

The Yellow Nib

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The Yellow Nib

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[THE YELLOW NIB]

CHRISTOPHER REID

FOUR POEMS

The Courier

Go, Gogolesque member,
on an errand for your master!
Hop out of my trousers
and take an urgent message
to my darling far from here:
tell her I want her with me.
Be off now – bounce all the way
on your two tireless testicles.
Don't dawdle or droop. Be bold.
Blood-proud, handsomely helmeted,
present yourself like a trooper;
stand staunch as you salute her;
your brisk and dashing manner
should let that fine lady know
where her true interests lie.
If she doubts, drive the point home
with deft thrusts and debonair flourishes:
that kind of argument counts
for more than rank or riches,
so bang on till she cries 'Yes!'
and comes without further ado.

[after an anonymous 14th-century Welsh poet]

CHRISTOPHER REID

The Circumstances

They were both distraught
at having to part.
Neither wanted to,
but circumstances forced them.
A job had come up,
obliging one of them
to move far away –
somewhere in America.
To be frank, their love
was not what it had once been:
mutual attraction
had grown less intense,
and the power of love itself
much less intense.
Still, they were reluctant
to be separated.
Circumstance, though,
or possibly Fate –
with an artist's touch –
was parting them now,
before affection faded,
before time could change them,
so that each for the other
would stay as he had always been:
a handsome young man
in his early twenties.

[after Cavafy]

CHRISTOPHER REID

The Clatter

Most annoying, the lover
who, making a dawn departure,
suddenly remembers the book,
or the keys, he has put down somewhere.
He clatters around in the dark,
muttering, less to himself than to you,
'I don't understand it';
and then, when he's found it,
the book goes into his bag
with a histrionic gesture,
or he jingles the keys
like some primitive musical instrument –
all to the detriment
of the mood of gentle regret
that you ought to be enjoying.
Instead, you can only get madder
and madder at his doltish behaviour.
Rule one: a good lover
must also be a good leaver.

[after Sei Shonagon]

CHRISTOPHER REID

The Competition

He must think he's in heaven,
sitting so close to you
and lapping up all
your chatter and laughter.
But it's hell for me.
In your company, my voice
dries utterly, tongue's
an unliftable weight,
fire courses through me,
eyes blear, ears roar,
I'm in a muck sweat,
boast less colour
than a wisp of straw,
and might as well be dying.

[after Sappho]

MIRIAM GAMBLE

FOUR POEMS

Mugs

Your brother bought us mugs
with the Union Jack on them,
not knowing his way
in the world of signs and emblems,
though for dates, for weird facts
he's second to none.

It's dinning your head
on a stone to tell him, the same
as trying to espouse
that he's not addicted to Coca-Cola,
or that, because we're older,
it doesn't prove we're rich;

strict meanings adhere to things
and flake from others
without rhyme or reason,
a comprehensible frame: to him
a mug is a mug
and the Union Jack a flag,

though, to be fair to your brother,
they're a good size
and perfect for coffee,
and though they live
in the darkest bowels of the cabinet,
knowing, we use them anyway.

MIRIAM GAMBLE

The Locked Room Mystery

For Eoghan Walls

Let's admit that it's come to a natural end.
The Golden Age is over;
new additions, however seeming miraculous,
can only in all truth repeat, repeat.

When, tell me, did our lives last depend
on someone getting the answer
(it didn't matter who): a poisoned dress,
a knife honed to a point so neat

the victim didn't register the wound?
Now, it's the field of the number cruncher:
out of imagination's wilderness
he comes forth bearing an ear of wheat,
a plot to which the average child could mime.

And yet we still seek the impossible crime.
Listen. There's a house, surrounded by virgin snow...

MIRIAM GAMBLE

Vigilante

There has been a series of break-ins.
In each, a mendacious work was stripped from a wall
in a house in a terrace in a cityscape
through which the artist, like some latter-day Hansel,
and lured by the parings of his rotten soul,
from avenue to close to street
was dragged, we gather, on this orgy of destruction.

A sorry affair! Though we cannot guess
at his mental state, we hope this basic reconstruction
may breathe, poriferum, the nature of his crimes.
Data is minimal, barring the fact
the raid happened several years ago
to judge by the limits of the paintwork
and the out-of-date currency in scrolls
that was left in a cubby of every house.

Are you affected? Are you a victim?
Why not check your glory hole?
This man is armed with pap, and dangerous.
Please note, however, that this is just an artist's impression
of an artist. His profile is unknown
as not one citizen recalls his name
or what the image was they used to own.

MIRIAM GAMBLE

The World is Laced with Smells

The world is laced with smells
and the dog follows them,
pissing on anything that isn't legible
or that screams 'enemy!' or 'intruder!'.
His brain is packed, as conch shells whisper
of waves, with hints of what has gone before;
his bladder is a well's endless supply.
He follows the track in swerved lines
as Holmes, not Watson, follows the law.
As for what he smelt, or saw,
in the coiled, darkling criminal mind
of a pickup truck from Tipperary
I couldn't say, but it must have been bad,
for it sent him back the long way
to his spit-daubed nuzzle-rug by the fire;
to flames, and dreams of Moriarty.
And I strode on witless into the mire.

PIOTR FLORCZYK

TWO POEMS

Birthday Party

Not everyone who shows up on time knows your name by heart. A few
are overdressed,
manicured, and want to debate how it feels to be halfway done, on your way
to hell, or

some other place without a zip code. Yet you recognize A. who sold you
the first porn, and

K. who cried on your shoulder about being in love. Others ring the bell
because of

their dimpled cheeks or perky breasts. There's nothing strange in her clinging
to a bottle of

vodka, or him, leaning against the piano, pulling tighter and tighter on his
white-and-

red polka dot tie. Since your heroes were hooded and carried away on flatbed
trucks,

you've learned to live with furniture missing legs, how to find friends by
whistling the

tunes your forefathers sang charging tanks with bayonets. But that's an old story,
no longer

true. So when the street lamp outside comes on, and there's no more finger food

for fingers to find, you cut the white chocolate cake into squares for little Z.,
who now

sports a beard, and for G. who rode a mule across valleys and peaks with a
Hallmark card

he could have sent priority. Meanwhile the present pile grows taller. D.'s in
charge. You
love the way she places each box atop another, brushing against the columns
just to

crown one with a basket of citrus soap bars. She's a keeper. Who else could order
the rest
of one's life from inside this labyrinth, then not miss a beat when the band strikes
up a

jaunty tune and the guests huddle like pebbles in a bowl or roses in a vase—
the vessel you
stare into, searching for fallen thorns, while everyone wants to know if you'd
rather

open the signed or unsigned gifts first.

PIOTR FLORCZYK

Bric-A-Brac

The second I turned away, he was playing with fire by smashing one red brick after another, first against the shoulder-high wall he built, then against his forehead,

sunburned and creased beyond his years. Yet all morning nothing spelled that the end was near. While he worked on encircling the eye of the well, calm as the level, I sat

in the ditch by the road, tapping a stick on the stump of the elm. Milk trucks went by.

I saw a hawk, and bald hens scuttling for cover. The well was just a hole in the ground.

But things began to unravel. Straightening up, my father looked down the shaft, and saw his face like a cloud at the bottom. That's when the chain twirled, the water

changed color—he later claimed—it wasn't the way to go, not then, not ever. So he went after the bricks and the well, spooked he wouldn't be there when the bucket came up.

STEPHANIE CONN

Wie is de vrouw on de overkant?

Who is the woman on the other side?
It was the only phrase that stuck
in months of pre-trip conversation class.

As I struggled with the syntax
it became clear that you were a natural,
spending hours in the lab perfecting your grasp.

You couldn't wait to track down a local
to ask how to say I love you? *Ik hou van you*,
you said, content with your acquisition.

You led me in the appropriate response,
encouraged me to practise daily. *Ik hou ook van you*;
all it took to keep you happy.

The towns we visited belonged to you,
their guttural place names all tongue and throat;
Groningen, Maastricht, Utrecht.

You strode through their stone streets
listing the features of gothic churches,
as I fumbled with a bi-lingual map.

SINÉAD MORRISSEY

Photographing Lowry's House

And then he died.
And so I drove to where
he'd lived. I don't know why.
To stand across the street,
perhaps, hands in my pockets,
a happenstance observer

of the bricks, the Georgian
front, the chimney pots
and guttering, the bin,
the hedge, the fence,
appearing all-at-once
untenanted, bereft—

to take a photograph
or two of how that looked.
But his house was a smashed
hive, all industry and ruin:
the door was open;
vans with their backs

thrown wide cluttered
the driveway; men he never knew
in life were loading up
painting after painting—
portraits, landscapes, mill-scenes—
stripping every room

of his obsessions.
And so I intervened, crying theft
and history, and they listened.
And I was given half

an hour to photograph
what was left

before they finished.
Light in the hallway,
even in February: without a flash
the staircase seeming flounced
in the train of a bridal dress,
shimmery

as the white space
in the foreyards of the factories
his buckled, blank-faced
people bent their bodies to.
The mantelpiece in the living room
strewn with stories—

postcards, knick-knacks,
impromptu napkin sketches;
the bar-talk of the clocks,
each set to a different time
in case their simultaneous chimes
distressed him; likenesses

of his parents scowling down;
but as though I stood in Lascaux
among its sprinting fawns
and my very breath
was wrecking what I stared at,
there were absences also:

squares of thin-lined stains
where, moments earlier,
pictures in their frames
had kept their residence—
impossible now to distinguish
which. My camera

clicked and whirled.
Upstairs I found his studio.
I changed the film.
They'd been in here
but not for long: everywhere,
archipelagos

of canvases he'd lain
against the window or the walls
still held their chains—
persons, closer up than anything
of his I'd ever seen,
a boy and girl,

huddled and lovely
against a fogged-out background,
a man and his family,
everyone in it
round-shouldered and perplexed
by being found,

a child hitching a lift
in a barrow. And then the sea,
over and over: with a black ship
smoking into harbour,
or a distraction of yachts, or
waves and horizon only—

de-peopled, the tide
that one day didn't turn
but swallowed
the cacophony
of Salford and Pendlebury
and kept on coming on.

I had a minute
in the bedroom with Rossetti's
luscious women, standing silent

guard about his bed.
The counterpane re-made.
And then the foreman called me

from the first-floor landing—
they had to be getting on—
I should be going—and I had time
for a final shot
on my botched way out:
his trilby and his mac, hanging

from a hook, in black and white.

MARK GRANIER

TWO POEMS

Keys

At 18, I wore a bunch of them ž-pendants
on a leather thong. I wanted secrets

to keep, the jingle, the little teeth
turning the pins, old

tangible symbols. As if I might learn to belong
by playing at being warder

to a makeshift life: the front door
to my first home, 'Rockville' (the only one

with an actual name); the flat
with a fire escape that stopped short

of tousled, fogbound gardens, a neighbour
calling her cat in 1974;

the padlock that released, from Stephen's Green,
one buckled bicycle wheel;

the cardboard and leather suitcase I inherited
from Grandfather, who'd kept it

under his bed, perhaps so he could sleep
on old letters, tinted postcards,

a big brass paddle and key
to a hotel room high in The Windy City.

MARK GRANIER

Nope, I Haven't Yet Figured Out What Beauty Is For

— a response to Mary Oliver

Sure, your wild geese can drag me willy-nilly
with a choked sob into their sky

and I agree that dogs, swans, mockingbirds and doe-eyed stones
deserve to have souls,

but sometimes I want to shout (since a stone can not)
that these have as much need of souls

as the butterfly has of a pin, the biologist's mouse
of the human ear cloned on its back;

that to pile onto furry things spiritual quilts patched
out of wounded rapture

can chill rather than warm, make a soul's teeth chatter
for those others with hardly a stitch:

sea cucumbers, viruses, space junk -- the rice grain that fell
from a bird's skull-socket, curled

and writhed in my palm as if butting the swell
of this too-living wall.

[THE YELLOW NIB]

CAOILINN HUGHES

TWO POEMS

Marbles

A netted bag of green glass marbles with aquamarine swirls
deep in the otherworld of spherical transparency (simultaneous opacity)
was the first thing I ever stole when I was three and far from the last.
The marbles hung heavily in their lattice like motherless pearls,
like lifeless organs in between bodies, intervening worlds.

I gave them the damp of my palm, envisioning the cold shell nurture
of dinosaur eggs or black hole ovule. When I had lost each glass orb,
I filled my pockets with millefiori beads, Bangladeshi bracelets, Electric Eel eye
shadow, neon pingpong balls. But nothing weighed the same as the stolen marbles
that gave me unbuyable glee and belly aches when I swallowed them experimentally.

CAOILINN HUGHES

Communion Afternoon

I would have out-smarted them or, at a minimum,
flicked their coins back like sharp-edged playing
cards or swung the rosary beads like a Filipino Balisong
had I not vomited spaghetti alphabet all over the spring-time
grass and fake-white silk and girlhood; disgusted
at the injustice of being small and atheist and inarticulate.

GERARD BEIRNE

The Song of the Dead-Child Being

In a small cobbled together box of distraught wood under my father's weathered arm, wrapped in white cloth, knocked from side to side with the squall of his uneven walk along the knobbled lanes between the scrabbled hedge, the clinging grass and the scattered stones. The hard-to-swallow procession he led in fraught fashion in the throbbing rain.

The tall evening shadow of him alone amongst the walking dead. No talk, just the windswept breath of the stillborn bereft of the hard wrought pain of the unnamed, the shamed depths of the thrown-upon-us skies dense and black and warm crowding the worn path of heather along the cliff's torn edge, the thin veil of the calm sea, the unfledged life of the impending storm.

And up ahead the shallow grave the spade has dug, the small impression I have made, the shrug of earth, the dirt shoveled back and closing in, the stray-sod darkness and the hungry grass. Trapped in the dismal doings of the day, the ruins of the hardened clay, a banished child forever doomed to carry a candle and wander in the wilds of night with all the other baby-lights.

I glimmer outside the graveyard walls, my vanished time measured and stalled in flight the endless ventures towards the hallowed ground that I approach and yet can never enter.

OLIVER COMINS

Godstick

Rain reminds us how unprepared we are
as it beats in our faces, dashing across
a wind-swept courtyard in a storm
with tired children in our arms,
and runs down the back of my old
shawl-necked jersey. Thirty years ago,
some bastard stole my oilskin cycle-cape
from the Brown Cow, Hope Street, York,
in a carrier bag I'd left under the seat.
I wish I still had it now.

He or she took three books as well:
Barbarians by Douglas Dunn and Heaney's
Field Work (both first edition paperbacks,
signed by the author) plus a City Lights imprint
of *Paterson* by William Carlos Williams.
The replacement versions have never been read
in quite the same way, being new copies handled
like old friends from the beginning.

A stick my son picked up formed the base.
Its narrow tip cut smooth and later bound
with the cured skin of a domestic animal
of some kind. A swelling at the top
might have been attached to the rest of a tree,
or could have been the puffed-up bole
by the root of a small bush.
Wherever it came from and however
you choose to look at it, the countenance
of a god is almost visible, whose potent features
distressed the wood's grain at source.

We are here to admire an earlier example,
on exhibition in a climate-controlled cabinet:
if you look closely, you can make out the face
of a woman who is also a man and follow
the pattern of ceremonial markings across her cheeks.
Citizens of a distant place, who made this,
knew more than we think about the way
rain falls and feeds the ocean which makes
this island complete.

TRIC O'HEARE

TWO POEMS

A Pip, a Secret and a Lucky Coin

Men knit, my old father says carefully
caressing his small dog with shovel hands:
Men knit. One day Country Cousin Nick said,
'Come into the good room, City John,
I'll tell you a secret. It's about knitting.'

He's unswaddling the story as he once,
with the showmanship of a parish priest,
unknotted the corner of his handkerchief
to show me the fossilized tooth he'd found.
Here's the true history of the world, he'd said.

He says now Nick put his secret out like
a treasure from the box beneath his bed:
the peach pip shriveled like a shrunken head;
the coin that took a man to war and back
Men knit. In all these years, I've never told.

That night I get out the album - there's Nick
one ear chewed off by sixty years of sun,
looking backwards over his ribbed paddocks,
grinning *It doesn't matter* at the new pup
running across the furrows like a dropped stitch

TRIC O'HEARE

Minding the Gap

A life can be saved in the 'this close' space
between the thumb and finger's open clamp.
Some people wait for the quiet ferryman
to take them across the ultimate gap;
others leap from the sheer cliffs of The Gap
to span the gulf between now and the end.
Philosophers and priests spend minds or hearts
pushing God in or out of the big gap.

Ellipsis is a sure crumb trail into
the shadowy forests of readers' minds
where knives strike, lovers leap (or don't)
– the gap writers can haunt, but may not enter.
Sense swings on the hinge; the caesura, the pause –
the gap beneath the door that lets in light.

FLEUR ADCOCK

Mother's Knee

I

If you like stories, here's one to chew on:
a little girl in the street at Cookstown
frightened by something she can't understand –
four men holding the corners of a sheet,
and tossing a body high in the air.

Hustling her away, her mother explained:
the one in the nightshirt had a fever;
that was the only way to bring it down.
Martha was five in 1848;
this must have been the Potato Famine.

II

A generation on, in New Zealand,
we come to Jinnie and the string of beads.
Her teenage sister Lizzie went swimming
at Slippery Creek with Phoebe Godkin,
and little Jinnie was left in their charge.

The only thing was to buy her silence.
Back home, Martha frightened it out of her:
'Where did you get those beads, Jinnie? Jinnie!
'Phoebe Godkin gave me them, not to tell
about her and Lizzie going swimming.'

III

These are in the pure oral tradition –
mother to daughter to daughter's daughter –
no dates, no writing. It seems almost wrong
to supplement it from outside sources.
Lizzie, for example, married a man

who drove a brewer's dray and smelt of beer;
his last drink was a bottle of Lysol.
You surely can't like knowing that? Better
to leave her in 1880-something
prancing in Slippery Creek in her shift.

TARA CHRISTIE KINSEY

“RAVE ON, JOHN DONNE”:
PAUL MULDOON AND WARREN ZEVON¹



Fig. 1 (Courtesy of Paul Muldoon.)

In September 2000, Muldoon wrote a fan letter to Warren Zevon. “Dear Mr. Zevon”, Muldoon begins, “I hope you won’t mind my writing to you out of the blue, but I’ve been an unabashed fan of your work for twenty-five years and thought I’d simply put that on paper. I think you’re a great songwriter, one of the very best of the era, and often say so when the subject comes up”² Muldoon enclosed two autographed books as mere “tokens of my regard for your achievement” and insisted that Zevon need not be “in touch about them”. Muldoon heard nothing for almost a year until one day the phone rang.³ Muldoon’s wife, the

1 Van Morrison, “Rave On, John Donne,” *Inarticulate Speech of the Heart* (New York: Warner Brothers, 1983).

2 See Paul Muldoon, letter to Warren Zevon (8 September 2000) Letter held in an as yet unprocessed folder in the Paul Muldoon archive (Co. No. 784, Box 52), Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library (MARBL), Emory University.

