtapositions, shifting of registers, references to popular culture etc. are all represented here. This is all

packaged in a language and style that is sometimes colloquial and sometimes lyrical—with the joins hardly visible. For example, consider the mixing of registers represented by the following lines from the poem 'Yellow Gourds with Jaguar in Dulwich Pizza Hut':

Hang on a minute, soldier. No more of your party talk
or flashing the glitter lining to your fake Armani suit.
You're not the guy you were.

and

I found your stallion
thudding from the Forest-of-No-Horizon

The rest of the poem has similar instances. I particularly liked her 'with blood/on his empty saddle' which is clearly alluding to Bob Dylan's 'with blood on your saddle' from his song 'Idiot Wind'. Other Dylanesque touches in this poem are: 'Sky-Shutting-In-Time', 'Forest-of-No-Horizon', and 'Seventeen deep-frozen Xeroxes'. There is also another one in the poem 'The Soho Leopard': 'The avenue of the dead'.

Every poem in this volume is jam-packed with so much linguistic inventiveness that it is impossible for me to itemise them here, so you will have to suffice with just a few:

From 'The Red-Gold Border':

Closed-bracket lovers,
watching their own flame flicker

From 'Jaguar Quartet':

Twelve hours he burns,
tattooing the blue with peyote rosettes
from his ormolu skin

The shadow-clot Underworld

Weave him a spirit house from chalice vine.
Hang it from adobe cactus

The secret of apotropic

From 'The Burmese *Nat* of Shape-Changing and Betel-Nut Sends a Dream to the Corrupt Official Who Ordered the Beheading of his Secret Beloved':

Anahuath jewel
paraded by the Demoiselles of Xipe
who created the sun

one of the wild ungulates of Yakutia,
the night-tide of Gaviscon

She also shifts back and forth in chronological time, making temporal connections that are bizarre. In 'Yellow Gourds with Jaguar in Dulwich Pizza Hut' the first stanza is "set" in the present with the poet addressing a contemporary man in a 'fake Armani suit', then the enjambment that connects this stanza to the next acts as a transition to the distant mythological past. A place where the contemporary man has become a horse-backed hunter with crossbow on the Rio Negro dunes. But he got this crossbow as a gift from the poet when they were in her kitchen—which means we are back in the present again. This sort of temporal relocation is present in most of the poems. There is much more I could say about this collection: such as her use of ambiguity and the oblique phrase (sadly missing in most contemporary British poetry). But it would take too long. All I can say is that this is the best collection by a British poet that I have read in quite some time.

Michael Symmon's collection, *Corpus*, comprises of poems that are formally and thematically conventional. The use of language and syntax is pleasing but not exceptional. There is a tendency to slip into prose description, which mars the effect of some of the better poems. For example the first three stanzas of 'Ascension Day' are:

In the *Blue Lobster Café* backyard,
the head chef—arms outstretched—
bears what looks like a body,

but conjures six cook's shirts,
hot-laundered, pegged out,
dripping in a drench of sun.

As they dry, their half-hearted
semaphore becomes
more urgent, untranslatable.

These opening stanzas (despite the presence of 'half-hearted semaphore') are not poetry—merely prose. This can be seen once they are displayed in the following manner:

In the *Blue Lobster Café* backyard, the head chef—arms outstretched—bears what looks like a body, but conjures six cook's shirts, hot-laundered, pegged out,

dripping in a drench of sun. As they dry, their half-hearted semaphore becomes more urgent, untranslatable.

This is not to say that it is not exceptionally good prose. It is very good – but it is not poetry. However, the poem ‘Food For Risen Bodies – 1’ is. It has a dream-like quality that is difficult to trace to any single stylistic cause. It has a certain disorientating effect similar (although not as extreme) to John Ashbery’s work: in that it leads you to expect “meaning” but subverts this expectation. The difference between this poem and one by Ashbery (there are many differences, but I am just highlighting two) is that this poem has a stable register and is slightly more lyrical. The poem opens with:

A rare dish is right for those who
have lain bandaged in a tomb for weeks:

This proverb-like utterance is syntactically logical and meaningful – at least semantically. A ‘rare dish’ would, indeed, be welcome to someone entrapped anywhere for weeks. But in this instance the location is a tomb, and the occupant is bandaged. We can, therefore, conclude that a mummified body is being referred to. To further ratify meaning we then have presented to us a list of items that have been left in this tomb:

quince and quail to demonstrate
that fruit and birds still grow on trees,

eels to show that fish still needle streams.
Rarer still, some blind white crabs,

not bleached but blank, from such
a depth of ocean that the sun would drown

if it approached them.

