

## The Long Haul Towards Lucidity

Poetry review by Mandy Haggith

When Norman MacCaig published his second book, an Assynt friend responded with ‘When are you publishing the answers?’ which the poet described as ‘the only critical remark that was ever any use to me’, saying it started him on ‘the long haul towards lucidity’. Avoidance of being ‘wilfully obscure’, and giving the reader the respect of clarity, seems to have become established as a key value in Scottish poetry, if a stack of eighteen recent poetry collections is anything to go by. Only one of the poets (MacGillivray) fails to go along with it – her title, *The Nine of Diamonds - Surroial Mordentless* (Bloodaxe), is indicative of the difficulty of her content, a self-consciously surreal dazzle of wordplay.

Fortunately, there are many other approachable new poetry collections. Among the best is William Letford’s *Dirt* (Carcenet). The poems are experimental, virtuosic in language and texture, yet also full of heart. Love, for family and friends, is pervasive. In a prayer, addressed to ‘Da’, he says, ‘I try to be vulnerable, so I can let that love in. I look/ for beauty in small things. Let the night sky make me/feel small.’ There are laugh-out-loud funny poems, like ‘The Proverbial Morning’, when his lover wishes to be a panda but fears being a skunk, and tender moments, such as when his fingers trace words on a lover’s skin:

If you’re lucky you’ll find someone whose skin  
is a canvas for the story of your life.  
Write well. Take care of the heartbeat behind it.

Hamish Whyte (*Things We Never Knew*, Shoestring Press) is another poet at the lucid summit. Watching a wasp at a keyhole, he is characteristically wry.

If this were another kind of poem  
it might be about entrances  
and exits, transience and the sting  
of life. I can’t make much of it,  
except to say that probably  
the wasp didn’t fit.

He doesn’t write those kind of poems, yet he does catch enlightening glimpses of the world out of train windows and presents us with instants of great emotional depth (like a grandfather and child burying a pet mouse) in a manner that seems beguilingly simple. If you

too have a collection of stones gathered at significant moments, but now you've 'no idea where most of them/ are from,' this collection of poems is for you.

The most lucid of all is the much lamented Elizabeth Burns, whose exquisite pamphlet *Clay* (Wayleave) demonstrates perfectly an aesthetic of elegance and understated wisdom. This slim volume is surely the pinnacle of pottery poetry: poems about birth, life and death, treasuring and mourning. Her brief, delicate verses are encircled by the metaphor of life as a pot filled with experiences. In 'Gift' she expresses it thus.

‘the bowl a small circle of sun  
which will become  
spring-light – ‘

Some other pamphlets demonstrate that this format is still used for some of the best poetry being published, and we don't need to look only for full, perfect bound, collections for the cream of current poetry. The loveliest to handle and most pleasurable to read from are the pamphlets made by Mariscat Press. With a bright pink cover covered in extraordinary bat faces – it sounds lurid, but it isn't at all – Jane McKie's extraordinarily titled *From The Wonder Book of Would You Believe It?* is full of wondrous contents, a menagerie of bats, insects, fish, fungi and jelly fish. This is poetry at its most playful and full of inquiry. Her descriptions are crystal sharp, fresh as hail, gorgeous as a rainbow. Spiders are 'prodigious minor saints'. A puff-ball explodes 'like a marvellous expletive'. And here is insect radio, which surely Edwin Morgan would have loved:

...your songs are the moonlight  
behind sunlight, invisible  
but bright, like words scratched

in lemon juice – thrum  
of mosquito, rattle of butterfly,  
scrape of ant. The frequencies

of earth, your mother  
tongue – *boon boon zzzz*  
*zoum zoum summ summ.*

Playful in a different way are Kate Tough's found and concrete poems in *tilt-shift* (Tapsalteerie). They are concocted of phrases pilfered from an eclectic mix of sources: an index of first lines of William Carlos Williams poems, American railway stations, knitting magazines, an eighteenth century lady's diary and Google auto-complete, just as examples. This is a poet who looks at the world as if down the wrong end of a telescope and finds poems in all manner of unlikely places. Many of the results are very funny.