3 Muldoon said of his collaboration with Zevon: “It came about essentially because I’m a huge fan. I’ve been following his career since *Excitable Boy* (1978). About 18 months ago I wrote a fan letter. I heard nothing for close to a year then I had a phone call from him one day. We got together and he asked me if I would consider writing something

novelist Jean Hanff Korelitz, recalls that she “came home to find Paul playing, over and over, a recorded phone message” from Zevon.⁴ It appears the admiration was mutual. The two artists met for the first time in September 2001 in New York City, just days after the terrorist attacks of September 11th, when Zevon “prevailed upon” Muldoon “to write some songs”.⁵ Together, they wrote two songs, including ‘My Ride’s Here’, the title track of Zevon’s penultimate album, in which the speaker is bound for glory with Jesus, Milton, and John Wayne and spits into time’s winged chariot as it hurries near. Bruce Springsteen liked the song so much that on September 10, 2003, just three days after Zevon’s death, he recorded a live cover of the song in tribute to his dear friend.⁶

The collaboration with Zevon unleashed Muldoon’s already healthy appetite for all things rock and roll. Korelitz notes: “Books about the music business began to accumulate in our bathroom. Paul formed a publishing company to register his lyrics...Copies of *Spin* and *Guitar World* began to arrive monthly, along with an inexhaustible supply of Sam Ash catalogues”.⁷ Muldoon and Zevon began busily writing to each other, mostly over e-mail, about making music. They debated the use of certain musical instruments, questioned violence as a subject

for him, which, of course, was a great thrill for me, as it would be for anyone interested in popular songwriting. I do think he is simply one of the best songwriters around”. See Warwick McFadyen, “The Beat Poet,” *The Age* (14 April 2002): <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/04/12/1018333416123.html>.

4 Jean Hanff Korelitz, “Sleeping With the Guitar Player,” *The New York Times* (March 13, 2005) <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/13/fashion/13love.html?pagewanted=print>.

5 Marc Weingarten, “A Literary Answer to Lyricist’s Block: Musician/bookworm Warren Zevon recruits famous authors for lyrics on a new album,” *Los Angeles Times* (May 16, 2002):

<http://articles.latimes.com/2002/may/16/news/wk-weingarten16>.

6 At his concert in Toronto on September 10, 2003, just a few days after Zevon’s death, Bruce Springsteen opened the show with a live cover of ‘My Ride’s Here’. The live performance was recorded and included on *Enjoy Every Sandwich: The Songs of Warren Zevon* (Studio City, CA: Artemis Records, 2004).

7 Korelitz, “Sleeping With the Guitar Player”. Muldoon’s publishing company, Fled is That Music, comes from a line in Keats’ ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ “ASCAP” stands for the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers.

matter in the wake of September 11th, and expressed to each other how much they enjoyed the collaboration. Zevon writes to Muldoon: “Rest assured, I’d be just that much prouder and happier if you co-wrote everything. I’m quite content playing Keith to your Mick”.⁸

Many have joined Muldoon’s wife in puzzling over the Princeton professor’s sudden foray into rock lyrics and electric guitar. Maria Johnston suggests that “poetry scholars and critics” hardly know “what to make of the egregious aberration”⁹ in the poet’s forty-year career. Yet the unpublished correspondence, held at Emory University, makes one thing clear: Zevon was the midwife to Muldoon’s midlife rock and roll rebirth. Claiming that the “first song I ever wrote, really, was with Warren Zevon”,¹⁰ Muldoon has since written hundreds of song lyrics: fifty-five of them are collected in *General Admission* (2006).¹¹ On the cover, celebrity caricaturist David Chelsea depicts the fifty-five year old Muldoon as a buttoned-up, tweed-suited professor, lecturing drowsily from *Best-Loved Fireside Verse* while, behind him, his elongated shadow rocks out on electric guitar, with a head of wild hair thrown back in ecstasy. The title *General Admission* is something of a confession: that Muldoon has long wanted to become a musician. And now he is.

This is not to suggest, however, that rock and roll, or Zevon himself, is new subject matter for Muldoon. Years before he sent his fan letter, Muldoon “bled his ardour for Zevon into the pages of his work”.¹² References to Zevon appear in *The Prince of the Quotidian* (1994),

8 Zevon e-mail to Muldoon (dated 5 December 2001). E-mail letter held in an as yet unprocessed folder in the Paul Muldoon archive (Co. No. 784, Box 52), MARBL.

9 Maria Johnston, “Another Side of Paul Muldoon: The Poet as Lyricist,” *Aberration in Modern Poetry: Essays on Atypical Works from Yeats and Auden to Larkin, Heaney, Gluck and Others*, ed. Lucy Collins and Stephen Matterson (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011) 78.

10 Muldoon, *A Poet Rocks: Paul Muldoon and Rackett*, by Robert Mackey, November 2006: <http://vimeo.com/1835934>.

11 *General Admission* was published by The Gallery Press (Oldcastle, County Meath, Ireland) in 2006.

12 Marc Weingarten, “A Literary Answer to Lyricist’s Block: Musician/bookworm Warren Zevon recruits famous authors for lyrics on a new album,” *Los Angeles Times* (May 16, 2002): <http://articles.latimes.com/2002/may/16/news/wk-weingarten16>.

and poems such as 'Yarrow' (1994), 'Incantata' (1994), and most conspicuously, 'Sleeve Notes, Warren Zevon: Excitable Boy' (1998), in which Zevon's "hymns / to booty, to beasts, to bimbos, boom boom, / are inextricably part of the warp and woof / of the wild and wicked poems in *Quoof*".¹³ It is not difficult to imagine how Zevon's "gonzo bursts of cartoonish violence"¹⁴ became the soundtrack to *Quoof*, the 1983 volume Muldoon penned in Belfast during a particularly violent and bleak period of the Northern Irish Troubles. However, we might also note the way in which Muldoon either misremembers or revises history to envision Zevon's influence; Ray "Boom Boom" Mancini held the World Boxing Association lightweight championship from 1982 to 1984, which was during and immediately after the writing of *Quoof*, but Zevon's song, 'Boom Boom Mancini', was not released until *Sentimental Hygiene* (1987). One might reasonably suggest that Muldoon, whose poems have been described as "wily, irreverent, even unprincipled",¹⁵ has tuned his lyre to a Zevonian key throughout his career. It is no wonder that stuck to the back of Muldoon's car is a bumper sticker with the opening lines to Zevon's hit song, 'Werewolves of London' (1978): "I Saw A Werewolf With A / Chinese Menu In His Hand'.

Muldoon and Zevon were in the midst of co-writing *The Honey War*, a Broadway musical about a dispute over gaming rights to an American Indian casino, when Zevon was diagnosed with mesothelioma, an aggressive lung cancer which in 2003 took Zevon's life at the age of fifty-six.¹⁶ Since that time, Muldoon has been immersed in the writing and playing of music. In 2004, Muldoon teamed up with Princeton professor of English Nigel Smith to form the band, Rackett, for which

13 See 'Incantata' (line 193) and 'Yarrow' (line 615) *The Annals of Chile* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994). *The Prince of the Quotidian* was published by The Gallery Press (Oldcastle, County Meath, Ireland) in 1994. 'Sleeve Notes, Warren Zevon: Excitable Boy, appears in *Hay* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998) lines 9-12.

14 Andrew Dansy, "Warren Zevon Dies: Cancer claims singer-songwriter two weeks after last album," *Rolling Stone* (September 8, 2003) <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/warren-zevon-dies-20030908>

15 Clair Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998) 11.

16 Unpublished typescripts of *The Honey War* are held in an as yet unprocessed folder in the Paul Muldoon archive (Co. No. 784, Box 52), MARBL.

Muldoon wrote lyrics, sang, and played electric guitar until the band's break-up in 2010. Presently, Muldoon and Smith are playing in the eclectic Princeton-based musical collective, Wayside Shrines, which enlisted Zevon's former producer and engineer Paul Kolderie to record its first full-length album, *Word on the Street*, due to be released this year. At Princeton University this spring, Muldoon and the folk and pop singer-songwriter and author Wesley Stace (a.k.a. John Wesley Harding) are co-teaching a course entitled, "How to Write a Song", and collaborating on a new album.

Yet nowhere is there more evidence for Zevon's extraordinary impact on Muldoon than in 'Sillyhow Stride' Muldoon's long, three-part elegy for Zevon, later collected as the final poem in the volume *Horse Latitudes* (2006). Whirling the reader at breakneck pace through Zevon's "dirty life and times",¹⁷ 'Sillyhow Stride' teems with references to the seventeenth-century English poet John Donne, including 'The Anniversary', 'Death's Duel', 'Elegy XIX: To His Mistress Going to Bed', 'The Sun Rising', 'Love's Deity', 'Holy Sonnet X: Death Be Not Proud', 'The Relic', and countless others. Although Muldoon has referred to Donne as "the single most important writer" to him¹⁸ – and Donne's influence on Muldoon's work is evident as early as the unpublished poems written during secondary school – Donne's all-consuming presence in 'Sillyhow Stride' thrusts the seventeenth-century poet front-and-centre in Muldoon's work as never before. In this elegy for Zevon, it is as if Muldoon wants to swallow the Donne canon whole—a complete Donne-immersion from which he has not since emerged. In 2012, Muldoon published and wrote the introduction to a new Faber edition of Donne's *Selected Poems*; later that year (in a move similar to the early poem, 'Good Friday, 1971. Driving Westward'), Muldoon released *Songs and Sonnets*, twenty-five lyrics and poems whose titles conspicuously echoes Donne's own.¹⁹

Yet Zevon...and Donne? It would be all too easy to dismiss the pairing of these two artists as the latest of Muldoon's far-fetched

17 Zevon's "Dirty Life and Times" is the first track on his last album, *The Wind* (Los Angeles: Indieblue Music, 2003).

18 John Tusa, Interview with Paul Muldoon (2004), BBC Radio 3: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/speechanddrama/audioarchive.shtml>

19 Muldoon, *Songs and Sonnets* (London: Enitharmon, 2012).

comparisons – which, of course, it is. But to stop here misses the point. The unpublished correspondence reveals that both before and during Zevon's illness, Muldoon and Zevon were reading and writing to each other about Donne's poetry.²⁰ Donne appears, for example, in a cancelled stanza of 'My Ride's Here':

In a limo from the Royalton
over to the Morgan
I heard the Reverend Donne
strike up on his organ,
My ride's here...²¹

Awaiting news of his diagnosis, an anxious Zevon wrote to Muldoon and asked for some "literary suggestions", to which Muldoon responded: "I'm not sure how much poetry has to offer at these times, at least not directly. What about the priests, Donne and Hopkins? Always dependable". Zevon replied: "I can't tell you how important poetry is at a time like this! How's that for a bit of job validation".²² Months later, as Zevon lay dying, he e-mailed Muldoon again: "How can i be such a Donne-dunce that i can't find 'Death be not proud' in my library?" Muldoon immediately e-mailed the full text of Donne's poem, to which Zevon responded, "It's an honour to receive the Donne lines from your fingers. To look for those lines and have them come from you. What a shining life".²³ This exchange is just one of many that find their way into 'Sillyhow Stride' where we read of:

20 In another e-mail, Zevon writes to Muldoon: "Thanks for replying when you're so madly busy....I'll keep poking around the piano while you're away. From Donne to Scooby Doo in one day, and a pig roast too! At least I finished A Laodicean this morning: second-rate Hardy, they say, but I adored it". See Warren Zevon e-mail to Paul Muldoon (26 June 2002). E-mail letter held in an as yet unprocessed folder in the Paul Muldoon archive (Co. No. 784, Box 52), MARBL.

21 Muldoon, e-mail to Zevon (5 October 2001). E-mail letter held in an as yet unprocessed folder in the Paul Muldoon archive (Co. No. 784, Box 52), MARBL.

22 Zevon-Muldoon e-mail correspondence (28 August-4 September 2002). E-mail letters held in an as yet unprocessed folder in the Paul Muldoon archive (Co. No. MSS 784, Box 52), MARBL.

23 Zevon-Muldoon e-mail correspondence (November, 2002). E-mail letters held in an as yet unprocessed folder in the Paul Muldoon archive (Co. No. 784, Box 52), MARBL.

...a child soldier who would e-mail
you, at your request,
a copy of “Death Be Not Proud”...²⁴

The reference to the “child soldier” evokes not only the Nigerian Civil War and Congo Crisis, about which Zevon sang in ‘Roland the Headless Thompson Gunner’, but also to Muldoon’s school-boyish apprenticeship while learning to write his first rock songs at the hands of a revered master songwriter.

There is yet another reason for Donne to appear in Muldoon’s elegy for Zevon. For if there was ever a singer-songwriter who embodied what Renaissance scholar Ramie Targoff calls Donne’s “unusually active relationship to his mortality”,²⁵ it was Zevon. The way in which Donne and Zevon painstakingly prepared for – and made a holy show of – their death is the *discordia concors* by which Muldoon yokes together these two heterogeneous artists. Just weeks before his death Donne famously dressed in his burial shroud and posed for an artist’s portrait that he allegedly kept at his deathbed. Izaak Walton’s 1641 biography tells us that, despite a “weak...faint and hollow voice” and “so much flesh as did only cover his bones”, Donne “passionately denied” his friends’s pleas to rest and delivered his final sermon, ‘Death’s Duel’, in a performance that was (Walton tells us) interpreted by all who were there as Donne’s attempt to deliver “his own Funeral Sermon.”²⁶

And so it was with Zevon. Even a cursory glance at Zevon’s album titles (Life’ll Kill Ya), his song titles (‘I’ll Sleep When I’m Dead’) and the iconic cigarette-smoking, sunglass-wearing skull (‘Old Velvet Nose’) emblazoned on Zevon’s album covers and backstage passes, reveals the *ars moriendi* of a musician who had been “rehearsing for death his whole life”.²⁷ When the doctors issued their grim prognosis

24 Muldoon, ‘Sillyhow Stride’, l.30-32.

25 Ramie Targoff, “Facing Death,” *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, ed. Achsah Guibory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 217.

26 Izaak Walton, *The Lives of John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Richard Hooker, George Herbert and Robert Sanderson*, introduction by George Saintsbury (New York: Oxford University Press, 1927) 74, 81.

27 Barry Gilbert, “Death Inspires Him: Warren Zevon is running out of life, but not inspiration,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (23 August 2003): <http://bgilbert5.home.mindspring.com/zevon.htm>.

Zevon refused medical treatment and hastily wrote “his last will and testament”,²⁸ *The Wind* (2003), an album recorded in the last months of his illness and released just two weeks before his death. Death, which had ever been Zevon’s muse, spurred the dying rock and roller into song one last time. With the help of Bruce Springsteen, Tom Petty, Emmylou Harris and others, Zevon sang his own epitaph.²⁹ He granted VH1 special access to film an up-close documentary of the making of what he knew would be his last album. He appeared on *The David Letterman Show* to say goodbye to his fans. When he lost strength, Zevon moved the recording studio into his bedroom. During a cover of Bob Dylan’s ‘Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door’ Zevon’s lungs fail him, his voice cracks, and he keeps it that way. This is death on centre stage. John Fuery writes in *The Guardian*: “How do you write a decent obituary when the corpse-to-be is doing such a good job of it himself?”³⁰

There is so much that one could say about ‘Sillyhow Stride’, one hundred and eighty lines of loose *terza rima* swarming with literary and musical allusions alongside hallucinogenic moments requiring serious unpacking. Peter McDonald writes that, “‘Sillyhow Stride’, in which Muldoon mixes private grief (for his sister) with celebrity grief (for Warren Zevon) seems to me...an empty performance, one shot down completely by the over-generous injections of lines written by John Donne”.³¹ In what follows, I will suggest that the grief for Zevon in this poem is not simply “celebrity grief” but also highly “private” and personal—arguably as personal as any line about Muldoon’s sister, Maureen, who died of ovarian cancer in 2005. Furthermore, I will call our attention to the ways in which Muldoon’s “private grief” for Zevon is mixed with, and troubled by, Muldoon’s “celebrity grief” and that Muldoon repeatedly plays with these competing and,

28 Peter Murphy, “Warren Zevon’s Redemption Song,” *HotPress* 27:19 (25 September 2003) 86.

29 Zevon’s friend and actor Billy Bob Thornton says: “Warren has a huge posse of friends. And when news of his illness got around, all the big guns rode into town”. Billy Bob Thornton, VH1, *(Inside) Out - Warren Zevon: Keep Me in Your Heart* (Los Angeles: Artemis Records, 2003).

30 John Fuery, “It’s 2am, and Zevon’s ride is here,” *The Guardian* (24 September 2002) <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/09/23/1032734111046.html?oneclick=true>.

31 Peter McDonald, review of *Horse Latitudes*, *Poetry Review*, 97.1 (2007), 88-90.

at times, conflicting modes of intimacy. Applying pressure to the poem's fault lines of intimacy, we uncover an anxiety about the public display of affection for an artist Muldoon revered from afar as a fan for twenty-five years and loved, from up-close, as an artistic collaborator and personal friend for the last two. Erudition and emotion carry equal weight in this elegy, whose hyper-quotation of Donne is no encumbering "injection", but rather, a painstakingly chosen wellspring for Muldoon who, searching for an adequate expression of platonic love between two men, ploughs the rich terrain of Donne's Petrarchan poetry, rewriting it—and the contemporary woe-is-me love song with which it is associated – for a dead male friend. The intimate, direct address of Zevon begins at its opening lines, which recall Grammy Awards night in 2004 when Zevon, who never won a Grammy in his lifetime, was posthumously awarded two.³² Muldoon turns to Zevon, just five months dead:

I want you to tell me if, on Grammy night, you didn't get one
hell of a kick
out of all those bling-it-ons in their bullet-proof broughams,
all those line-managers who couldn't manage a line of coke,

all those Barmecides offering beakers of barm –
if you didn't get a kick out of being as incongruous
there as John Donne at a Junior Prom.³³

This elegy is not simply, as Muldoon's dedication suggests, "*In memory of Warren Zevon*", it is a long and elaborate apostrophe directly to Zevon, who is addressed as familiarly as if he were right there by the poet's side. Muldoon bears witness to the absurdity of Zevon, an underappreciated artist with cult success, being honoured too-little-too-late in a Grammy Awards scene dominated by pop music commercial success. The farce of Zevon's "song noir"³⁴ applauded by

32 "Best Rock Performance by a Duo or Group with Vocal" for "Disorder In The House" with Bruce Springsteen, and "Best Contemporary Folk Album" for *The Wind* (2003).