The opposition between life and death is clearly foregrounded by the use of the word ‘still’ in the first two of these stanzas. That ‘fruit and birds still grow on trees’ must be some small comfort to the corpse, yet it signals to us a connection to life, growth and the cycle of nature, that the corpse clearly does not represent. Note, also, that ‘birds still grow on trees’ – in what way this is possible, or in what sense is left unclear. It seems to function as a surrealistic flourish to enhance a poetic line. As does the phrase in the next stanza: ‘some blind white crabs’. Presumably the crabs would not be alive (or remain living long) when left in the tomb, therefore, in what sense are they blind?

I particularly like the line: ‘a depth of ocean that the sun would drown’ because the syntax makes its statement ambiguous. Does it mean that the sun would drown in the ocean because

it is so deep, or that the sun would drown the ocean? The answer does not matter because this is a poem and not a short story. The poem concludes with:

[...] Two-thirds
of the earth is sea; and two-thirds of that sea

— away from currents, coasts and reefs —
is lifeless, colourless, pure weight.

This unexpectedly takes us away from the tomb and into a dream-like open-ended pseudo-factual statement that, for me, is great poetry — but difficult to describe why.

Sky Hands by Daniela Voicu

(Appeared in *Eyewear*)

Daniela Voicu's *Sky Hands* is one of those poetry collections that I am always pleased to read, as it is neither descriptive nor literal but utilises imprecision and generalisation. Such aspects of poetry were the norm in poetic writing up until the early 1800s with the advent of Wordsworth and the British Romantic poets, who introduced an emphasis on descriptiveness that became the predominate poetic style in Western poetry until the arrival of High Modernism in the early Twentieth Century. *Sky Hands* refreshingly avoids this.

The most noticeable aspects about the collection are its use of three things: novel word juxtapositions, idiosyncratic turns of phrase, and mixing of the concrete with the abstract. These elements are present in almost every poem. The first of these elements, novel word juxtapositions, is something that has a great poetic lineage.

Two of the best exponents of it in poetry were Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, and it can be found in Jack Kerouac's '211th Chorus': 'quivering meat/conception', and in his 'The Thrashing Doves': 'all the balloon of the shroud on the floor'. And, of course, in Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*: 'hydrogen dukebox', 'starry/dynamo in the machinery of night' and 'supernatural darkness'. Other poets who have utilised this technique are Tom Clarke in 'You (I)': 'siege/engines', John Ashbery in 'Leaving the Atocha Station': 'perfect tar grams nuclear world bank tulip' and William Blake in *Milton*: 'freezing hunger', and 'eternal tables'.

The use of this technique results in elliptical breaks between juxtapositions of words not normally collocated and which, therefore, allows for the possibility of expanded meaning. It operates similarly to Sergei Eisenstein's theory of cinematic montage where,

the emphasis is on a dynamic juxtaposition of individual shots that calls attention to itself and forces the viewer consciously to come to conclusions about the interplay of images while he or she is also emotionally and psychologically affected in a less conscious way. Instead of continuity, Eisenstein emphasized conflict and contrast, arguing for a kind of Hegelian dialectic, where each shot was a cell and where a thesis could be juxtaposed by an antithesis, both achieving a synthesis or significance which was not inherent in either shot.

(Ira Konigsberg, *The Complete Film Dictionary*, p.217)

In Voicu's poems we see similar instances of this, as in 'To Not Lose My Self' (p.11): 'time strips', 'groan dissolution', 'destiny rain'; in 'Sky Hands' (p.15): 'rainbow pencils'; in '-26C...' (p.16): 'finger opera'; in 'A Thought' (p.20): 'gate-souls in constellation'; in 'Raining' (p.23):

'impossible horizon'; in 'Style' (p.24): 'nitrogen air', 'crown tree'; in 'Molecular Blue' (p.26): 'molecular love'; in 'Air (Haiku)' (p.27): 'eternal love kiss pearl soul'; and in many other poems in this collection.

