

Shiny, Lissome

Michael Schmidt, ed. *New Poetries II: An Anthology*, Carcanet, £9.95

What exactly is the point of this book? *New Poetries II* is the latest in a line of showcase anthologies with a more or less consistent approach that goes back at least thirty years. Poems by writers who have previously appeared only in magazines or with small presses are placed before a wider audience, the publisher takes on one or two of the contributors' full collections and the rest go elsewhere. A few vanish altogether. So it is that in Faber's *Introduction* series the early work of Douglas Dunn, Paul Muldoon and Tom Paulin rubbed shoulders with poems by where-are-they-now writers like Bartholomew Quinn, Alasdair MacLean and Ian McDonald. The publishers might argue that they are providing a service to poets, readers and even rival firms; undeniably, part of the fun has always been the beauty pageant element.

After Carcanet published *New Poetries* in 1994, however, they went on to take individual volumes by seven of its eight inclusions. Is *New Poetries II*, like its predecessor, a catalogue of forthcoming Carcanet attractions? And if Carcanet fully intend publishing the majority of these writers, why not hold out for their book-length manuscripts? More puzzling is the inclusion of Sinéad Morrissey, whose impressive debut, *There Was Fire in Vancouver*, appeared from Carcanet in 1996. Schmidt's introduction tells us "she is here because she ought to have been in *New Poetries*" and because her latest poems mark a significant change from the earlier work. Why not wait for a second collection? Or should *Life Studies* have premiered in a 1950s equivalent of the introductory volume?

This might sound like quibbling, but it is difficult to see how these poets benefit from being presented in bite-sized chunks. Without space to demonstrate a breadth of themes and techniques, they are scarcely more than caricatures (as are most poets when reduced to a handful of anthology pieces; though, in the case of the established writer, the reader is at least aware of the missing work). Oliver Marlow, for instance, seems to be little more than a *faux naïf* ruralist: "all the time

and all around /Busy songs of birds /Rise from the ground". There is surely more to his work than is suggested by the four poems here.

New Poetries II isn't a cross-section of the emerging generation of English-language poets. For all their diversity, these thirteen authors would fit comfortably onto the Carcanet list. If any proof were needed, Schmidt's introduction informs us (helpfully for the reader, if not the new poet struggling to establish a voice) that the influences on his contributors include Wallace Stevens and John Ashbery; Auden is nowhere to be seen. In fact, it is likely that any trawl of new writers outside the pages of *P. N. Review* would reveal the influence of Muldoon via Carol Ann Duffy or Simon Armitage; perhaps we should thank Schmidt for avoiding the obvious. Certainly, *New Poetries II* is full of the virtues and vices of the Carcanet list. Its authors are admirably serious about poetry (no pitifully hyperbolic "poetry is the new rock 'n' roll" chuntering here) though their gravitas can become indigestible or, worse, poetic.

The anthology opens with eight earnestly playful poems by Matthew Welton, including "Two Hands", a variation on the sestina which begins with a single line and in successive sections—couplet, triplet, quatrain, etc.—retains the end words of the previous stanza's lines. By the final, twelve-line section, the piece seems to have gone on forever, slowly draining the reader's enthusiasm for what looked like a good idea at the outset. Other contributors offer "Poetry" with a capital P—people are "shinely lissome", thoughts are lofty, oaks are serried, moonlight is envisioned—and the sort of breathy sensitivity that muffles everything with good taste:

And after the white rain
a green swell rose
in the garden,
or the moon appeared
like a watermark
(Nicole Krauss, "The Last Eunuch")

There's nothing wrong with preferring a poetry that swoons, though many readers who choose a novel before a book of poems do so to avoid this kind of writing. A little abrasiveness here and there might have energised proceedings.

How young are the writers? How much is apprentice work? Apparently, these questions should not be asked. Instead, Schmidt asserts the primacy of the poem over the poet; so, as with his *Harvill Book of Twentieth-Century Poetry in English*, there are no biographical notes, only clues (mostly regarding country of origin) dropped into his introduction. This specious editorial decision is seigneurial, high-table stuff made nonsensical by the four-line note about the book's

editor on the back cover. Surely, Michael Schmidt needs no introduction.

This paucity of information about a gathering of newcomers is needlessly intriguing, not least in the case of the South African Karen Press, whose rather florid poems dwell on a sense of place. From the 2000 Carcanet catalogue (in which her first UK collection is announced), we learn that she was born in 1956 and has published six collections. Born in 1972, Sinéad Morrissey is, in contrast, a precocious talent whose poems about her stay in Japan are among the anthology's finest:

No one seems sure of the reason why aprons
Are tied to the necks of stone babies in temples.
The priest says "honour".
The guide to Kyoto City mentions "cold
On their journey away from us to the heaven for children".
I look at them squatting in Buddha-reflection,
Wrapped up to the throat in teddy bears and trains.

Her techniques—a clear eye for detail and, predominantly, a long line that never quite crumbles into prose—result in an engrossing, intense poetry. Her work shone from Bloodaxe's 1997 *Making for Planet Alice*, another otiose book, and it does again here.

Of the rest, John Redmond's poised poems of rural Ireland survive repeated readings, though, on this showing, any expansion of the scope of Irish poetry is incremental; Stephen Burt's atmospheres are attractively languid; and Monica Youn's "A Parking Lot in West Houston" contains the memorable image of a "splayed-out compact car half-sunk/in the tar pit of its own shadow". It is, however, a found poem by Karen Press that ultimately overshadows the whole enterprise. Dedicated to Jessie Tamboer, "who set herself alight and burned to death because she could no longer provide for her children", "Dispossessed words" concludes

She was immediately engulfed by flames but did not utter a
sound as she
walked around the yard
burning.

The ashes of one household are collected by another for the
bits of coal.
If you want to survive you must make a plan.

I cannot say anything about my future now.

Reading this in the context of *New Poetries II*, I find it difficult to avoid the feeling that much of the poetry we produce is competently written, self-indulgent fiddle-faddle.