33 Muldoon, 'Sillyhow Stride', I.1-6.

34 Of Zevon, Jackson Browne said, "He's the first and foremost proponent of song noir". As quoted in Warwick McFadyen, "Warren Zevon's Final Cut," 2 September 2003: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/09/01/1062383506453.html>

glistening Hollywood “bling-it-ons” inspires the description of Zevon as “incongruous there as John Donne at a Junior Prom”, a line that triggers the first of countless joint references to Donne and Zevon in the poem. Muldoon quickly establishes Donne as the *doppelgänger* for Zevon’s “Excitable Boy” (1978):

He took little Susie to the Junior Prom
Excitable boy, they all said
and he raped her and killed her, then he took her home
Excitable boy, they all said
Well, he’s just an excitable boy...

...After ten long years they let him out of the home
Excitable boy, they all said
And he dug up her grave and built a cage with her bones
Excitable boy, they all said
Well, he’s just an excitable boy³⁵

As the piano player for The Everly Brothers, young Zevon would have played ‘Wake Up, Little Susie’ (1957) “night after night”. In Zevon’s version, sing-songy-ness, like Susie herself, is sabotaged by horrific violence. Situating Zevon alongside “Tim McGraw and Outkast”³⁶ and other Grammy favourites, Muldoon exposes how counter to pop culture Zevon’s art is, and how ill-equipped the mainstream is to comprehend, let alone appreciate, it.

The implication is that the “I”, on the other hand, does appreciate it—perhaps in the way that only a fellow “excitable boy” could. In ‘Sillyhow Stride’ we eavesdrop on a private tête-à-tête from “I” to “you”, an exchange in sharp contrast to the public, theatrical *see-and-be-seen* in which “all those” Grammy-goers are ensconced. Note how much distance Muldoon creates by repeating the phrase “all those”: “all those bling-it-ons”, “all those line-managers”, “all those Barmecides”. To place himself in Zevon’s camp of the musical underdog, Muldoon takes a remorselessly binary, us-against-the-world approach, one of camaraderie and lockstep in an artistic counterattack against modern-

35 Zevon, “Excitable Boy,” lines 11-20 (New York: Asylum Records, 1978).

36 Muldoon, ‘Sillyhow Stride’, I.37.

day conformity, pomp and circumstance, and the corporatisation of the music industry itself. To defend the underappreciated art of his dead friend, Muldoon launches some fierce shells at the music industry, particularly:

...the gasbag, gobshite, gumptionless A&R
men who couldn't tell a hollow-body Les Paul with
double-coil
pickups pushed through a Princeton Reverb
from a slab of London Broil ³⁷

To identify with artists who refuse to sell out, Muldoon conspicuously blurs the boundaries between voices — Zevon's, Donne's and his own. Muldoon writes:

...The young John Donne who sets a Glock
on his dish in the cafeteria
knows that, even as he plots to clean some A&R man's clock,
his muse on dromedary
trots to the Indias of spice and mine...³⁸

This allusion to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's tribute to Donne:

With Donne, whose muse on dromedary trots,
Wreathe iron pokers into true-love knots;³⁹

reminds us that, like Coleridge, Muldoon is also “with Donne”, and that Zevon is so much “with Donne” that there is virtually no boundary between them. The “young John Donne” is seemingly dropped into the back cover of the *Excitable Boy* album itself, where we see, not a Glock, but a Smith & Wesson .44 magnum (a Glock *does* appear in

37 Muldoon, 'Sillyhow Stride', III.66-69.

38 Muldoon, 'Sillyhow Stride', I.13-17.

39 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “On Donne's Poetry” (1818), lines 1-2, *Literary Remains*, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge (London: W. Pickering, 1836) Vol. I, p. 113.

the first line of Zevon's, 'Rottweiler Blues'⁴⁰). The rebellious, maverick voice is yet another bond Muldoon establishes between them. Take, for example, the bold motto in Spanish, "antes muerto que mudado" ("sooner dead than changed"), in the upper right-hand corner of the 1591 portrait of the young John Donne,⁴¹ then listen to Zevon's song, 'Renegade':

I don't want to grow old gracefully
I don't want to go 'til it's too late
I'll be some old man in the road somewhere
Kneeling down in the dust by the side of the Interstate...
....
Next time I would rather break than bend⁴²

Muldoon champions Donne and Zevon for eschewing a life of numb, conveyor-belt conformity, for remaining outside of convention in order to stay true to themselves and their refreshingly irreverent art. They are the unflinchingly authentic, the "pill that can't be sugared", the sarcastic, keep-it-real, "yeah right" that appears throughout poem. Muldoon locks arms with Zevon against a world that shuns artistic genius for mass-marketed, blingy, pop culture.

Yet to retreat to a secluded space with Zevon, to roar with black humour at the rest of the world where every quotation from a Donne poem or a Zevon song becomes the subject of their inside joke, Muldoon outlandishly pushes the tropes of male friendship beyond the traditional comfort zone. Muldoon does not just jump into Zevon's camp. Quoting Donne, Muldoon jumps, like a forlorn lover, into Zevon's grave and bed:

Two graves must hide, Warren, thine and mine corse
who, on the day we met, happened
also to meet an individual dragging a full-length cross

40 Zevon, 'Rottweiler Blues', line 1. *Mutineer* (Wea: Giant Records, 1995).

41 Engraving of a miniature portrait painted in 1591 by William Marshall: Frontispiece to Donne's *Poems* (1635).

42 Zevon, 'Renegade', lines 5-8, 28. *Mr. Bad Example* (Wea: Warner Brothers, 1991).

along 42nd Street and kept mum, each earning extra
Brownie points
for letting that cup pass. The alcoholic
knows that to enter in these bonds

is to be free, yeah right.⁴³

These lines evoke Donne's 'The Anniversary', in which the speaker grasps that he and his lover will be kept apart by "two graves", but quickly envisions the possibility of their having one grave, so that death would be "no divorce":

Two graves must hide thine and my corse;
If one might, death were no divorce.⁴⁴

Muldoon jumps, like a lover, or indeed like the excitable boy himself, into the grave of his beloved friend. Although these lines alter biographical fact (Zevon has no "grave", as his ashes were scattered in the Pacific), they also hold a mirror up to life. Immediately after Zevon received his diagnosis, Muldoon wrote to :

Dear Warren, I just wanted to check in with you to say I'm thinking of you. I realise that it must be almost a year to the day since we met in New York and saw the guy carrying the cross outside Grand Central and didn't let it interrupt our conversation. I hope you're still in demi-semi decent spirits.
Love, Paul⁴⁵

Like Donne, Muldoon turns back time one year to celebrate the beginning of a cherished relationship as he contemplates its inevitable end. Pirating phrases from Donne's 'The Anniversary' Muldoon shuns the rest of the world to suggest that only his love "hath no decay"⁴⁶,

43 Muldoon, 'Sillyhow Stride', I.7-13.

44 Donne, 'The Anniversary', lines 11-12. *John Donne: The Complete English Poems*, ed. A.J. Smith (New York: Penguin Books, 1996). All subsequent references to Donne's poems are cited from this edition.

45 Muldoon, e-mail to Zevon (dated September 2002). E-mail letter held in an as yet unprocessed folder in the Paul Muldoon archive (Co. No. 784, Box 52), MARBL.

46 Donne, 'The Anniversary', line 7, p. 41-2.

and goes to great Donnean lengths to retrieve a lost companionship with the dead Zevon.

At first glance, it would be easy to blink right past Muldoon's lines—"The alcoholic / knows that to enter in these bonds / is to be free"—a line lifted right out of Donne's strip-tease poem, 'Elegy XIX: To His Mistress Going to Bed':

How blest am I in this discovering thee!
To enter in these bonds is to be free;
Then where my hand is set, my seal shall be.
Full nakedness! All joys are due to thee,
As souls unbodied, bodies unclothed must be
To taste whole joys...⁴⁷

Muldoon returns incessantly to his first bonding moment with Zevon to pinpoint exactly when their friendship first began. Imagining Zevon at his side, Muldoon is like the lover in Donne's 'The Good Morrow' who cannot imagine what life was like before their love:

I wonder by my troth, what thou and I
Did, till we loved? were we not wean'd till then
But suck'd on country pleasures, childishly?
Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers' den?⁴⁸

Muldoon whimsily rewrites these lines (and those from Donne's 'Song: Go and Catch a Falling Star') to suggest all the no-good that he and Zevon "did, till" they "loved":

Were we not weaned till then from Mandrax and mandrake
or snorted we in the seven sleepers' den

a line of coke, or wore long sleeves to cover the wreak
of injecting diacetylmorphine?⁴⁹

Near the end of the poem, Muldoon writes:

47 Donne, 'Elegy XIX: To His Mistress Going to Bed', lines 30-35, p. 124.

48 Donne, 'The Good Morrow', lines 1-4, p. 60.

49 Muldoon, 'Sillyhow Stride', II.68-71.

...every frame a freeze-frame
Of two alcoholics barreling down to Ensenada
In a little black Corvette, vroom vroom⁵⁰

The correspondence shows that Zevon and Muldoon barrelled down to Malibu for sushi on a Friday night in April 2002 and that, months later, Muldoon proposed flying out to Los Angeles for another outing.⁵¹ To cling, as Matthew Campbell suggests, “to the remains of the absent, the scant fragments of memory or memento which will not allow forgetfulness, since to do so will bring the poem to an often resisted closure”,⁵² Muldoon fancies his bond with Zevon as rooted not just in rock and roll but also in alcohol and drugs.

Casting out line after Donne line, Muldoon describes Zevon “playing piano for all those schlubs you could eclipse / and cloud with a wink”⁵³ and, later in the poem, writes:

Go tell court huntsmen that the oxygen-masked King will ride
ten thousand days and nights

on a stride piano...⁵⁴

Both moments evoke Donne’s “The Sun Rising” in which the lover chides that “busy old fool”, the “unruly Sun”, for its attempt to enter the bed where he and his lover lie. It is as if Muldoon wants to turn back the hands of time to make one little room, once shared with Zevon, an everywhere, and for all time. To get close to Zevon once again, Muldoon’s “amplification”—as Samuel Johnson said of Donne

50 Muldoon, ‘Sillyhow Stride’, III.76-78.

51 In an e-mail dated 26 August 2002. Zevon-Muldoon correspondence held in an as yet unprocessed folder in the Paul Muldoon archive (Co. No. 784, Box 52), MARBL. Given Muldoon’s Joycean allusiveness, one cannot help but read “little black Corvette” as an echo of “Little Red Corvette,” the 1983 hit-song by Prince, whose ‘Raspberry Beret’ Zevon sang a cover of on *Hindu Love Gods* (Wea: Giant Records, 1990), an album Zevon recorded with REM’s Peter Buck, Mike Mills, and Bill Berry.

52 Matthew Campbell, “Muldoon’s Remains,” *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, ed. Tim Kendall and Peter McDonald (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004) 177-8.

53 Muldoon, ‘Sillyhow Stride’, I.24-25.

54 Muldoon, ‘Sillyhow Stride’, II.47-49.

and the Metaphysicals—has “no limits”.⁵⁵

But what are we to do with this love that seems to know no bounds and compels Muldoon to forage about in Zevon’s grave and bed? And what are we to make of the astonishingly large number of Donne’s love lines cast toward a dead male friend? For one, we might point out that Muldoon was not the first poet to do it. In Edgell Rickword’s ‘Trench Poets’ (1921), a First World War soldier reads Donne’s lines aloud “to rouse” the dead and decomposing comrade at his side:

I knew a man, he was my chum,
but he grew blacker every day,
and would not brush the flies away,
nor blanch however fierce the hum
of passing shells; I used to read,
to rouse him, random things from Donne—
like “Get with child a mandrake-root”.
But you can tell he was far gone,
for he lay gaping, mackerel-eyed,
and stiff, and senseless as a post
even when that old poet cried
“I long to talk with some old lover’s ghost”.

I tried the Elegies one day,
but he, when he heard me say:
“What needst thou have more covering than a man?”
grinned nastily, and so I knew
the worms had got his brains at last...⁵⁶

That Rickword and Muldoon quote Donne not just in memory of, but directly at, their dead male friends may suggest something unique about Donne – as if there were (to quote Muldoon) something about Donne’s “lapel-grabbing, headbutting, street-wise”⁵⁷ masculine lines,

55 Samuel Johnson, “Life of Cowley,” *Johnson’s Lives of the Poets: A Selection*, ed. J.P. Hardy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) 13.

56 Edgell Rickword, ‘Trench Poets’ (1921), *Behind the Eyes: Selected Poems & Translations* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1976) 13.

57 Recalling his very first Donne-encounter as a secondary school student at St. Patrick’s College in Armagh, Muldoon writes: “Even when I first read Donne and

something about Donne's unquenchable obsession with death, that possesses a quality fit to shock the senses, and rouse—perhaps even *arouse*—the dead. As with Rickword, Muldoon chooses lines from a Donne poem in which the driving theme is a love so unlikely that an argument bordering on absurdity is required on the part of the speaker. In Rickword and Muldoon, the engagement with Donne's 'Love's Deity' with its refrain, "I must love her, that loves not me", takes unrequited, Petrarchan love to whole new levels of irony—not just because Donne's love poems are now read to a cherished male friend, but because that male friend is dead.

Even the poem's lines about Muldoon's late sister Maureen are addressed directly to Zevon – and in a kind of male coterie code: Donne's lines are intermixed with lines from 'MacGillycuddy's Reeks' one of the songs Muldoon and Zevon wrote together:

I knelt beside my sister's bed, Warren, the valleys and the peaks
of the EKGs, the crepuscine X-rays,
the out-of-date blister-packs

discarded by those child soldiers from the Ivory Coast or Zaire,
and couldn't think that she had sunk so low
she might not make the anniversary
of our mother's death from this same cancer, this same quick,
quick, slow

conversion of manna to gall
from which she died thirty years ago. I knelt and adjusted the sillyhow
of her oxygen mask, its vinyl caul
unlikely now to save Maureen from drowning in her own spit.⁵⁸

the other Metaphysical poets in Helen Gardner's great edition at the age of fifteen or sixteen – I have before me the copy I had in sixth form – I think I must have been struck by the lapel-grabbing, headbutting, street-wise aspects of the openings of these 'strong-lined' poems". See Paul Muldoon, "Getting Round: Notes Towards an Ars Poetica," *Essays in Criticism* (April 1998) 108-9. The edition of Metaphysical poetry to which Muldoon is referring is *The Metaphysical Poets*, ed. Helen Gardner, revised edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966).

58 Muldoon, 'Sillyhow Stride', II.5-12.

Maureen, a science teacher, responded to death precisely as Zevon and Donne did: with an outpouring of death-obsessed art, including an unflinching self-portrait with her surgeon's hand traced over her red, raw abdominal scar. Maureen's best friend claimed that "Maureen took all of her scientific knowledge and did so much research about her disease that she knew more than the doctors".⁵⁹ The image of Maureen with an "oxygen mask" inspires the "sillyhow" of Muldoon's title. The archaic word for "caul", the sillyhow is the "amnion or inner membrane enclosing the foetus before birth" or a portion of it "enveloping the head of the child at birth".⁶⁰ The sillyhow-as-oxygen-mask, the notion that in our beginning is our end, is found in Donne's final sermon: "Wee have a winding sheete in our mothers wombe which growes with us from our conception, and wee come into the world wound up in that *winding sheet*, for wee come to *seeke a grave*".⁶¹ In closing, if we, like Donne, "end / where we began"⁶² and return to the very first words of Muldoon's elegy – "I want you to tell me", a phrase repeated throughout the poem – we discover that it is not just a colloquialism, it is itself a reference to The Everly Brothers's lovesick, woe-is-me song, 'Walk Right Back' (1962):

I want you to tell me why you walked out on me
 I'm so lonesome every day
 I want you to know that since you walked out on me
 Nothin' seems to be the same old way.

Think about the love that burns within my heart for you
 The good times we had before you went away, oh me
 Walk right back to me this minute
 Bring your love to me, don't send it

59 Personal interview, Mary McIntosh, at Maureen's grave in Eglisli, Northern Ireland. Tuesday, 26 July 2011.

60 "caul, n.1". *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. November 2010. Oxford University Press. 24 January 2011 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/29083?rskey=xO7pGY&result=1>>.

61 Donne, *Sermons*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953-1962) vol. X, no II, p. 233.

62 Donne, 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning', line 36, p. 84.

I'm so lonesome every day...⁶³

Muldoon searches far and wide for a language with which to express his desire for the impossible return of someone he loved dearly. 'Sillyhow Stride' is not an "empty performance", not an overly cerebral poem that has, as Helen Vendler once claimed of Muldoon's poetry, "a hole in the middle where the feeling should be".⁶⁴ Donne and the metaphysical poets were accused by Johnson of being "men of learning" whose "whole endeavour" was "to show their learning". My observation is that readers continue to read (and misread) Muldoon this way.⁶⁵ 'Sillyhow Stride' shows that Muldoon is a poet who has the capacity to show his learning and show his feeling at the same time, a poet who has an astonishing amount of rock and roll and Donne finery coursing through his veins even as he mourns, and a poet who is –like Donne, Zevon, and his sister Maureen – deeply engaged in an artistic meditation on death.

63 The Everly Brothers, 'Walk Right Back', lines 1-9. *Instant Party* (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers, 1962).

64 Helen Vendler, "Anglo-Celtic Attitudes," *The New York Review of Books* (November 6, 1997) <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1997/nov/06/anglo-celtic-attitudes/?pagination=false>.

65 Samuel Johnson, "The Life of Cowley," 51.

CAROL RUMENS

FOUR POEMS

Fire, Stone, Snowdonia

Like the fireworks at the world's
beginning and, possibly, end,
traffic rips past our field, each cold

controlled explosion leaving
the giant white ARAF signs
bemused and englished

by the foot's mock-translation,
each tiny ton retracting,
on the bend, to a glob of snail-shell.

In the quarter-acre left him,
Boreas, unabashed,
works out. He could bucket the lot –

four-by-fours, the rolling rugs of pine,
the cottages limp in the nets
of Scottish Power. But for now

he's happy enough harassing
a riot of buttercups, kettled
in rye-grass left to itself

by a passing strimmer's witty
attempt at scenery.
Gold in a blizzard of silver -

and what more could you need
in the way of horizons?
The field has fallen castles

of dry-stone wall, dim mines,
velodromes, auditoria
slate-veined, fluvial, pliosive

under fern-hangings. Listen. Tune
out the traffic. Ear-ball the ipods,
of insects, the beetles' techno,

the crickets' maracas, the crackle
of wings while the fossil-fuel burns.
The shyest grass aims upwards,

but the ways of the insects
are horizontal:
Like us, they are slow kissers.

Like us, they phone-hack, thief
bonuses, see colours
others can't, and meet themselves

in sudden horribly familiar
eye-studded hammerheads, tarmac-black and fiery
as petrol, old and wicked as the wind.

CAROL RUMENS

To the Unknown Couple

You made that very ordinary thing –
love in a time of war.

When war-fires cooled,
you spun it over years of rationing,
the two-roomed rented flat, the two-door child;
a time-warp income which would never spring
new windows open, though the air was mild,
and youth had so much youth and peace and “All
You Need is Love” –

but what’s that lovely trick
of catching up if you were born
too soon?