*The Leonids*, another from Mariscat, is Isobel Dixon's nasturtium orange pamphlet, which is full of South African warmth and sunshine. The nasturtiums feature, as a symbol of the poet's mother's life, their colour echoing in a favourite tangerine dress. This is an elegiac book, both parents brought close and vivid. We are shown, with great compassion, her mother's 'sad pharaoh face' on Skype, worrying about the cost of the call, frightened that she can't afford to hear music. This is raw and honest writing about the adult experience of becoming an orphan.

Memories of and mourning for family members is, perhaps not surprisingly, the theme of several other pamphlets. These include three from the amazingly prolific Sheena Blackhall (*The Seely Howe*, *Cleikum* and *Crossing the Bridge*, all published by Lochlands, although with distractingly poor editorial attention). One of the most successful is *Owersettin* (Tapsalteerie) authored by three poets, Maggie Rabatski, Sheila Templeton and A C Clarke, writing in response to each other's work in Gaelic, Scots and English respectively. It is interesting to observe how some seem like close translations, others varying more widely in their versions, and to wonder why.

Full collections give most poets the space to broaden their concerns beyond one theme, but sometimes a single strand can have compelling results. In *Jacob* (Shoestring Press), Carole Coates has written a verse novel from the perspective of a boy growing up in a dysfunctional post-second-world-war English family. We follow Jacob chronologically from his earliest experiences living with his extended family, to his reflections as an old man after his mother has died. Throughout his young life she is a disturbed and disturbing influence, and as he finds comfort in the park, in books and from other family members, it is impossible not to read incessantly between the lines that irrevocable emotional damage is being inflicted upon him:

he's beginning to know that

things happen and happen again  
and become his life every day

but some happen and full of terror  
remain like black rooms  
with doors opening

Three more collections deserve a mention: Vicki Husband's *This Far Back Everything Shimmers* (Vagabond Voices) brings an astronomical theme and a quirky eye to her lovely debut collection. Margaret Gillies Brown's *Ilka Spring* (diehard) follows the seasons in poems, the best of which are formally tight and elegiac. Em Strang, in *Bird-Woman* (Shearsman) includes a hilarious Brown Bear in the voice of Walt Whitman in a collection full of horses, birds and dark moments, which sometimes, to borrow one of her words, 'unwing' me.

Turning finally to anthologies, where treasures can usually be found, I am not disappointed by the triad at the bottom of my heap. *The Voyage Out* is 'An international anthology of writing, art and science' produced at the University of Dundee. Given the breadth of its remit, it hangs together surprisingly well and includes some interesting pieces by non-writers on their life journeys, the best of which is by molecular biologist Ron Hay about a life-time's study of arsenic. The stand out is Chris Arthur's spellbinding essay 'Footnotes', beautifully written and philosophically far-reaching from its starting point of his daughter's feet. Peter Davidson's prose poems on exile and return are also gorgeous.

I was delighted to be introduced to some new names by an *Anthology of Scottish Poets* (Editura Pim) produced in Romania! Alongside well-kent writers like AC Clarke, Sally Evans, Eleanor Livingstone and Graham Fulton, there are lesser-known writers with links either to Romania or other international poetry scenes. Donald Adamson's reflections on damaged trees, which when they fall are 'noticed by their absence, sudden blue/astonishment of sky', will send me in search of more of his poems. I liked Douglas Lipton's gorse, which 'censures the Scottish air/ with a South Sea island essence', and Angus MacMillan's remembrance of his brother dropping pan drops in church, 'midway between the fire and the brimstone' ... one of which rolled 'all the way from Mount Ararat to Gethsemane'.

The book to get before it's too late is *Whatever the Sea – Scottish Poems for Growing Older* (Polygon), a beautifully produced and uplifting selection of poems that almost makes ageing something to look forward to. Death is looked in the eye without flinching and with humour and wisdom, a few grumbles and considerable elegance of phrase, line, rhythm and rhyme. Here are some unforgettable voices from beyond the grave plus a busload of Scottish poets with free passes, none of them past it yet, and all lucid!