Another aspect of *Sky Hands* that is very effective is its use of idiosyncratic turns of phrase such as: 'depending on words hungry for invention' and 'I learn the blind silence' (in 'You Are Special', p.18); 'the sky is naked and the thinking of time is anchored' (in 'A Thought', p.20); 'the shy night puts her cheek on the breast of the moon' (in 'Glow', p.21); 'I walk on the Tropic of Cancer' (in 'Style', p.24); 'water that flows from the heaven on your skin' (in 'Molecular Blue', p.26); 'to live correctly we must be born old' and 'I am lost in your crazy arms' (in 'Cathedral of Your Love', p.30); and 'Every day it is a place for another day' (in 'Surfing Silence', p.36)

The use of both novel word juxtaposition and idiosyncratic turns of phrase enable a sort of linguistic defamiliarisation, which is always pleasing to experience.

Voicu's mixing of the concrete with the abstract, is also interesting. Abstraction by itself, of course, is no stranger to poetry. By abstraction, I mean those phrases and image combinations that are too generalised and indeterminate to be strictly referential. These are not to be confused with what William Empson called "sleeping" or "subdued" metaphors but are similar to what he refers to in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* as 'ambiguity by vagueness'. An example of abstraction can be seen in William Blake's 'To the Muses' where the phrase 'chambers of the sun', in the first stanza, does not specifically refer to anything. The phrase 'chambers of the East' in the previous line, however, does. It refers to the cavernous areas located near the mythical Mount Ida (represented in line one as 'Ida's shady brow'), the place from which the gods watched the battles around Troy. It could also refer to the mountain in Crete where Zeus was said to have been born. The phrase 'chambers of the sun' does not allow for closure in this way. The word 'sun' (a source of light) has no connection semantically with the word 'chambers' (a source of darkness). Also, the sun is noted for its lack of vacuity, unlike caverns.

Voicu utilises abstractions of this sort but also "connects" them to the referential, but in doing so the abstractions are not weakened but paradoxically strengthened. Examples of some of these are:

'rhymes flow over the sunset' ('Sky Hands', p.15)

'we have hands to hold words' ('We', p.12)

'every window has a shadow of a dream' ('Windows without Dreams', p.22)

'my skin is filled with cries' ('Style', p.24)

'I will paint your body with love words' ('Remember', p.28)

Such a conjoining of the concrete and the abstract is to be welcomed in poetry, as, indeed, are the other poetical aspects mentioned in this review.

Sky Hands is well worth a read. Its poems span the full range of human emotions and will evoke in readers' minds a myriad of interpretive possibilities that will enrich their reading experience and transport them to a dimension that is dreamlike in its imaginings, simple in its beauty and moving in its honesty. What more can be asked of poetry?

About the Author

Jeffrey Side has had poetry published in *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Cuib Nest Nido*, *Underground Window*, *A Little Poetry*, *Poethia*, *Nthposition*, *Mad Hatters' Review*, *Eratio*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *Fieralingue*, *Moria*, *Ancient Heart*, *Blazevox*, *Lily*, *Big Bridge*, *Jacket*, *Textimagepoem*, *Apochryphaltext*, *9th St. Laboratories*, *P. F. S. Post*, *Great Works*, *Hutt*, *The Dande Review*, *Poetry Bay*, *The White Rose* and *Dusie*. He has reviewed poetry for *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Jacket*, *Eyewear*, *The Colorado Review*, *New Hope International*, *Galatea Resurrects*, *Stride*, *Acumen*, *Orbis* and *Shearsman*; written articles for *Jacket*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *Isis* and *Shadowtrain*; and written peer-reviewed articles for *The Literary Encyclopedia*, *Postgraduate English*, *English Magazine* and *The British Association for Romantic Studies Bulletin and Review*. From 1996 to 2000 he was the deputy editor of *The Argotist* magazine, and is currently the editor of the online successor of this, *The Argotist Online*, which has an ebook publishing arm called *Argotist Ebooks*. His publications include, *Carrier of the Seed*, *Slimvol*, *Distorted Reflections*, *Cyclones in High Northern Latitudes* (with Jake Berry) and *Outside Voices: An Email Correspondence* (with Jake Berry).