The last dance saved, the dance-steps prove too quick:
he’s got dementia, she, arthritis; then
what does it matter there’s no cash to spare
for

first-time cruise or
second honeymoon?

I want them, though: I owe you all you wish,
who, with the twentieth-century, thinned to ash
without me, with no need of me.

How long

I’ve kept those ball-room gloves - even the drawer
they dreamed in, sweet talc-scented like the schmaltz
of Movieland!

And still I can’t come near
your blitz-flushed black-out nights, or see you waltz
into my not-yet life, humming the song
I never heard:

love in a time of war.

CAROL RUMENS

On Standby

Pass me that small pencil, sharpened nicely
At both ends, a pencil with two eyes,
And keen to work, up for it – screed or scribble.
The peeling laminate stripes, still visible
Give it a look of elongated wasp,
Which brings to mind school colours, and the tie,
Worn slack of knot, with dandy-ish irony,
By pupils in a cash-strapped Comprehensive,
And how, one day, piercing the long vague dream,
Some bright-voiced teacher talks about ambition
And one kid stares, and finds some point to grasp.
A pencil works its way. Its graphite cursive
Aspires. It knows hard graft and knuckled gloom,
A shadow flickering like a footballer's –
Designed for transfer. Slowly it wears down,
But scrapes our stories till its last rasp:
The desks gouged, cartoons and crossings-out;
Forensics of the rubber, and the bruise
In soft flesh of a rush of narrative.
However swift, it hand-crafts every letter:
However strained, its text grows out of us.
Who never chewed a pencil-top has never
Tasted words.

Pass me the pencil! yes,
I'll leave it by the keyboard, just in case...

CAROL RUMENS

After Horace

(From the Russian of Joseph Brodsky)

Fly with the waves, little ship-of-state.
Your sail's a crumpled rouble-note.
The republics scream from the hold's throat.
And the planks complain.

The plating buckles, the sea swashes,
The helmsman blabs about man-eating fishes.
The bravest mouth is sick of dishes
Thrown up again.

Mad as a bullet, with less of a goal,
The storm's got lost in its rock-and-roll.
Don't worry, old ship - even the gale
Hasn't a notion

Whether to rush to this side or that -
Four sides have become the norm, in fact;
This could be a Hyperborean's flat
Overlooking the ocean.

Fly, little ship, and don't be fazed
By cut-throat rocks. Your hull might graze
An isle, where crosses bleach on the graves
Of sailors; where

Bundles of letters are to be sold
By a surprisingly blue-eyed child -
Flower of a native's century-old
Love affaire.

Don't trust that congress of officers
Generally known as guiding stars;
Attachment to the idle mass
Can hurt your head.

Trust the one thing of solid worth –
The waves' democracy, its froth
Of lively speech, its contact with
The ocean-bed.

Some sail away to forget disgrace,
Some, to insult Euclidean space;
A third group vanishes without trace
They are all one.

For you, little ship which Borya steers,
There's no horizon other than tears.
Fly through the waves until you're theirs.
Fly on, fly on.

JACK UNDERWOOD

Sometimes your sadness is a yacht

huge, white and expensive, like an anvil
dropped from heaven: how will we get on board,
up there, when it hurts our necks to look?

Other times it is a rock on the lawn, and matter
can never be destroyed. But today we hold it
to the edge of our bed, shutting our eyes

on another opened hour and listening
to our neighbours' voices having the voices
of their friends around for lunch.

[POETRY]

RACHAEL BOAST

FOUR POEMS

St Anne-in-the-woods

All that's left are the street names
Chapel Way, Pilgrims Wharf, Angels Ground
but all the same I follow the clues
down into the valley, knowing my way
by innocent folly, until I find St Anne's Well,
a sorry sight, a stopped miracle,
to whom we owe our deep apology.

Rival to Walsingham and Canterbury,
matriarch of earth and water,
port and harbour, I inspect the curious offerings,
pulling aside lumps of broken concrete
that inadvertently make me
a well-wisher by reverse procedure,
a fool that rushes in, as sometimes we must.

RACHAEL BOAST

Reciprocity

Now you no longer drink so much coffee
you tell me you've nothing to say –
until, when I ask for your umbrella,
having made my visit, as always,
impromptu like summer rain,
you answer with a yarn – *and then,*
there was St. Martin, tearing his capella in half..

If *happiness is tedious*, how is it you're stimulated
only when I'm about to leave –
and so delay me, flagging up
that it's thresholds we love,
that tear us apart; our eyes looking
back and forth for the little chapel
we've entered in, that place we cannot stay..

RACHAEL BOAST

Deer Park

For a path is an un-going, congruent with the gritty stones,
a scar impressed across the far landscape, prepared ground.

Turning this way and that, it is a parting, as if the spirit of a stag
had cut in sideways, taking up the whole of the hillside.

We need more wild creatures in our landscapes –
at least I think that's what you said, you spoke so softly.

You spoke as a priest might speak – *what I do not have*
makes room for you; these feet are your feet; I have no roost,

no offspring; I am roughshod, an odd man in black
poking the chervil – and as I looked over at you

your eyes were steeped in distance, carrying the dark
in the openness of your heart, master of camouflage.

RACHAEL BOAST

Strength of Song

Here they come, the duet possessed,
you might say, by the charm

of their own silence. Two lamps
in the nether-light moving against

the tide, moving in little fucks of the water
through the all-in-one, over to you,

seeming to have noticed what they're up
against, confronted by the other-wise pull

yet settling for it nevertheless, into its dots
and dashes, into the unison of incessant script

as they repeat the upward lift of their necks
in that language with which they say

*bread for a song or song for our bread –
whatever. I'm Porgy, she's Bess.*

PETER MCDONALD

The Learning of Poetry

*Sheila Smyth Memorial Lecture
Methodist College Belfast
28th September, 2012*

Somewhere in the very dimmest reaches of literary obscurity, there is the figure of a man called Acron, an ancient Latin scholar and commentator, dry as the driest dust; it is so dark in Acron's vicinity that he can be made out hardly at all, and the notion of an even more shadowy figure somewhere behind him seems difficult to credit; but even so, there is someone there, known even less, who does not so much as possess a name, and is referred to only as Pseudo-Acron. This would appear to be another ancient scholar, who was either passed off, or passed himself off, as Acron for a time. He wrote on some of the same subjects, and made commentaries on some of the same writers. The one thing that is of any consequence whatsoever about this Pseudo-Acron, the sole feature of his long-dead face that still manages to catch a faint light, is a phrase of four words which he provoked (if he did not exactly produce them in this order) in relation to the Roman poet Horace: 'Poeta,' the words go, 'nascitur, non fit' – 'A Poet is born, not made'. Many think the phrase is Horace's own – I thought so myself until the other day – and indeed it sounds as though it ought to be: which was, perhaps, Pseudo-Acron's one flash of literary genius. At any rate, it has been the kind of Latin tag which has a very long reach into the future.

Are poets born, or made? Now, before considering the very reasonable case that poets are born *and* made, I want to spend a little time with the two extremes which are the alternatives here. First, there is the idea that a poet is someone profoundly special – differently attuned to the world, and to language – who is possessed by nature of certain gifts: it is this character who cannot be manufactured, or otherwise artificially brought into being. At the other end of the spectrum, we have the idea of a poet as somebody who is the product of a whole

cultural enterprise, fashioned out of life and society, literary tradition, knowledge, and careful training.

At first sight, ‘born or made’ seems like a pretty futile distinction; and it is rare, of course, to find people who are wholly committed to either of these two extremes. Where, after all (and we might as well start with the very best), would you place William Shakespeare on this born/made spectrum? In fact, the question occurred to a great poet who faced the very great challenge of being one of Shakespeare’s contemporaries – Ben Jonson. In the poem he published in the posthumous edition of his friend’s plays, Jonson gave ample praise to what he called ‘nature’ in Shakespeare, but went beyond what one might call native talent:

Yet must I not give Nature all: Thy Art,
My gentle *Shakespeare*, must enjoy a part.
For though the Poets matter, Nature be,
His Art doth give the fashion. And, that he,
Who casts to write a living line, must sweat,
(Such as thine are) and strike the second heat
Upon the *Muses* anvil: turne the same,
(And himself with it) that he thinks to frame;
Or for the lawrell, he may gaine a scorne,
For a good *Poet*’s made, as well as borne.

‘The fashion’ here is the thing you get only by fashioning – that is, making; and Jonson’s metaphor follows through into images of modern and everyday manufacture, for he takes us into the smithy’s forge, where iron is sweated over, beaten, then returned to the fire for the ‘second heat’ before being turned again on ‘the *Muses* anvil’. This is hard work, and presumably it is not to be learned without effort. (In a less formal vein, Jonson was to lament that Shakespeare hadn’t done quite enough re-turning of his originals, and said, of this poet rumoured never to have blotted a line, ‘Would he had blotted a thousand!’).

For Jonson, the ‘anvil’ is a metaphor; but, like all good metaphors, it only works because it feels real: there is, as there has to be, a literal

heft to the lines that leaves us in no doubt that their author had seen the inside of a forge or two. And Jonson did have, indeed, some experience of what we might call ‘the world of work’: among poets in English, he is the only one (so far as I know) whose apprenticeship qualified him to lay bricks. Most poets, we have to admit, have been strangers to labour; and if you look for a poet-plumber or poet-plasterer even today, you will look in vain. Still, we need to ask what Jonson’s metaphor means: how, for example, is poetic labour to be carried out? And how is skill at such labour to be learned?

In trying to answer these questions, we don’t need to leave the metaphor behind entirely, or not yet. We still speak loosely of creativity having (at some ideal point) a ‘white heat’, and when we do so, we imply that it is art’s task to make something out of the imagination in its molten state. How it does this can be matter for poetry in itself – there is, for example, Gerard Hopkins’s show-stopping finale to his (actually, rather odd) sonnet on ‘Felix Randal, the farrier’, which addresses the smith at ‘the random grim forge’ where ‘thou ... Didst fettle for the great grey drayhorse his bright and battering sandal’. In that line, it is possible to hear the poet himself at work, turning and re-turning his words and their component sounds – ‘fettle’ comes back in ‘battering’, but only after the triple-strike of ‘a’-sounds in ‘great gray drayhorse’. It all makes a wonderful noise; but the word ‘makes’ here is to the point, for Hopkins is not achieving any of his effects without experience or effort. Of course, Felix Randal isn’t a poet, but his kind of labour is being vicariously enacted in the work done by this poetry.

Being made, then, need not be any kind of second-best. For all that, poetry has a way of remaining just out of reach of earnest labouring on its own. Put simply, all the cleverness and mental application in the world does not guarantee the creation of poetry. Percy Bysshe Shelley famously wrote in his ‘Defence of Poetry’ about the ‘fading coal’ of inspiration – his metaphor, again, directing us back, if not to ‘the *Muses* anville’, at least to the fuel for the furnace – but the context of this is a fairly stern warning about trying too hard:

Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to

the determination of the will. A man cannot say, 'I will compose poetry'. The greatest poet even cannot say it: for the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness: this power arises from within like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our nature are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure.

Today, in any university's commercial prospectus, Shelley's 'A man cannot say, 'I will compose poetry'' would itself be unsayable. 'The determination of the will', and 'the conscious portions of our nature', are not sufficient here. 'I appeal to the greatest Poets of the present day,' Shelley goes on, 'whether it be not an error to assert that the finest passages of poetry are produced by labour and study'. Clearly, Shelley anticipates an answer along the lines of, 'No, not 'by labour and study''; but even this response might carry – however visibly – the implication of 'But not entirely *without* them either'.

It's hard to say what things are necessary for any poet to 'study'. Carried away just a little by wondering too seriously about this problem, W.H. Auden once went so far as to draw up a whole poetic curriculum in outline, which featured the learning by heart of copious amounts of poetry – in several languages – along with less obvious elements, including tennis and cookery. However much Auden might have had his tongue in his cheek, the fundamental point here was certainly one being made in earnest: poets need to know things, and have to apply themselves to the study of these things in a dedicated, and sometimes a demanding and hard way. The seeming eccentricity of Auden's curriculum was also designed to drive home a point: what poets need to learn is not the same as what other students of literature require – because of the way they are born (if you like), this is the special kind of 'making' they demand. And the point works the other way around, too: the study of literature does not demand that its students should be treated as though they were all poets in waiting.

That sounds like something very elementary, and may indeed strike some as platitudinous. But education, led by the demands of its examination system, has for some time now been working in a quite

different direction. That direction is mistaken, in my view, and has led to a lower level of understanding of literary art amongst those who are guided down its road; it simultaneously mystifies and debases poetry, under the delusion that creativity can be taught, and that any difficulties presented by poetry are better abolished than encountered. Yet a difficult poem does not stop being difficult once we begin to understand it; the difficulty is not a problem to be got over, but (if the poem is a good one, that is) a true expression of the nature of things. And one of the most difficult things of all, for many people, is simply this: a poem is a poem, and not a version of something else. All good poets have known this; yet it remains, as far as literary education and assessment are concerned, a disgraceful and unmentionable secret.

By the time the poet John Keats was sixteen, he had left school and embarked on a medical apprenticeship as a trainee apothecary. He had not yet written any poetry of discernible merit, but he was already a poet – at least, so he seemed to his friend Charles Cowden Clarke, who recollected (many years later) the early evidence for this teenager's gifts:

That night he took away with him the first volume of *The Faerie Queene*, and he went through it, as I formerly told his noble biographer, 'as a young horse would through a spring meadow – ramping!' Like a true poet, too – a poet 'born, not manufactured,' a poet in grain, he especially singled out epithets, for that felicity and power in which Spenser is so eminent. He hoisted himself up, and looked burly and dominant, as he said, 'what an image that is – *'sea-shouldering whales!'*

Clarke is absolutely certain that 'a true poet' is 'born, not manufactured'; but he is willing to claim just a little credit, all the same, for having introduced Keats to the poetry of Spenser (an actual book was involved, we should remember, which Keats did not possess and which was literally put into his hands; and Keats put himself to the good trouble of reading that book). Keats's reaction to what he reads is expressed physically; and this is emphatically not the reaction of what even 1813 would have understood as literary criticism. In fact, Keats's singling out of 'epithets' allows him to pass by any larger

concerns about what the poet Spenser might have meant by them. Those whales, for example, which seem to have brought Keats so vigorously to both physical and imaginative life: it would be very hard to know, from what Clarke remembers, that Spenser was actually not at all enthusiastic about them. Here is Keats's 'sea-shouldering whales' in its context, from the second Book of *The Faerie Queene*:

Most vgly shapes, and horrible aspects,
Such as Dame Nature's selfe mote feare to see,
Or shame, that euer should so fowle defects
From her most cunning hand escaped bee;
All dreadfull pourtraicts of deformitee:
Spring-headed *Hydraes*, and sea-shouldring Whales,
Great whirlpools, which all fishes make to flee,
Bright Scolopendraes, arm'd with siluer scales,
Mighty *Monoceros*, with immeasured tayles.

Spenser wants to send a chill down our spines with his collection of monsters of the deep; Keats ignores all of that, and enacts what he praises in 'sea-shouldring': 'He *hoisted* himself up, and looked burly and dominant'.

Clarke's anecdote is an important one, and not just as it concerns Keats. It suggests that poets can hear, see, and feel things in poetry which go beyond the usual reading of a text; it suggests, also, that they are acutely receptive to language, and that this receptiveness (played out on all the senses) is both an expression and a form of their learning. If you were looking for a competent assessment of the meanings of *The Faerie Queene*, Keats would not be your first port of call; but if you want to read deeply and appreciatively in the mature work of the poet Keats, you will need to know about Spenser, whose influence there is pervasive.

So, why bother at all about the question of whether poets are born or made? Well, one reason for thinking about this carefully is that it impinges on other questions about poetry which we need not to answer exactly, but to bear in mind constantly when we make poetry a part of the culture we pass on in the form of education. There are two things,

above all, to be remembered here: first, one cannot educate people into becoming poets, and we should be very wary about attempts to do so; and second, there are aspects of poetry that can be learned about with intellectual profit – not least, poetry itself is something that can be learned, and the capacity to enjoy it cultivated, by people who are not, and are never going to be, poets themselves. A good reader is not some kind of failed writer.

At this point, I intend to swerve into an area which – in the usual course of things – literary criticism is much better for avoiding: that is, I want my argument to take something of an autobiographical turn. One of the most disgraceful pieces of modern literary cant – a phrase to make the heart sink – is ‘Speaking as a poet, I...’. Usually, this means that ‘I’ am about to talk more or less complete rubbish, but you aren’t allowed to object, since ‘I’ am a poet and you’re not. Nevertheless, I suppose that it would be a bit worse than just disingenuous for me, at fifty years of age and with a *Collected Poems* under my (ever-widening) belt, to affect to be anything other than a poet. Unlike a good many of my contemporaries, I feel I can call myself a poet neutrally, as it were, since I don’t consider ‘poet’ to be necessarily a badge of honour; all too often, indeed, it is little more than the emblem of shame, and shamelessness. So, ‘speaking as a poet’, I feel that a great deal of the educational landscape is not one in which new poetry is likely to thrive, and that large tracts of it are in fact a wasteland in which true creativity is more liable to starve. Being neither an educationalist nor a politician, I cannot outline a scheme for putting this right; but I know I would be defaulting on the huge debt I owe to poetry, and to my own education in and about poetry, if I were to pretend these desert places were in fact green and fertile.

Although I am not an educationalist, I do have a certain amount of experience of education. Professionally, I have taught English at university level for most of the last thirty years; longer ago than that, I was myself taught about literature in this very place – and by (amongst others) Sheila Smyth, in whose honour this lecture series has been established. I shall have more to say about Sheila later, but for now I want to make one point which bears on my argument: when confronted by the combination of curiosity and wrong-headedness,

enthusiasm and blinkered-ness, of teenagers with some embryonic literary gifts, Sheila taught us both to evaluate poetry as good or not good, and to keep open minds about what we might and might not like. These two things – intelligent evaluation and the avoidance of prejudice – are by no means incompatible; but it is remarkable – amongst professional literary critics especially – how seldom they are in fact combined.

