

Poetry Reviews by Seth Crook

Alan Hill's *Gerontion*, a Happenstance pamphlet, is an elegant tanka sequence about old age.

"Different in your day
I suppose", and the young man
smiled. Bloody cheek!
"I haven't died yet", I said.
"While I live, it's still my day."

Frailty, lost friends, living in memories: the subjects are unsurprising, but taken up with wit.

Happenstance and Mariscat combined to produce Alison Prince's *Waking at Five Happens Again*. Some of this also considers difficulties of later life, such as dealing with a heart operation. In "Fast", about a heart rhythm disorder, she notes:

Rests are not restful

The poems have a satisfying precision. Though many focus on family memories, they frequently evoke a wider subject matter. I found the most engaging to be those recalling a childhood period of being under bombing during the second world war. "Wartime" involves an incident in which two sisters have been killed. One is to be buried and her parents ask for a doll to be buried with her.

...in the wartime shortages
you passed things on

On a rather different subject, we hear praise of "dangerous" men.

The others can be excellent
members of committees, pianists,
and keepers of labradors, but where
is the prickle of unknown risk,
the sense of muscle under the skin
the possibility of sudden hurt?

Theresa Munoz's *Settle*, published by Vagabond Voices, is split into two sections. The first features poems on her family, their move to Canada and her own emigration to Scotland. Sometimes the two experiences of emigration are nicely combined. In "Way":

Any kind of job will do.
My father knew this.

The second section reflects on "Digital Life", Facebook, e-mail, search engines, selfies, junk mail, etc. There is a lighter tone, but not always. Page 20 of a Google search emerges as a symbol of loneliness. I have now visited page 20 a few times. Perhaps both sections might be seen as going into one folder dealing with distance and keeping in touch. In "I zoom your face"

your face zoomed in
as if right here
talking back, in whispers.

We also get an overdue requiem for defunct computers. Bless them.

Tapsalteerie press seems to be thriving, with books varying in form, poetry style and language; from Stuart Paterson's substantial collection in Scots, *Aye*, to a pretty haiku sequence that heads to Iona by Alessandra Trinidad, *In Transit*; from Jim Ferguson's *My Bonnie Scotland*, which has a line claiming that counting syllables is the exact same thing as measuring skulls

to Neil Young's collection of fourteen sonnets, *The Parting Glass*. Nice to see the film *Kes* get a mention in Neil Young's collection, in a sonnet about difficult school days.

They dished out bibles, the lash and the boot -
Bastards. We send Billy Caspar's salute

Again, family history is prominent. One memorable poem is concerned with three generations, the author, his welder father, his daughter. In the "Handover":

His hands, my hands and my wee girl's, although
it's her turn next. I'll grip and she'll let go.

A collection with sadness and anger, but also a strong sense of the love of family.

Sheena Blackhall seems to be producing many pamphlets via Lochlands Press. I have four before me from 2016: *Death of a Tadpole*, *Flat Out*, *The Witnessing*, *Cheerybye Eden*. Given such output, I'll resist the urge to generalise about the subject matter, which varies from the last will and testament of a kelpie to the names of minor planets and asteroids. Frequently there are "owersetts" into Scots; and from a wide variety of sources, such as Vietnamese poems, poems in Yiddish, poems by Holub. Especially notable is a version of John Clare's lengthy "The Cottager", which becomes "The Crofter". Fans of Clare will enjoy, as I did, setting the two versions side by side. Overall, the pamphlets are enjoyably eclectic. My favourite, in *The Witnessing*, catalogues a series of calamities that happen

before life, the seamstress,

mends the rents and fabric of the day

Many of her own not-owersett poems are much in the manner of folk songs and near nursery rhymes. Concerning one imagined writer:

Platinum Mars Superflous

Has two inflated egos

As big as twin powered zeppelins

He's stunning in his speedos

Ruth Aylett and Beth McDonough's *Handfast*, published by Mother's Milk, is a powerful and ambitious combination of poems dealing with dementia and autism in the family; dementia in Aylett's mother, autism in McDonough's son.

In "His autism and the power of rain", McDonough's son is danced

by the hard rain, stung-skinned on his seven year

naked of self, drenched in the joy of storms

In "On Diet and Autism" there is a response to some less than ideally helpful advice:

but Dietician, what I don't know

is just how *many* olives.

He never leaves the stones

McDonough is a linguistically playful poet. For example, she frequently noun-verbs.

hide up high, where a child once

limbed to some together place

Sometimes this language creates a sense of living in the same world as others, but also a world slightly altered; as if there is a life with a need to draw on ordinary common language, but also needing to go its own expressive way:

Twisted through blood moons, we rope

dark shifts, bound by your shout-

tics. All of us spiral, rhythmmed beyond

your sometime lost reason for rest.

Aylett provides a striking metaphor for the felt loss-but-also-continuing-presence of another person. In "Waterworld":

Is this a well where I find you

somewhere in the bottom?

Its dark down here and you

are the echo to my questions

In "Modern Art" two changes are set beside each other:

You are leaving your own likeness very slowly

and the author becomes

a mourner by degrees

Though poems are not jointly authored (apart from the first and last), they intertwined to produce what feels like a genuine, very successful joint work.

Seth Crook rarely leaves Mull. But his poems have appeared in such places as *Gutter*, *New Writing Scotland*, *The Rialto*, *Magma*, *Envoi*, *Best Scottish Poems of 2014*.