Why is this? The answer lies partly in the field of which I have most professional experience, that of tertiary level education. Some time ago – it is hard to say when exactly, but certainly by the time I was myself working as a postgraduate student in the mid-1980s – departments of English found literary evaluation to have become an embarrassment. What was then called – rather grandly, and very misleadingly, in retrospect – ‘literary theory’ was generally holding centre stage, and one of the many effects of this was to undermine the idea of what was called a literary ‘canon’ – books, that is, which it had been felt were important ones to know about, written by authors who were (or had once been) people of flesh and blood, living with others in a number of actual and knowable points of history. ‘High’ theory – roughly speaking, that of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida and his followers – always struck me as being ‘high’ only in so far as it was thoroughly intoxicated by its own counter-intuitive and counter-literary abstractions; and in due course, it became ‘high’ in the way that meat is high as it goes off; but its one solid achievement – its decisive blow for the worse to the culture of learning – was to reduce all kinds of literary works to mere ‘texts’ in Universities. One ‘text’ was as good as another for the purposes of what was known as ‘deconstruction’; and poetry, in line with this, was simply another kind of ‘discourse’. To pretend otherwise, one was told condescendingly again and again, was to be party to a discredited system of illusions, in which cultural control was masquerading as ‘value’. (Nobody ever asked, of course, why the theorists of that time were so obsessed with control and the structures of power; but a number of third-rate 1980s deconstructionists were to prove dab hands at institutional manipulation and control as they themselves rose through the academic ranks later on).

Suddenly, the whole idea of a core of literary texts and genres which one needed to know before being in a position to exercise critical judgement was old news, and evaluation itself was taken as a sign of attachment to the corrupt manners of some quasi-Leavisite *ancien régime*. As the rebel lecturers of the 1980s matured into the tenured professors of the 1990s and after, with departments of their own to run, the wildest intellectual excesses of deconstruction eventually went the way of ponytails and jeans at work; but the canon was gone – in the favoured critical language, it had been ‘put under interrogation’ (given the far-left European origins and affiliations of ‘theory’, this was either fatally unselfconscious language or downright sinister). With literature flattened into an unbounded landscape of ‘texts’, a loose kind of cultural history took root in English departments: this text illustrated that thing, and one’s history of choice could be traced through ever more involved labyrinths of the literary and what had once been the non- or sub-literary. ‘Literature’ (let alone ‘poetry’) had been replaced by ‘texts’. In a sense, a thousand flowers bloomed; but only in a sense, for we abolished any distinction between flowers and weeds – not to mention the dedicated cultivation of exotic flora made entirely from plastic.

Alongside all of this, or rather perhaps under its protective shade, a new academic subject was quietly being born, which would extend its reach quickly into school curricula. This was something called contemporary literature, and it was all too easy to define. ‘Literature’ was a word much bandied about in the promotion of all this; but it was a weasel word, for it had already been hollowed out, and was being used only for its surface effect. According to the circular logic (which no one by the 1990s any longer dared to question), texts being studied were literary *because* they were contemporary; literature, we were reminded repeatedly, could not be a matter only of dead works by dead authors, and these were contemporary *texts*; and it was somehow to be tremendously empowering for young people to know that living people wrote literature too, that because it was contemporary it was automatically relevant to their needs and interests, and that (here the cultural politics came in explicitly) this literature spoke from and about authorial personalities and identities which had often been marginalised in the past.

All of this was a witches' brew of politics and ignorance: sometimes, the best of cultural intentions were caught up in it, and I don't doubt that a number of people believed, and still believe, that by selling poetry to the (notoriously resistant) teenage market on the grounds that it's easily absorbed as relevant to a particular identity or social situation, or to the toils of British gender-, class- and race-identities, they were doing both the young people and poetry itself a favour. I do not, then, call into question the integrity or good faith of all these promoters of poetry; but I insist that they were, and are, fundamentally wrong in their assumptions, and that what they did – and are still doing – damages, instead of helps, poetry itself.

In Britain, A-levels and GCSEs inevitably took their bearings, more and more over time, from the departments of English in Universities. Perhaps this had always been the case to some extent; but over the last twenty years, the message from those departments – that the canon has gone, and that 'literature' is just another aspect of cultural control, which can be exercised or (that endlessly-glamorous word) 'subverted' through literary study – has given school syllabi the lead. Thus, contemporary poetry is often given at least equal weight with poetry of the past. I acknowledge absolutely that the needs of Universities cannot be the sole factor in determining the worth of particular A-levels; all the same, I can say with certainty that, for me as a Tutor in English at university level, the tendency for A-level English Literature syllabi to allow more than half of the texts studied to come from the twentieth century and after has been nothing short of disastrous. Let me be clear: the coverage and priorities embodied in A-level English are not useful preparations for a good English degree, and they put in place some assumptions which it is the task of university tutors to undo, if they still can. There is no real limit, of course, to the amount of ignorance which a clever young person can rectify; but she or he must first be convinced that ignorance of the literary past is something to be rectified, and not an irrelevance, any mention of which is at best pointless and at worse a form of insult.

All too often – and to enormously damaging effect – it is as though poetic history had been merely the warm-up act for the star attractions of the contemporary scene. It will not do, ultimately (though at

present it *has* to be done in these contexts) to set sixth-formers to study, say, Christina Rossetti alongside Carol Ann Duffy: the texts of these authors are not mysteriously comparable just because they are both poetry. Yes, both women published poetry, and one of them still does; but to set one beside the other for comparison is to create a grotesque sense of disproportion. If some students can see this horrible mismatch of achievement, we may be sure that they would be ill-advised to say so in their assessed work. Safer to concentrate on the way these poets were *made* by their societies (one society is held to be ‘ours’ – though ‘ours’ is a predatory and dangerous word here – while the other is ‘Victorian’, which is to say something you need to understand by seeing how far it is *not* ‘ours’); safer to do this, than to ask how good these poets are – how far, if you like, they are poets born. Obviously, I’m pretty sure I have an answer to this: Rossetti was a poet of enormous native talent and profound imaginative resource, who wrote largely against the grain of the age in which she lived; Duffy is a poet of very limited ability, whose writing depends absolutely on the grain of contemporary British society – if it were not able to work with that grain, it would have nowhere at all to go.

You may very well say all this is just my opinion. And yes, it is certainly just that. But remember, I may ask you to make good *your* opinion, and to be explicit about the grounds on which it is formed. I may even ask you to explain particular lines in the poetry you claim to value, and to tell me where exactly – in terms of style, of form, of diction – you believe that its virtue resides. If you tell me that its worth depends on what it is ‘saying’, or on who is saying it, I will have to conclude – with whatever degree of regret – that we are carrying on separate conversations. But then, I am much more interested in the force and feel of a phrase like ‘sea-shouldring whales’ than I am in (say) Spenser’s unconsciously-encoded idea of exotic sea-creatures in the context of later Elizabethan maritime culture, and its normative force on constrained discourse. And what you have to tell me about the Poet Laureate’s attitudes to this, that, or the other is – though doubtless much more banal, and certainly less esoteric – essentially information of that order. I am not saying by this that one is somehow ‘wrong’ to prefer Duffy to Rossetti; but I am saying that any critical intelligence would more or less force a comparison to be made, and

some kind of preference to be declared. To defend poetry in terms of what it is about, of where it comes from, or the perceived cultural or political utility of what it represents, is to dwell on its manufacture, and not its nature; it is to value poetry for things apart from poetry.

Yet that manufacture is increasingly important in the way we think about literature, and perhaps about poetry in particular. From all kinds of evidence, it would appear that the possibility of *making* poetry, as we would make carpets or boxes of ball-bearings, is something in which people would very much like to believe. Consider the currency of the word ‘workshop’: perhaps because it begins with the letter W, the *Oxford English Dictionary* takes this word little further than the 1980s, when it was common in discussion of practical matters in the theatre (its hideous verb, ‘to workshop’, goes back in that context to 1973, and Australia). But it is hard to move in poetic circles by now without running into both workshops and workshopping. As far as I can determine, a ‘workshop’ is a small gathering of people who have written poems, or who want to write them, in the presence of a kind of master-craftsman, who will be (another phrase that really needs some hard attention) a ‘published poet’, to discuss a submitted piece, and make suggestions about how it might be adjusted or otherwise improved. This might be an agreeable situation in all sorts of ways, and socially it is I’m sure often very stimulating, but it really is an odd kind of manufactory. The *OED*’s sense 2.a, ‘A meeting for discussion, study, experiment, etc., orig. in education or the arts, but now in any field; an organization or group established for this purpose’ bears witness to a kind of fading-away of what one might call actual labour, as it is gradually assimilated into art’s aspiration (or pretension) to be a form of ‘work’. An early poetic instance, caught by the *OED*, is Louis MacNeice’s sceptical take on a star of Soviet poetry in 1938: ‘The communist poet, Maiakovski,’ MacNeice wrote, ‘established a ‘word work-shop’... to supply all revolutionaries with ‘any quantity of poetry desired’.

If poetry is truly instrumental, and good in so far as it fulfils functions that are decided outside itself, then it might as well be manufactured. Nowadays, most participants in poetry workshops (who will, one way or another, be paying for the privilege) believe that they are enhancing

their own creativity, and learning their own originality. In fact, this is far from the case; and they are much more likely to be learning how to write in a style of acceptable mediocrity, in line with the prevailing styles of 'successful' poetry. Self-esteem may be boosted – though it may be lowered, too – in this process; and every now and again, published poems (or more) may even result; but that the art of poetry is being served in any way by this commercial form of art-therapy seems to me deeply implausible. And we should not forget that commercialism here is not incidental, but central: if workshops did not pay, they would not happen. The truth of the matter is to be found, as so often, in the bottom line.

Working as they do according to broad business principles, universities have seen the potential revenue value of creative writing, especially over the past ten years. 'Creative Writing' seems to belong in English departments – and it is true that, often, the only places where close verbal attention to writing, and a concerted attempt to teach students about the rhythms and rhymes of lyric poetry, are to be found in many modern English departments are in the creative writing workshops. But this should not cheer us; on the contrary, it is closer to an admission of failure in many cases. For what 'creative writing' is not – and never can be – is an academic discipline; it does not have access to the depth of critical argument, scholarship, philology, and literary history that have traditionally fed into the discipline of English literature. In the end – and quite rightly – 'creative writing' is about what 'works' (or doesn't 'work') in a particular piece; but to call this an academic subject in itself is to mistake fundamentally the meaning and purpose of the activity.

One way of thinking about the rise in Creative Writing is as the triumph of manufacture over that rarer, and much harder to define thing, inborn poetic talent. But just as the breaking up of the canon at university level fed down into education more generally, with the ascendancy of the contemporary and the removal of meaningful value distinctions between works, so Creative Writing's strength in the academy threatens to spread into school curricula. By this, I don't mean to object in the slightest to school students being encouraged to

write poetry – on the contrary, I think this is tremendously important; I myself owe a vast amount to just such encouragement from Sheila Smyth and others, and I am professionally committed to supporting and boosting it. But I do mean to deplore the idea that Creative Writing might become an assessable subject in schools, as though it were on academic parity with the study of literature. Already, Creative Writing has a foot in the assessment door in some A-levels; and yet, just as was the case when it entered university departments of English, that will not be enough. In the end, the very discipline which sees fit to offer Creative Writing a home will find its own proper home taken away, and the foundational principles of study will be first joined, then undermined and finally displaced, by the practices of the workshop.

You may object that this is mere scaremongering, and that there is not in fact an A-Level in Creative Writing; but there will be very soon, since one has now been announced by the AQA board. I quote from the AQA website:

In autumn 2012 we launch AQA's brand new A-level in Creative Writing, for first teaching in September 2013. We are the first awarding body to offer a Level 3 qualification in Creative Writing and believe we have produced something unique and innovative.

Developed in close consultation with higher education and with A-level and GCSE teachers, the new specification will:

- provide opportunities to study creative writing as a discipline in its own right, distinct from English studies
- complement but not overlap English Literature and/or Language study
- allow aspiring writers to trace a route through school or college on to higher education and into professional practice

Note, first, that 'close consultation with higher education': I think we can assume that the first ports of call here were not professors of medieval English, or experts on Shakespeare or nineteenth-century

prose. They will have been that new breed, Professors of Creative Writing, who are hardly likely to pour cold water on what is, after all, an A-level in their own subject. This amounts, of course, to a kind of insider-dealing, since the existence of an A-level will presumably fuel demand for the subject at university level: in this little circle, everybody (except, I would argue, the student) wins. Notice also the insistence on ‘a discipline in its own right, distinct from English studies’. As I have indicated already, I for one don’t even begin to accept the validity of this, though I despair of the willingness (and ability) of ‘English studies’ as a whole to contest the fraudulent claim; but worse, in a way, is the implicit promise that Creative Writing can ‘complement but not overlap’ A-levels in English. Here, a (for me) ghastly prospect starts to open up, of young people deciding that they want to take A-levels in English Literature, English Language, and Creative Writing. I can think of no educational menu less likely to produce a good student of English literature at degree level; and anyone who has the misfortune of having been born a poet would face an uphill struggle for development if she or he were to try such an academic combination.

I fear I must ‘speak as a poet’ just a little more. However, I want to do so in the context of real poetry, and return to the metaphor of the smithy’s forge as used by Jonson, Hopkins, and others. It’s vital to remember that the metaphor concerns true work: effort expended with patience and skill, and informed by long practice and learning, to create a thing of practical use. Now, for what it’s worth, that is also my definition of a poem, and of course my sense of ‘practical use’ might be broader than that held to by many people. Still, in the light – and the heat – of that metaphor, we should be able to take heart from a poem like this one, from Seamus Heaney’s 1969 collection, *Door into the Dark*, ‘The Forge’:

All I know is a door into the dark.
Outside, old axles and iron hoops rusting;
Inside, the hammered anvil’s short-pitched ring,
The unpredictable fantail of sparks
Or hiss when a new shoe toughens in water.
The anvil must be somewhere in the centre,

Horned as a unicorn, at one end square,
Set there immovable: an altar
Where he expends himself in shape and music.

These first nine lines of Heaney's sonnet were written when the poet was a young man, but their literal precision is astonishingly acute: 'the hammered anvil's short-pitched ring', and the anvil itself, 'Horned as a unicorn, at one end square' are more than just brilliantly literal (as the appearance of that 'unicorn' might be hinting). The poetry Heaney so powerfully creates here is also about the act of creation, and about the artist's expending himself 'in shape and music'. The smith is 'expending' and not not *expressing* himself here, notice; and in that phrase Heaney discloses a completely accurate sense of the whole relationship between an artist and the thing an artist must create. No true poem is ever an 'expression' of its poet. I do not think it is stretching things too far to point out that Ben Jonson's celebration of making (and Hopkins's, too) lie behind Heaney's verse, and that the poem is in this way a prime example of active tradition in poetry, harnessing the raw strength of imaginations long dead to create something new. Heaney's metaphor is simultaneously first-hand and learned.

This is not unusual for good poems, or for good poets. Knowing things doesn't just help; it's essential, for poetry is about learning and embodies learning. Although you cannot learn to be a poet, you can learn poetry, as well as learning about it, and the intellectual and cultural virtues of this are very considerable. Potentially, at least: for by making a fetish out of contemporary poetry and poets, and holding blindly to the dogma that they are more worth learning about (and even – though this would often be something of a tall order – learning) than poetry of the past, only intellectual and cultural stuntedness can be achieved.

I want to end by returning to my own experiences of learning poetry, and learning about it, when I was fortunate enough to be taught here by Sheila Smyth. As well as slightly shocking my too-precious adolescent sensibilities by actually making me look at verbal detail in the poetry I loved, and so demonstrating to me that all I was in

fact doing was admiring it from afar, Sheila was the first person to put into my hands contemporary poetry. I remember vividly being sent home to Dunluce Avenue one afternoon with three books lent to me by Sheila – utterly different books, both from each other and from the Keats-and-Shelley soup I had up till then been swimming about in: Philip Larkin’s *The Whitsun Weddings*, Thom Gunn’s *My Sad Captains*, and Michael Longley’s *No Continuing City*. I read and read, absorbed, bewildered, and excited. Sheila and I discussed these poets too, talking about what there was to like, and what was perhaps harder to like as well. No ‘study’ went on, and there were certainly no ‘I can do this too!’ moments of revelation. Instead – and I believe much more importantly – there was a dawning realisation on my part that if this can be done, it needs hard work and time; that as well as feeling oneself to be a poet, there is the long business of learning how to write true poetry, which may take a lifetime. Sheila’s good humour would never have allowed her to put it this way, but she taught me that there are no shortcuts to good writing.

In literary education today, we need to remember that there are, properly speaking, no shortcuts to the kinds of understanding which young people – from school pupils to University students – deserve to possess. Consciously or not, my academic generation has passed off shoddy goods; we have too often swindled the young out of what is most precious in literary culture. No shortcuts, then. As far as poetry is concerned, this means respecting its learning: the learning that all great poetry contains, the learning which in its turn it constitutes, and even – yes – the necessity of committing lines, stanzas, and whole poems to memory. It means as well that we must kick the habit of considering things like creative writing workshops as shortcuts to learning to write; and, as readers, that we must give up on the shallow reliance on poetic texts as shortcuts to an authorial personality. We need to forget about poets in that sense, and start learning again about poetry – for we may be sure that poetry readers are indeed made, as well as born. Our own age has not been short of the praise of learning – in a way, that has been endlessly (yet emptily) extolled; but it has been desperately reluctant to engage and invest substantially *in* learning, for fear of offending learning’s opposite. Yet that opposite needs to be named, however painful its naming might be to our contemporary

sensibilities: learning is meaningless without the acknowledgement and identification of ignorance. That is where all of us start, and it is worth the work of leaving behind – even for poets. I end, therefore, with Ben Jonson again:

[...] a good *Poet's* made, as well as borne.
And such wert thou. Looke how the fathers face
Lives in his issue, even so, the race
Of *Shakespeare's* minde, and manners brightly shines
In his well torned, and true-filed lines:
In each of which, he seems to shake a Lance,
As brandish'd at the eyes of Ignorance.

RITA ANN HIGGINS

Mr Grave Offence

(No one can hate like a good Christian.

– Patsy McGarry, Pat Kenny Show,

RTE Radio Dec. 8, 2011)

Mr Grave Offence
took a fence, took an inch,
took a crooked mile.
He croaked out
that hurt was only his.
Hurt is only mine ye swine
came the chorus.

He had high hopes
for the witches' tongue,
it was loose for too long.
He didn't want to gloss over
he wanted ectomy, ectomy,
a trophy with a last vowel
a viper verb
a sliding to Gethsemane.

Waiting in the wings
with a yard of isolation,
were the 'follow the money' mob
rent a mewling crowd of maggots
rent a crowd of mewling maggots,
same same, me love you long time money man.

They were all present
except the unmentionable;
leave her in the wilderness
came the chorus,
let's hope the dingoes come

and eat her tongue
it's been loose for too long.
Find her rhyme then
crown her vowel.
Toss her nothing
not even the odd nettle
to soothe her aching eyes.

MATT KIRKHAM

At Ardkeen

What a rain to come home to, fast as headlamps
flickering through oak and sycamore and ash.
It holds leaves' shadows, like the sap
holds them from the inside in their unique prints.
And what a meaning you give to the rain,
more than my memory of my time
of ash budding and bursting before the oak,
bare ash bark my morning grey,
the oak's your deeper sky
knotted with cloud before this cloudburst.

In a small house you can touch the storm
on three sides. Can see the lightbulbs shaking,
vacillating over their support
for the pineboard ceiling. I have my own frequency
of light, countless evolved,
for the better capture of the sun when it comes,
but it does not come yet. We're already in tomorrow,
getting in the right ground for remember
the rain that fell last night? To look for its moonlight
diffused over a flooded field, that second moon
hanging over the electric dining table,
lighting moments when the clock is a sound,
falling into line like fox tracks, not a number.

Three times reflected beyond your reach
a constellation grows under glass
and beyond the glass farm lights,
then street lights of the clustering dwellings
that call themselves the next townland
opposing me like an opposite season,
a territory that may as well be

across the other side of the now hidden sun,
loaded, landmarking and unflickering
even in this overfull weather,
effective as lightning that pins down
this map with a tower or a steeple,
the gap between them an archaic measure
of geography: rod or chain or how far
a yearling that grazed on leaves
of oak saplings, ash saplings, sycamores,
bay, yearling-adolescent, unruled,
might walk between saplings before winter.

FIONA SAMPSON

THREE POEMS

Conception

The small cat inside the hut,
looking out of the glass door
at the dog scratching that door,

places her paws together
with unconscious care
on the blue square of the mat.

Grace is a secret clockwork,
she seems to say. Which is true.
We'll never arrive at the truth –
I mean, we can never undress
right down to how we were
in our conception's new caress

when the membrane spilled the dreaming yolk;
when self first broke and entered self.

FIONA SAMPSON

By Ashen Copse

Follow the path
down through buttery mud
past flowering elder and hazel –
the dogs running ahead –

till the last farm
slips behind the trees
and you're alone
with a kind of wild fecklessness:

sunshine, rain,
and once again the crowsfoot
and lady's smock near the lane –

How these recur... a song
that some drunk you thought was done
starts up again.

FIONA SAMPSON

Hymn of the Coleshill Orchards

Mirabelles
and greengages
hang like lollies
in the trees'

three hundred lobes,
and wasps hang swooning
from the lobes
of fruit.

Your hand shifts here and there
among twigs, ripe fruit
and the corona
of insects.

What the wasps spoil
is sweetest;
they sow the ripeness
in the plum.

GARY MATTHEWS

The Hut-Circle

(a walk at Carn Brea 16th June 2012)

When we reached the top of the hill, Peter,
we were soaked.
you would have laughed at our efforts to shelter
behind the rocks and hear the poem
Penny read from a sodden sheet –
the one you wrote about the archaeologist
re-engineering a young mother
(ca 3 000BC) by fleshing
her fragile bones with wax.

Penny conjured you from granite,
newly baptised by the rain,
wise and sentient as Carn Brea
in your glistening coat,
but the wind snatched your words from her,
chased them through the grass,
round outcrops, across mine-yards,
down to the Saturday streets below.

In Praise of Wit and Whimsy

Billy Collins, *Horoscopes for the Dead*, Picador, £9.99

Kay Ryan, *Odd Blocks: Selected and New Poems*, Carcanet, £12.95

Former American Poet Laureates, Billy Collins and Kay Ryan write wittily and engagingly. Acknowledged crowd-pleasers, during and between poems, they have rocked the poetry boat by selling lots of books, especially Collins (200,000 plus). Latecomers, having achieved publishing success in their forties, they have declared an uneasy relationship with the Poetry Establishment, preferring outsider status. As if to underline this, both have spoken of their audience awareness (an unfashionable trait in modern poets) and the other a-word: accessibility.

Twenty-three years on from *The Apple That Astonished Paris*, Billy Collins is still tripping the light metaphysical, hamming it up, conceit by conceit; taunting the humourless Poetry Police with his omnipresent first person, his prosiness, his unserious intent, and, heaven forfend, his whimsy. In his defence, it's worth noting that the word whimsy derives from the Old Norse *hvima* : 'to have the eyes wandering'. Ergo Billy Collins eyeing /I-ing up a scene, his imaginings meandering (his self-awareness showing) via occasional cul-de-sacs, en route to a final insight. His books, averaging over a hundred pages, divided into four sections, could be prefaced: You are now entering Billy Collins's brain. Sense of humour vital.

In *Horoscopes for the Dead*, there are fewer laughs and more preoccupations with mortality, but he is still pushing the boundaries of willful playfulness. 'Gold', set in a sunlit bedroom, opens, "I don't want to make too much of this". The Collins reader knows there is a distance to go from here. Mid-poem, he throws in, "Again, I don't want to exaggerate" and, a few lines later, having invoked Aphrodite, concludes:

but the last thing I want to do

is risk losing your confidence
by appearing to lay it on too thick.

Let's just say that the morning light here
would bring to any person's mind
the rings of light that Dante

deploys in the final cantos of the *Paradiso*
to convey the presence of God,
while bringing the *Divine Comedy*
to a stunning climax and leave it at that.

High trajectory archness indeed. Less playfully, 'Florida' revisits the technique of a powerful early poem, 'Embrace', where, depending on the angle, someone with their arms wrapped around their back looks embraced, or straitjacketed. In 'Florida', the same startling movement from light to dark occurs when the sunglasses on a yellow rubber ducky, "a cool ducky, nonchalant/little dude on permanent vacation", become the glasses of the blind:

and him a poor sightless creature swiveling
on the surface of the ruffled water,
lost at an intersection of winds,
unable to see the cobalt-blue sky,
the fans of palmettos, or the bright pink hibiscus,
all much ablaze now in my unshielded, lucky eyes.

There's a different duck in 'Silhouette' which opens, "There is a kind of sweet pointlessness". Apt, since the poem finds him outdoors, his right hand making the duck's head of an indoor party trick. In order to try to stop the duck jabbering, he turns it to him and talks to it. What becomes clear is that he has retreated from indoors; from news of war on the radio, and preparations for his birthday dinner (the hands of time being as unbidable as the duck). This poem exemplifies Collins' use of whimsy as a stay against the darker stuff. OCD-ness ("The Straightener") and 'Memorizing "The Sun Rising" by John Donne' (it takes all day) tease the reader by hinting at a few 'Do not enter' rooms

in Billy Collins' head.

Attempted take-downs by reviewers include "Collins tries to sound weathered and blokey, but he is in fact one of the most slickly packaged poets around". and "Collins claims to think some weak-minded things in his poems, but he isn't stupid. He's a very shrewd writer of very popular poems". Aside from being the sort of comments that make booksellers hang their heads in despair, they patronise Collins' fans. Whether the 'I' is Collins, or an artfully conjured alter ego, is immaterial. The persona has been sustained, and a moreish, if escapist, persona it has proved to be. It would be churlish to deny the comforting decency of 'Cemetery Ride' where he cycles between headstones, plucking names as though they were wild flowers, attributing characteristics, fleetingly resurrecting a whole community with imagined discourse. Balm has its place in poetry, or ought to.

The sense of glide in these train-of-thought poems owes much to the elegance of the writing. The achieved momentum and the often well-sketched, sometimes exotic, locations amplify the sense of journey. The why-would-ya? that hangs over the writing and reading of such flights of fancy is offset by the minor miracle of how often the reader supplants the Collins 'I'. It is impossible to read 'Simple Arithmetic' without imagining oneself sitting on the gray wooden dock, subtracting the modern world from the scene. That come-on-in congeniality is central to his popularity, and no mean feat.

The book closes with 'Returning the Pencil to Its Tray', a mock (one hopes) envoi. Long may he continue to rub modern poetry the wrong way by making a meal (snack, feast or spun-sugar confection) of the quotidian.

Unlike Collins, whose collections have been published by Picador since 2000, Kay Ryan is a newcomer to the British Poetry scene. Given the quality of her work and her popularity in the States, it has seemed for the past decade that poetry publishers were missing a trick, a big one at that. At last, Carcanet have moved in with their publication of *Odd Blocks, Selected and New Poems* (an overlapping, but different Selected and New to that of her Pulitzer Prize winning *The Best of*

It, 2010). The selected poems are drawn from the last four of her six collections.

In contrast to the gleefully uninhibited Collins, Ryan poems are much leaner, more reserved affairs; stripped of the first person, the short lines get shorter. Tellingly, there's even a poem called 'That Will to Divest'. She can sound didactic and sage-like as well as wickedly funny, especially where grim meets whimsy (grimsical?). Coinages, clichés, sayings, proverbs, fables, fairy tales, *Ripley's Believe It or Not*, Wikipedia and quotations are all Ryan fodder. Dictionary poems such as 'Vacation' and 'Crib' are meditations on a single word and its multiple meanings. There are elegies for WG Sebald and Joseph Brodsky. Her vocabulary is wide-ranging, often satisfyingly surprising or weird. As with Collins, analogies abound. Ryan attributes her belief in the importance of analogy to her many years as a teacher of Remedial English.

Though eschewing traditional forms, Ryan deploys rhyme to witty and sonorous effect e.g. the "four-oared" and "ill-afford" of 'Turtle'. That she admits to applying the bass pedal to her rhymes at public readings is a measure of her own delight in the sounds and their crowd-pleasing payoff. 'Recombinant rhyme' is her term for these recurring snippets placed along any part of the short Ryan line. But the manipulation implied by this term undervalues the generative role of rhyme in her work. A better genetic analogy might be: rhyme and reason are the twisted strands from which the poems issue.

Her brevity and precision guarantee the thrill of knowing that every word is freighted with meaning, starting with the title. 'Corners' is a particularly unsettling fable. It opens "All but saints/ and hermits/ mean to paint/ themselves/ toward an exit" and the reader is pulled up at the word 'paint', delightedly nailing the title. Nineteen lines of pretty colours and slight, but surreal movements (of the doors and windows of the house, to the left) precede the grim outcome:

Only toward evening
and from the
farthest corners

of the houses
of the painters

comes a chorus
of individual keening
as of kenneled dogs
someone is mistreating.

‘Home to Roost’ (“all/ the same kind/ at the same speed”) was co-opted as a 9/11 poem. Indeed many of her poems could function as universal pegs for grief, loss and assorted angsts and personal struggles. Or perhaps Ryan’s thin poems are better thought of as freeze-dried vials, to be reconstituted by the reader. The required diluent is an individual blend, but must include GSOH (light and dark), receptiveness to irony, wit and whimsy, plus a life’s worth of emotional and cultural baggage. Hence her poems become personalized affairs, all the more significant and memorable. The title poem of her last full collection (*The Niagara River*, 2005) could stand for any sleepwalking towards disaster scenario, such as the current financial crisis.

Odd Blocks closes with the new ‘The First of Never’, occasioned, one imagines, by the death in 2009 of Ryan’s partner of over 30 years, Carol Adair. For those of a certain age, the inevitable soundtrack to this poem is an old love song, ‘The Twelfth of Never’. The poem wills ‘Never’ to be a day that, having risen, can be out-waited. It ends:

So we wait.

That’s the
only time
we’ve ever known:

it should be
getting late;
she should be
getting home.

The quiet, matter-of-fact, flat diction of this poem yields an

astonishing emotional jolt, even without bearing in mind the lyrics of the song: “I’ll love you till the poets run out of rhyme. Until the Twelfth of Never, and that’s a long, long time”.

One measure of the consistent brilliance and memorability of her poems is that the Ryan fan closes *Odd Blocks* with a sense of disappointment, a harrumph, even. Why no ‘Hailstorm’ or ‘Bad Patch’? What about the elfin tailor or the black-suspended tulip magnates? Ditto many others from her last three collections that didn’t make it through the selection process. By all accounts, Ryan delighted the Aldeburgh Poetry Festival in November 2011, her first appearance there. One hopes that British and Irish audiences will see much more of her, soon.

Ryan and Collins are the type of poets ‘discovered’ by intelligent readers who have otherwise felt excluded from poetry, the added frisson being that they don’t come with any elitist poetry baggage. Many will be content to settle there, but the potential to create a wider interest in poetry is something publishers and booksellers should be alert to. Part of the allure of the mercurially-minded Collins and Ryan is their preoccupation with thinking about thinking. They belong to an unacknowledged subset of brain scientists, groping, metaphor by metaphor, never mind trying to come to terms with assorted paradoxes. Zeno’s arrow gets an outing in both books. Procrastination is duly picked at in ‘Thieves’ (Collins) and ‘Edges of Time’ (Ryan). Such intelligent enquiring has a pleasantly dizzying effect on the reader.

Despite their differing styles, the flaneurish cottonwoolery of Collins vs the finicky, forensic Ryan, both have the same ‘what’s-it-all-about?’ agenda. Both manage to take the reader out of his/her self. In an era of much whingeing, the dark-tinged wit and whimsy of these collections proffer sweet release.

JEAN BLEAKNEY

Nothing The Thing

Tom Paulin, *Love's Bonfire*, Faber, £12.99

In one of the translations, or versions, that make up the central section of *Love's Bonfire* ('Poems after Walid Khazendar'), the figure is described as dragging its shadow "like it's a ladder / or a sack stuffed with half-bricks". This shadow is also related to language, and, more specifically, the language of poetry: the title of the poem, 'Humping the Word Hoard', plots coordinates that need no explaining, in an Irish context at least. Combined with the frequent forays into dinnseanchas (Ballykinlar, Drumquin and Eglisish all feature) and Paulin's trademark use of the vernacular, this hint of affiliation might suggest that *Love's Bonfire* is a book of roots and rooting. Memory, too, plays a key role, with current events or stimuli often serving to drive the poet back into full (and colourful) reconnections with the past.

For example, in 'Something Said' a pat piece of business speak – "some phrase like *level playing field...his / trying to unpack this*" – gives Paulin "the cue / to leave the room no disattend the meeting". The bulk of the poem is devoted to an intense evocation of "that struggling throughother pit / village where we lived for half the 80s", and the specific form of address ("you know that struggling throughother pit / village..?") furthers the impression of, if not exactly "recollection in tranquillity" (what's remembered is harsh and violent), at least a feeling of solid substance. Paulin's tone is triumphant – "all this and more I got from something said / by a young man in a pale blue suit"; what seems to be at stake is memory's richness, its power to conjure, fused with the capability of concrete language ("railway lines allotments dry sooty / slagheaps") to capture and contain what memory offers, as against the feeble abstract jargon of the "young man in a pale blue suit". No ideas but in things.

However, what seems pure celebration in 'Something Said' takes on more complex resonances when viewed in the context of the rest

of the collection. Heaney may be one point on the spectrum but Beckett is another, and many of the poems explore situations in which characters are either stuck in cycles of revisitation or can't connect with the present

– “this being here and then not quite”, as it's put in ‘Daisies / Du Barry's’. ‘The Sail, Again’, another of the Khazendar versions, circles in a grim Beckettian purgatory that is both personal and historical:

was it all for nothing the thing
we launched that fell back on us?
- then finish over and done with
but now's the time to start over again

And in ‘Sans Souci Park’, the house – one of many ramshackle dwellings in the book – is described as keeping itself ‘on course’ by clinging to odds and ends, “the scrimped and saved”; its rooms are filled with “furniture that says that's that – / end of story finis”. Here, life doesn't seem to be lived so much as existed through, and already over: a game of waiting for the end amongst minimalist objects that make no pretence at reassurance or grounding. (Quite the opposite, in fact: the kitchen clotheshorse is a “cloth and woolly blade” that “hangs from the ceiling above our heads”, the house a place in which “old people live stealthily”.)

Language, too, keeps felt, physical ‘reality’ at a distance: the metaphorical language of poetry (and visual art) works to transmogrify one thing into another without arriving at clear definition. Rather, comparative figurations merely steer the mind from the object; what works as recovery in poems like ‘Something Said’ and ‘Daisies / Du Barry's’ (“see my mind's begun to jump / back over a little ramp or hump”) can also go the other way, setting off a chain of imperfect ‘something elses’:

The stream clem to a trickle
that looks like a back alley
though it makes not a sound

and though I like the paint's oiliness
– almost oiliness I should say
for it's dried – matt – it isn't liquid
and it's long ceased to be sticky
– 'sdulled a bit flaky
which may be why the name Crumlin
comes and goes in my mind
like a bald man wearing shades
– tattoos show on his hands
when he takes his gloves off
– but those walls those doors and roofs
enclose dead space

In 'Letter of the Law', tropology is openly questioned: "do we say for a joke the ears of corn / leapt like deer on a mountain?" And in 'A Noticed Thing', the 'given' or inevitable status of the symbolic is revealed as a sham: "I happen on it this hot humid Friday / like the way you find a *symbol*/ in a poem or a novel". Meaning is not built in so much as chancily imposed, whether by writer or reader.

Like Elizabeth Bishop, Paulin undergoes or enacts a constant process of self-correction, without yet feeling that he has ever found either *le mot juste* or "what somewhere is called *the real presence*" towards which this right word ought to lead. His style is fitful, his engagement with the Irish tradition of dinnseanchas (a word on which he claims "no rights of property") tricky: he gives the correct etymology without enabling this to ground the speaker in the place. Ballykinlar is both "place of the candlestick" and a "camp and barracks", temporary installations that, like the sheds in 'Shades Off, No Sheds', have "none of the feel the barm / that belongs to a dwellingplace". Continually, the poems focus on things that are perched on the land rather than intrinsic to it: in 'Marked Already', "they're building a bungalow like a barracks / way above the bogland...it's over the bogland this bungalow"; in 'A Spruce New Colour', desire for the authentic is checked by the recognition that what was thought to be the authentic original is itself merely a layer in a palimpsest:

...just sometimes I feel the wish

to drive through the village again
and see the old bridge
– or the bridge that stood in for the older one

Even Paulin's beloved "scutching vernacular" doesn't seem willing or able to do its job: it's frequently introduced as a minor variation on the "polite" arm's length of Standard English ("Some hairs off a donkey / – or some hairs off of a donkey"), and, in 'Sans Souci Park', is deliberately warded off, prevented from bringing the smack of local 'real' to the precarious, fragile existence described there: "I won't to be polite / call this a prog or a feed".

In 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words', Wallace Stevens wrote of "the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality". That pressure from the outside, though, is an indispensable component in the formation not only of imaginative responses to the world, but the very sense of being in the world: we need the touch of the other to confirm ourselves to ourselves. In *Love's Bonfire*, Paulin explores what happens when this touch is taken away: it's a profoundly ghostly book, and one in which both language and the-self-in-language skite over the surface, searching for ballast. This is not a new concern, but it remains a relevant one, both politically and existentially – as much to those who are strategically unaware of it (the young man in the pale blue suit) as to those (the poet, the refugee in 'Stateless Twice Again') who couldn't avoid it if they wished.

MIRIAM GAMBLE

Versions of Pastoral

Kerry Hardie, *The Ash and the Oak and the Wild Cherry Tree*, Gallery, €11.95

Michelle O'Sullivan, *The Blue End of Stars*, Gallery, Pb. €11.95, hb. €18.50

Kerry Hardie has made the pastoral elegy her own in six collections, beginning with *A Furious Place* in 1996. Her landscapes achieve immediacy because of the constant impress of her own mortality: "Being here, Now" is the task these poems wish to achieve. In her last collection, *Only This Room*, the consolation offered by the change in light and seasons gave way to an ascetic thirst for solitude and silence. This asceticism carries through into *The Ash and the Oak and the Wild Cherry Tree* where there is a studied plainness about the language and the moments told.

This is the frank quiddity that comes with age. In the opening poem, her husband's hesitant and occasionally stooped body reflects her own, an uncomfortable fact she'd like to reject:

This mirror his form holds to mine
Is not how I want things to be

but there are no other options:

The shadow of the pine
lies stretched and sprawled across the trodden sands.
The waterline creeps close ('Sixty')

Hardie has always painted her landscapes in watercolours, the wet seeping in to her free verse, mainly unrhymed, lines. There are few poems that don't name a colour and here she favours sombre, mortal, tones: grey, red, black, white and blue. Nor do any mythic beings cavort in Hardie's pastorals, "there's hardly a dryad left in Ireland" as she reports in one poem, and God is most present in the livery of bees. When a red dog shows up in the forest, 'Dog' is what she calls out after him. And yet, while to praise the 'dogness of dog // into woodness of woods' is her declared aim, traces of magical thinking remain.

They are there in the unearthly scent of wet hedgerows, 'like the fragrance / from the body of a saint' ('Grace') or the anticipation of deliverance when awaiting sails at the Bay of the Dead ('The Inmost Sea'). The speaker of 'Envyng No One' describes herself as 'lonely and happy / as one of those Zen solitaries' and herein, I think, lies a problem that's at the heart of this collection.

In an early poem, Hardie described herself as possessing 'a lean, long-boned spite . . . / against my religious lineage, the rites expected of me - ' ('She Goes with her Brother to the Place of their Forebears'). That antagonism towards a Church of Ireland paternalism lent a great energy and determination to her search for an alternative avatar in beast or fowl. With a doctrine of acceptance replacing such scepticism at the heart of this theological temper, some of the revelations can sound trite. It seems axiomatic that death 'cancels the contract of life, / it stifles our birth-howl with clay' ('Sixty'). And while Hardie's version of Stephen Dedalus's walk out on Sandymount Strand also gives rise to credible immensities on the shoreline, these are shrugged off in the closing question and answer:

I was a dot, a tiny concentration
of blood and bone and intelligence
moving about

under all that vastness. Isn't it strange?
At once so particular
and so enormous ('Waking Up')

I also fear this solitariness has lost the antiphonal quality achieved in her earlier narrative poems where some sense of rural economy and community crept in to her pastorals. There used to be beet fields and sheep marts to remark, and letters to write. Nature, in these poems, is gorgeously elemental but while 'the meadow grass shines' and 'the bull roars in Daly's barn' ('Nothing is Simple') her title might be applied with more force to the complexities of mixed farming than the questions she directs to 'friend god'. How long can the Irish pastoral preserve its bucolic landscapes from European agricultural reform?

Michelle O’Sullivan’s debut collection occupies a similar terrain to Kerry Hardie’s. There are rivers, cloudscapes, the purling waves of the sea, and birds flock here too: goldcrests, and crows in the elder tree. Yet these are not poems that celebrate flora and fauna for their own sake. Instead the consciousness that the landscape itself is articulate, and perhaps has already been best heard and described in someone else’s art, gives these neat stanzas their intensely rhapsodic force. The act of listening, and the art of interpreting the silent gesture, recurs. Even a hare on a ridge is a receiver of sorts, ‘the soft turn of her ear nuzzling the air, / interpreting something only she could hear, / and her leg clasped to the ground / as if testing it’ (‘A Body’s Language’). O’Sullivan declares her own aesthetic best in ‘An Unknown Blue’:

I want to be still
as a folded note
 left on a table
before sunrise,

silent as the crease
concealing words
 that will not
have been read –

for all intents unopened;
just a strand
 shimmering
on the dark edge of a knife (‘A Body’s Language’)

This deconstructive logic frees O’Sullivan’s pastorals from the inventory of every weed and wader that can carry the stale whiff of museums out into the field (I, too, am guilty). It also liberates her from the curse of the primal hoard that turns up so routinely on poetic digs in the West. In its place the landscape becomes at once immediate and textual – its destination in her poetry already recorded at the moment of vision: ‘A storm in the distance scribbles the air’ (‘Watching for Signs’).

If difficulties in communication provide O'Sullivan's main subject, there are yet some gorgeous phrases to be found along the way: 'a pheasant streaks the hedge, / her feathers tweed the space she moves for flight'. In a couple of poems, O'Sullivan stretches her sentence over several tercets with a nice complexity gained for the syntax. This suggests an analytical intelligence that might reward bigger stanzas in future. 'Sketches for Vincent', a narrative sequence at the heart of this collection, works well enough as a rondo on the progress of a love affair, but to use such a famous life to record an intensely introspective relationship seems too conventional and inappropriate a vehicle. That said, this is an impressive debut collection marking O'Sullivan as a poet with the intelligence and skill to make her pastorals her own.

SELINA GUINNESS

Acts of Quiet Reverence

Moya Cannon, *Hands*, Carcanet, £9.95

John F. Deane, *Snow Falling on Chestnut Hill: New and Selected Poems*,
Carcanet, £12.95

I will admit to being rather unforgiving of partial sentences about Apple products as poem titles and of the use of the word 'quotidian' without serious justification. Cannon's poem, 'Yesterday I was listening on the iPod', and 'the small, quotidian gifts' of 'Still Life', therefore, caused me some difficulty. *Hands* succeeds not when announcing its self-conscious attempt to capture and record the beauty of eating blueberries and listening to Vivaldi, but when it veers off course and loses the will to celebration in the attempt at description. I know nothing about sea urchins, but their appearance, in Cannon's titular study, as 'sunbleached, rosy sea-lanterns' makes me want to. The speaker of 'Death' describes her ninety year-old mother, whose 'greying brood' have arrived from near and far. I love the short line, 'Her room is full of stifled mobile phones'. *Hands* meditates with conscious reverence on ordinary rituals, absence and presence, and daily acts of grace. But in lines like these, Cannon conveys with great economy and simplicity the emotional tones of these experiences: the claustrophobia of family gatherings, the solemn silence in the anticipation of death, the impossibility of detachment from the demands of a life outside the mother's room, and the pretence of not being distracted from last things. It is not 'life's blessed rhythm' that delights me in these poems, but the fact that 'Agatha Christie's *Herkules Nya Storverk*' takes its place beside the Bible, the Koran, and the Siddur in the chapel of Stockholm Airport. No doubt this says much more about me than it does about Cannon. Though I will admit to a small swelling of the heart on seeing 'a fillet of light in the dusk' ('Farrera Light'). In 'Driving back over the Blue Ridge', 'the sun has decanted itself /into a single maple tree', and from within my sunless urban office this, too, gives me pause. A single sentence of thirty lines, the title poem imagines the many lives held in a pilot's hands on a flight across the Atlantic, proposing that to be human is 'to be borne

up, improbably, over an ocean'. This acknowledgment of chance and precariousness is a necessary counterweight to the collection's exultant uplift.

John F. Deane's *Snow Falling on Chestnut Hill: New and Selected Poems* is similarly engaged in acts of quiet reverence, but with explicit attention to Christian faith and practice. As titles such as 'Christ with Urban Fox', 'Canticle', 'Acolyte', 'Madonna and Child' and 'Bead after Bead' suggest, Deane's poetic career is a spiritual pilgrimage, one undertaken with courage and imagination. In these collections Christian scripture, liturgy, and music provide not only consolation but a means of paying attention to the world – its cruelty and violence as much as its beauty. Deane's newest sequence, 'Snow Falling on Chestnut Hill', muses on human nature, on whether flesh is salt or stone, grass or snow, all the while 'riveted/ by the outstretched arms of the Christ-man'. A host of composers – Mozart, Handel, Bruckner, Górecki – populate the poetic symphony from 'Overture' to 'Coda'. These latest poems are much longer than Deane's earlier work and each features a variety of line lengths and stanzas shapes, including prose sections, quotations from choral works, poetry, and liturgy. All but the last conclude with a colon. The effect is at once more fragmented and more unified, the disharmonies of the individual poems resolved in the circular orchestration of the book. The poetic voice is explicitly 'of Ireland, its dirge and requiem, its adagio' and its 'dismal harmonies' ('Pastoral Symphony'). Deane brings the weight of religious ceremony and tradition to bear on private recollection, a nearby landscape, and familial grief. Snatches of hymns and Latin canticle drift into memories of journeys and childhood.

If Deane's poetry is poised in the act of transcendence, it is also 'a story-book/ of hen-feathers, gristle-spit, and bone-claw'. In neologisms like these Deane reveals the world from which his love of Christian ritual might seem to be in revolt; a mucky world, where darkness falls daily and creatures improvise survival. The lovely single-sentence sonnet, 'The Red Gate', concludes, 'the self-betrayed economies of governments/ assault you so you may miss the clear-souled drops/ on the topmost bar that would whisper you peace'. At times the earth 'will seduce you/ back into grace' ('Report from a Far Place'): an imperative

for the practice of sensitive observation. But most days, the world is cruel and full of ghosts and God is strange and silent. There is self-deprecation, too, in Deane's 'self-portrait/ with grief and darkening sky'. Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'our intent, depressive scholar/ who gnawed on the knuckle-bones of words' ('Artist'), casts his shadow over Deane's work, from the imagery and anxiety of the early poems to the sprung rhythm of his latest volume, the 'slimed creatures spittle-boned and fin-fleshed' ('Who have Business with the Sea'). *Snow Falling on Chestnut Hill* concludes that 'love exists, and glory beyond our petty flesh,/ our grubby hands, our murky secrecies'. As if to prove this grubby reality, the following stanza shows a moose 'sprawled in death on the roadside; [...] her long/ ungainly head splattered with blood, // her swollen belly peppered with ticks, dung/ oozing onto the road'. In Deane's descriptive attention to creatures clumsy and exposed in death there is a tenderness for graceless existence – a tenderness that ensures that the heavenward flight in these poems remains tethered to the grubby world.

GAIL MCCONNELL

History and Geography

Eamon Grennan, *But the Body*, Gallery, €11.95

Harry Clifton, *The Winter Sleep of Captain Lemass*, Bloodaxe, £9.95

In *But the Body* and *The Winter Sleep of Captain Lemass* respectively, Eamon Grennan and Harry Clifton have produced collections impelled by their returning to Ireland – Grennan intermittently, from the US, Clifton after years of living abroad. As such, both collections are works of homecoming, though their moods and methods are strikingly different, occupying, in fact, the two sides of a seam which runs down the middle of Irish poetry. History and geography may be inseparable in many Irish and Northern Irish poets, the one often being written through the other, but Grennan and Clifton have different instincts, Grennan majoring in Geography, Clifton in History. Grennan's *But the Body* takes an Epicurean view of the primacy of the present moment and is rooted in a materialistic love of the here-and-now, the landscapes of Ireland featuring heavily in his muscular pastorals. But if Geography is the discipline of Romantic pastoral, History is rather more worldly, and throughout its ninety-five pages *The Winter Sleep of Captain Lemass* is fuelled by an insistent historical awareness and a wryly political wit.

“The word ‘because’ occurs so often in Eamon Grennan’s vibrant new collection”, proclaims the blurb to *But the Body*, “that it signals an ongoing impulse to answer questions of being”. It is interesting that the blurb-writer singles out a recurrent word. On reading through the collection, the blurb comes to seem a bit like a brave-faced disclaimer since there are many other recurrences – repetitions, even – throughout *But the Body*. One such recurrence (shall I say) is the Epicurean theme that the here-and-now, which is all moments, is the moment of being. The gods live in an infinite number of present moments, and have no need of history; for a poet to return insistently to this idea is for him to wish very hard for it to be true, one suspects. These repetitions begin to chime a little too tinklingly after a while: “this inhabited minute” (‘Visitation’), “the hot tea steaming into the

minute” (“Still”), “the moment happening” (“The Horse at Hand”), “the here and now / of the world as is” (“Dublin-Poughkeepsie: Bread Knife in Exile”), “each moment murdered by the next” (“Parents and Departing Train”). This, happening in an Irish landscape, a Geography so saturated in its History, might be tendentious, if not for the physicality of Grennan’s language, and the strenuousness with which he writes the physical world. “The System” opens with “Two flies flicker-fucking on a dollop of gullshit”, and continues to “that ineradicable drive / that aligns, so the poet tells us, *love’s mansion / with the place of excrement*”.

Grennan’s Epicurean sensibility runs deeper than simple celebration of transience, then, and its materialistic immediacy fuels the collection’s many moments of success. Grennan has a rare grasp of the poetic line, an unusual and striking ear for vowel music and for the texture of consonants, and a tone which is at once erotic and elegiac, often very beautifully so. To celebrate the moment as it passes is simultaneously to mourn, the Epicurean tone being precisely this beguiling blend of eros and elegy. In the prose-poem ‘Aftermath’, for instance, occurs the wonderfully Petrarchan phrase, describing two geese skimming over the water, “the other known as each of them imagined knowing once the other”. This poem is a huge success precisely because its sweetness is balanced against the violence and novelty of its language and rhythms, and also because it does not arrive at its conclusions before it starts. In fact, its ending is (in the context of the collection as a whole) refreshingly forceful, its parataxis enacting the poet’s hard-won Epicurean vision:

Cold comes. Cloud thickens. Scatter-lines of geese circling. A black net of starlings over houses, over empty trees, opening, closing, rounding itself to ground again. Silence. *Face in the ashes. Old starlight, face extinguished.*

Despite the frequent power and beauty of this collection, I could not help wishing Eamon Grennan was less concerned with “questions of being” and more concerned with the business of living. Beauty is difficult because it must be hard-won, not labored-after; you can’t decide to be beautiful. However, *But the Body* contains much of value,

and is authored by a poet of real skill.

The current Irish Professor of Poetry, Harry Clifton's difficult task in this role is to have inherited the mantle from Michael Longley. On the strength of *The Winter Sleep of Captain Lemass*, however, Clifton is poet enough for the honour. Intelligent, inventive, and consistently strong, the collection is divided into three sections – 'Twenty-Six Counties', 'Six Counties', and 'Elsewhere' – and, like Grennan's, is occasioned by the shock and wonder of rediscovering Ireland after long absence. Unlike Grennan's though, Clifton's collection makes poetic virtue of the difficulties of public and private life, and has an acute sense of history and politics in Ireland, and in the human constitution, running through it. *The Winter Sleep of Captain Lemass* has a cumulative feel, building and gathering momentum like a treatise. There are many highlights here, but an absolute stand-out, early on in the collection, is 'The Crystalline Heaven', whose Dantean title is mischievously ironic, the poem being situated in the Dáil Eireann, and whose speaker, at the poem's conclusion, is "Sitting in judgement on Dublin, and getting older". (Though it remains unclear to me quite why Charlie Haughey and Aengus O'Snodaigh are anachronistically sharing the Dáil – I may be missing something here.) The poem is notable for its light-footed intelligence, its (Yeatsian) observance of public life, its devilish use of form and rhyme, and its humour: characteristics of the collection as a whole.

Another stand-out is 'Christiania', occurring toward the end of the collection. This poem has the distinction of being the only poem I have ever read actually to contain the word 'dystopia' – and not only to contain it, but to weave seamlessly into its tune the squeals of cliché emanating from the word. I quote here the first stanza (which doesn't contain the word 'dystopia'):

I see you, Christiania, in the light
 Of Blake and Engels, other days
 Than Copenhagen. From the abandoned looms
 Like visionaries, the women have long since risen,
 And the men have gone their ways
 From an age of press-ganged war and debtors' prison.

For an instant, poised above time,
Being, not doing, is the real Jerusalem [...]

That line break, “the light / Of Blake and Engels”, communicates, as prose never could, that Clifton does *not* see this hippie commune in the light of day, but in “other days / Than Copenhagen”. This subtle wit and command of the poetic line confirms Clifton as a poet to be reckoned with, within Ireland and beyond. As this line-break suggests, he is a poet immersed in history and in culture, and feels the medium of being, paradoxically, is “doing” – coming, as he does, from “Dystopia, where the Lords of Misrule, / Born old and penny-wise, / Catch holy innocents, and drag them off to school”. If the hippie commune of Christiania is a stunted modern equivalent of Epicurus’ garden, then Clifton, “Born old”, is wittily anti-pastoral, even as he celebrates the sacredness and humanity of the passing moment. Because of the collection’s scope and variety, I have picked out a couple of poems which, I feel, represent what Clifton is up to in *The Winter Sleep of Captain Lemass*, but there is more. Here we have politics, history, love, death, and landscape, in poems which deliver their kick time after time without succumbing to the temptation of the prescribed epiphany.

ALEX WYLIE

Acts of the Apostles

Paul Durcan, *Praise in Which I Live and Move and Have my Being*,

Harvill Secker, £12

Dennis O'Driscoll, *Dear Life*, Anvil, £9.95

The title of Paul Durcan's new collection proclaims his interpretation of the poet's role as priest-like. The quotation (or pseudo-quotation) from Acts, 17:28 ("For in him we live and move and have our being") might strike any reader not entirely attuned to the vision as vague, egocentric and sanctimonious. Happily, most of the "product" complicates the label. There's praise by the font-full: praise of the dead, of poets, of nurses and the down and out, and of Veronica Bolay's paintings (never before were Durcan's ekphrastic reflections so full of colour). Praise, as here, is better implied than stated. Durcan's tone in the elegy and eulogy can seem orotund and consequently insincere. When he maintains the balance between priestly orator and stand-up comic, with a bias towards the comic, Durcan is unsurpassable. He's a brilliant observer and mimic, with an acute sense of timing and a nice line in self-mockery (always popular with the pale-face sort of reader). The most alluring poems here lace the celebration with venom.

Take the opening narrative, double-edged from its very title, 'On Glimpsing a Woman in Hodges Figgis Bookshop in Dublin'. The woman Durcan's speaker glimpses is not any woman, not "a" woman, but "the" successful chick-lit-writer, Amanda Bruner. Wandering into the store, Bruner takes it on herself to sign her way through a pile of copies of her latest volume, *Champagne Kisses*, uninvited ("Oh I was just passing and I saw my books on your shelf...").

The narrative perfectly pitches a sustained, affectionate piss-take. He smiles at the animal in his own human ("on my hind legs") and in Amanda herself, who, making a Country-and-Western fashion-statement (or fashion-confession) "rides out of the shop on her white bronco". The mockery rises to delicious heights when he starts to read the novel's opening lines. It begins "Why did I have a full Irish

for breakfast?” This is Durcan’s cue for a glorious riff on the “why did I” theme. It’s hilarious, yet not cruel. The woman’s chutzpah is fully registered and admired, even if her vanity and her prose-style have been gently nailed.

The mundanity and absurdity of the human species, our hopeless efforts to understand one another, our imprisonment in time and habit and cliché, are faithfully rendered. Durcan’s speaker seems to be a kind of flâneur - one with a senior citizen’s “Free Travel Pass”. Weary but fascinated, wherever he is, he stops to chat to passers-by, and jot down their words of wisdom. This persona reminds us, perhaps, of an age when artists could be outlaws, and live almost dangerously. ‘How I envy the Homeless Man’ seems, partly, a lament for that old way of being a poet. The envied tramp becomes almost too Christ-like, with his hands “palm-open to the night sky” and “his integrity,/ His courage, his independence”. When he disappears, Durcan worries. But the tramp returns safely to his “cardboard cot” with a baguette, a bottle of wine and a copy of *The Da Vinci Code*. Ah, the impossibility of dodging the bourgeois ‘life-style’.

Auden’s “Elegy for WB Yeats” concludes: “In the prison of his days/ Teach the free man how to praise”. Durcan’s truest praise acknowledges the prison and dances with and against the music of death, loneliness and comedy. He is Walt Whitman and Dara O’Briain, with a touch of Alan Bennett. He hears not only what people say, but what they don’t say, and he knows exactly when to step back and leave the speaker to carry on. No doubt he’s the first poet who has ever ended a poem with the line, “Enjoy your stay in Australia mate” (“Towoomba Father’s Day Mystery Tour, 2007”).

Dennis O’Driscoll, too, has comic talent, but he has no appetite for the transcendental. The often-quoted depiction of him as the Philip Larkin of Irish poetry is perhaps more illuminating than the journalistic formulation makes it appear. There are poems in *Dear Life* which might be grappling with Larkin’s quietly horrified question, “Where can we live but days?”, and Larkin’s sense of the prison of time was far darker than Auden’s.

Larkin shores up his precious fragments (England, pastoral, “love again”) against the ruinous claustrophobia, and tries to make it not matter. O’Driscoll, though, sticks grimly with it. Even his numerous puns seem grim. It’s part of his integrity and rationality not to dodge, but rather to insist on, a lack of ultimate meaning. Sometimes, the work of such courage seems exhausting, and the poetic energy-supply wavers.

Of course, that effect may be part of the strategy, as it is in ‘Sub’. Life is offered in the form of a magazine subscription. Happy memories are summoned as justification for taking out the sub. But there is a kind of flattening effect in the repetition of the demonstrative adjective which summons the good times: “That warm morning...”, “That blackbird...”, “That observant lake...” The lake reminds the speaker of a credit-card, the butterflies resemble tourists in Hawaiian shirts. The gifts of life seem to come ready-tarnished, and the conclusion is that there was no choice anyway. You’d tick the “No” box, and – horrific joke – “Then get on with your life”.

God’s complete failure as a conversationalist is thoroughly documented in ‘Our Father’, a poem which begins with some cold comedy but gets less funny as it goes on – perhaps a fitting comment on God’s silence through the ages. The last, over-long stretch of the narrative sees the astrophysical decoding of the cosmos as a final hopeless attempt to read a creator whose “attention-grabbing voicemail”, the noise of the Big Bang, has become “our sacred text”. Again, this is a poem which has made up its mind where it’s going. The quotations, asides intended to illustrate hollow consolation (“What does not reply is/ the answer to prayer”), rebelliously open mental windows in the fortress of scepticism.

O’Driscoll finds his true epiphany in the unlikely habitat of Larkin’s toad, work. While he’s alert to the fatuousness of management-jargon, he is also aware of its pathos: he reels it off in a way that’s more affectionate than satirical, finding, after all, its human voice. There are poems, like the excellent sequence, ‘Revenue Customs’, full of quiet praise for the honest toilers of the day-job. Larkin might have written such poems about being a librarian (he was, by all accounts,

an outstandingly conscientious one) but he didn't. O'Driscoll is unchallenged master of the "office poem".

The title sequence returns to poetry's traditional concerns. A heightened charge to the idea of "dear life" results from a brush with "dear death", though there's still a bracing detachment, and even a cool joke that the laws of probability, singling out the poet for an unlucky diagnosis, have ensured his friends's lucky escape. At the end, there's a hard-won insight: if the mind doesn't cling on for dear life, the body certainly does. Perhaps it can teach us to ignore our dualist instincts, and recognise that, if "I" am my body, my body's life-wish is mine. The lessening of the burden of nihilism is expressed in uncluttered short-lined tercets which list the simple, astonishing, pleasures of reprieve, and conclude, with rightly unembarrassed intensity: "I caught an inkling of resistance/ from the corner/ of the mirror's eye...//And when my stomach /grumbled, it was for /life itself it hungered" ('Dear Life').

CAROL RUMENS

Editors: It is with great sadness that we record the death of Dennis O'Driscoll on 24 December 2012.

Nether Powers

Peter Redgrove, ed. Neil Roberts, *Collected Poems*, Cape, £25

Neil Roberts, *A Lucid Dreamer: The Life of Peter Redgrove*, Cape, £30

Peter Redgrove was that rare case, a poet whose life and work made, consciously and unconsciously, a single entity. His poems explored the beliefs and desires he lived by, and his life was built around his work as a poet. Put like this, the project sounds not unusual; after all, poets write from what they are, and must make time to write. But Redgrove's practice, as it might now be called, was peculiarly uncompromising. Especially once he had met his second wife, the poet Penny Shuttle, in 1969, he found ways to align his inner and outer lives and to explore whatever interested him: sexuality, the occult, the feminine principle.

So it's unusually apt that *A Lucid Dreamer*, Neil Roberts's fine biography of the poet, should be issued alongside his *Collected Poems*, which Professor Roberts has also edited. The latter is not *exactly* a collected but does, as the accompanying press release says, gather together "the best poems from all of his twenty-six volumes of verse", both in and out of print and issued by a variety of publishers. With a poet as prolific as Redgrove, this seems exactly the right approach. These five hundred-odd pages make an authoritative, career-spanning, volume; a great deal more than mere introduction, they manage both to map the work and to allow the reader to inhabit it. Between one and thirty-something poems from each collection are included.

Most generously served are the mid-career volumes *The Weddings at Nether Powers* (1979) and *The Apple Broadcast* (1981). Not coincidentally, these are collections we might describe as echt Redgrove. Dreams break surface as they do in his earlier work, but here invite participation. It's not that the images have ceased to be essential and become merely decorative. 'The Visible Baby' is a vision of the vulnerability and trustfulness of ordinary infants: "I can see the white caterpillar of his milk looping through him", and, in 'A

Journey', "thunder has a human voice". But now insight is integrated and steadied, producing poems that can be read independently of their author's life. 'The Sire of Branches and Air' seems effortlessly to transcribe the experience of a coming rain-storm. It is not the wind but the poem that "mounts /the stiff sire of branches, /It is a ghost trying on bodies". This same quality of inhabitation underpins *The Apple Broadcast's* famous title poem. Here, the generative psychic experience is made explicit, by and in the verse. "I lie intensified", the poem-narrator says, entirely and easily summing up this "Meditation-experience", as the epigraph has it, and releasing the reader into assent. Steered like this, even the most conservative reader can relax and enjoy the splendour of a "valley" with "the Spider with her crisp handclasp //In her glass ladder rocking the empty fly". And the writing itself, while rich, is crisp and exact: it takes a true observer to know that it's the empty carapace of a fly that remains in the web.

But Redgrove is neither a pastoralist nor an eco-poet. His landscape is always primarily symbolic; and in the best of his writing that symbolism is shared, public, and like a third dimension throws the writing into relief. 'At Home', from 1989's *The First Earthquake*, is a domestic interior in which "There is a dustbin boiling with worms" not merely literal but psychological, though the image stays slant, capacious. Is the family atmosphere rotten, or the psyche of the narrator-son? As its title suggests, the collection records a time of change, in poems like 'Menopausa', with its fascinated, uncompassionate voyeur's-eye view. This husband doesn't know whether that change has left him a woman or a lizard. Roberts also collects 'Joy Gordon', the loose-limbed elegy for Redgrove's mother in which the poet's complex belief systems drop their guard and allow a simple "Lord of the Dance" vision of death as a return to a pure "dancing" spirit: "to be fluxile /Like air, but /Constant as metal, /Not keeping to the one world".

Redgrove suffered all his life from comparison with his Cambridge contemporary Ted Hughes, but it's impossible to ignore the proximity of this voice and method to Hughes's later-published *Birthday Letters*. In the same way, Redgrove's five collections from the 1970s, dense with the oracular in ways that now sometimes seem only partly-articulated, share with the Hughes of that decade not diction, but

the sense of straining to make any meaning that might transcend the daily given. In 'From the Questions to Mary', "The Virgin Mary gave birth to Dionysus, who said: /When I have grown my horns I shall begin listening to them". It might be useful, in other words, to stop searching for imitation, or a definitive mastery by one poet over the other, and instead accept that these peers were necessarily the product of the same artistic and social era (both, after all, spent decades avoiding the metropolitan scene in the west country); neither exactly *sui generis* but neither imitating the other. Another way to say this is that Redgrove can read as a product of the Sixties art school scene; as part of that reinvention of the English countryside which encompassed both the Brotherhood of Ruralists and folk-rock groups like Steeleye Span. This is not to suggest that he has dated, but rather that he makes sense as a carrier of that *zeitgeist*.

My own preference is for the poems of this millennium, from the last three collections and a posthumous fourth, in which stepped tercets open up the material and keep it moving. They allow each passing splendour to anchor in our attention. 'The Rainbow' opens:

The great reservoir
 hangs up inside itself;
 it reflects a sky
Corroded like zinc,
 in its pewter-coloured surface
 a small squall
Patches the water
 into roughened metal:

It is to Neil Roberts's great credit that he agreed to the simultaneous publication of *A Lucid Dreamer*, since one book could easily occlude the other. Fluently and steadily written, the biography is full of interesting literary witness-statements, from admiring peers Peter Porter and Alan Brownjohn among others, as well as of material less comfortable for a friend to examine: the breakdowns, the mysophilia. It's a painstaking and balanced exploration. The difficulty with a poet whose work and life are one is that, to consider his writing in depth, one must understand the network of personal frailties and strengths,

conceptual systems and sexual animations, expressed in the writing. Or else what is able to stand alone in the writing will eventually have to be set free, to create an incomplete, but important and beautiful, representation of the man and his work.

FIONA SAMPSON

Wielding the Mojo of Language

Tess Gallagher, *Midnight Lantern, New and Selected Poems*, Bloodaxe, £12

I have never once got the feeling that Tess Gallagher wrote a poem because it was 9:30 am, or that she hadn't written a poem that week, or a villanelle was due to an editor. In this era of professional poets typing away to maintain audience or tenure, this quality (and I suspect it's not just a quality with Gallagher but a fact) makes her a rare priestess of poetry. The great gift of Gallagher's work is one feels the poet *had* to write these poems. The urgencies the world provides—death, birth, despair, velvet, disease, humans behaving badly, ghosts, horses—these are when she picks up the pen.

Midnight Lantern, New and Selected Poems provides a rich journey for those of us who have followed Gallagher's career. It is a joy to revisit her much-anthologized, quoted and beloved poems, such as 'Black Silk', 'Under Stars', 'Instructions to the Double', 'I Stop Writing the Poem', and 'Each Bird Walking'. Part of the joy, for me, is in remembering what these poems meant when they were new to a young poet (myself) who wanted to write poems huge with feeling. The first anthology I ever bought outside of a literature class was called the *Morrow Anthology of Younger American Poets*, published in 1985, a testament to the American plain style. I remember well the book's luxurious white spaces, minimalist font and author photo placements. My relationship to Gallagher began then. This plain style I am referring to might be described as a poetry that depends on direct speech, a resistance to formal splashiness, solid narrative grounding, and a trust in sincerity. This was the milieu in which I developed as a poet, the movement that the *Morrow Anthology* articulated. Nearly 30 years later, reading *Midnight Lantern*, I see some of the seams in American plain style and what those choices might cost a poet. At the same time, I can see how Gallagher's particular talents allow her to transcend the limitations of this style.

A former student of Gallagher's, the poet Tony Hoagland, writes of her

poems, “[i]t actually feels possible to see, at times, the moment when the poet is seized by the muse, what the medievals called the *furor poetica*, and is carried away”.¹ He goes on to quote, in his fine essay about the merits of disproportion, her poem, ‘Legend with Sea Breeze’ (not collected in *Midnight Lantern*). In this poem of mourning, the speaker takes a ride on a horse, which becomes a figure for seeing, for wild feeling and, finally, knowing. The quality Hoagland most admires in Gallagher’s work is her lack of respect for stability or neatness. What she strives for is that eruption of “imagination into psyche and language into bravado”.² In a conversation I had with Hoagland recently, he said, “the thing about Tess: she’s not asking anyone for permission”. And certainly he’s right. Look around at a Tess Gallagher reading; she has a serious following. Most love her work for its fecund relationship to lived experience and the possibilities for the ecstatic within it, however, I will say the poems do not always provide a smooth journey there.

‘Utterly’ is from *My Black Horse*, published in 1995, and demonstrates Gallagher’s commitments:

My spirit was a bee in those days—
the world one gigantic buzz, drooling
sweetness. Sweet unto bursting.
Love ahead. Love under me.

Here the central metaphor of bee *appears* to indicate the speaker’s spirit, which would be simple equation and one set out clearly in the first line. But then what follows confuses matters – if the bee is the spirit, the world is the buzz, which would seem to suggest a thing produced by the bee, which it might be, but I don’t think that’s what Gallagher intends us to take away from the poem. What tells me this is the image of the buzz “drooling sweetness”, which suggests an altogether more uncentred rush of almost free association. In the poem, in other words, the regular associations this metaphor sets up. have been elided in favour of a more connotative, intuitive series

1 Hoagland, Tony, “On Disproportion,” *Real Softistikashun*, Graywolf Press, St. Paul, 2006

2 Ibid

of connections. That the sweetness becomes love seems respectable and a return to some kind of consistency, but that this love is ahead, and *under* the speaker...well, this is a heated diction, one beyond New Critical precision. See the poem's final stanza for this slipperiness, this relinquishing of control:

It's like that against the facelessness
of the heart. No contours. Only
unlivable crimson. Only the clustered Braille
of a fearless premonition
fumbling the turned cheek.

Frankly, it's hard to do a strict close reading of this stanza. And this difficulty is where Gallagher loses some readers—below I've included in parenthesis how a Gallagher skeptic might respond to this stanza:

It's (what is this pronoun referring to?) like that against
the facelessness
of the heart (a heart with a face? Mixed metaphor!).
No contours. Only
unlivable crimson (what is unlivable about red?). Only
the clustered braille (nonseeing?)
of a fearless premonition (psychic?)
fumbling the turned cheek. (of the faceless heart?)

I would argue that connotation, the intuitive, cultural colour of language takes over. To write, for Gallagher, is to feel, and her writing is compelled to break through language, smash the icons of rational meaning, to find her oracular mode. I say to read these kinds of passages, you must, too, let go of mathematic, denotative precision. I say let your mind jump from stone to stone to cross this river – from the pitiless *faceless* to *heart*; to the searing sound of the word *crimson* rejected by the curse *unlivable*; to the nubbiness of *braille* (which sounds like brave nearly every time to me); to the weakness of *fumbling* and to the pain of a *turned cheek*. You might get there – to the other side of the poem, to the other side of thinking, to feeling.

Some of the criticisms of Gallagher's work are, to me, the criticisms

of American plain style: a lack of rhetorical flourish, an unconvincing relationship to prosody at times, and the neglect of the powers of ornament. Gallagher is, you probably know, the widow of American short story artist Raymond Carver. There is no doubt, however, that at her best, Gallagher is perhaps our genius of grief. This from an interview with her in *The Atlantic Monthly's Atlantic Unbound* in 1997:

At this point, I don't think the word 'absolving' grief is what my work is about in *Moon Crossing Bridge*. That book was written partly in order to sustain the grieving process long enough for me to absorb the loss. I think the word 'attending' is more true to what I was doing. I was noticing all the different inflections in the process of grieving and how lively and varied that experience is, how it quickens everything around you. In the epigraph I say that I'm going to carry the grief, and you have to get hold of an amorphous entity before you can carry it. I would say the book is about discovering a form you can use to move with the experience on its terms, instead of merely constructing a container.³

While it's about the book *Moon Crossing Bridge*, Gallagher's last sentence can be taken as a statement of her poetics as well. Her poems are collaborative in the sense that she is in constant negotiation between huge feeling, the poetic movement out of which she sprang (the rough containers of its conventions), between the awkward vessels of words, and her own raging, vital spirit. "What other woman poet of her generation so embodies the Dionysian strain?" the wise man, Tony Hoagland, asked me. Indeed, who else is as unafraid of letting go of restraint, harmony, and even clarity at times, in order to open a poem to experience, on experience's own terms? The mojo of language is what a poet like Gallagher wields and it's a risky, less predictable magic. A collection like *Midnight Lantern: New and Selected Works* shows how worthy the struggle is.

CONNIE VOISINE

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

FLEUR ADCOCK's new collection, *Glass Wings*, is published by Bloodaxe Books.

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MATT KIRKHAM's collection *The Lost Museums* (Lagan) won the Strong Prize for best first collection in Ireland. *Aged Fourteen My Grandfather Runs Away To Sea* won initial Templar I-Shots prize for short pamphlet. His second full collection *The Dumbo Octopus* is due from Lagan Press later this year.

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GARY MATTHEWS is an active member of Falmouth Poetry Group in Cornwall, which this year celebrates its 40th anniversary. 'The Hut-circle' was written as a result of a very wet workshop day organised by Penelope Shuttle on the ninth anniversary of her husband Peter Redgrove's death, and is part of an e/anthology *Green Tower Day*. Gary is writer in residence at the Giant's Quoit at Troon.

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CHRISTOPHER REID's *A Scattering* was declared Costa Book of the Year 2009. His *The Song of Lunch* (same year) became a BBC2 film starring Alan Rickman and Emma Thompson. Since then he has published a further collection, *Nonsense* (2012), while a long narrative poem by him, 'Six Bad Poets', will appear from Faber and Faber in September of this year.

CAROL RUMENS was formerly Writer-in-Residence at Queen's University, Belfast and is now Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Wales, Bangor. Her most recent collection of poems is *De Chirico's Threads* (Seren, 2010).

FIONA SAMPSON'S *Beyond the Lyric: A Map of Contemporary British Poetry* appeared from Chatto in September (2012). *Rough Music*, her latest collection, was shortlisted for the Forward Prize and the T.S. Eliot Prize 2010.

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CONNIE VOISINE is an associate professor of English at New Mexico State University. Her collection *Cathedral of the North* won the AWP Award for Poetry and her second collection, *Rare High Meadow of Which I Might Dream* was published by University of Chicago Press in 2008. She was recently a Fulbright Scholar at Queen's University Belfast.

ALEX WYLIE graduated from Queen's University, Belfast in 2008 with a PhD in modern and contemporary poetry. He was included in Carcanet Press's *New Poetries V* and is currently completing his first collection.

