

AILMENTS AND ANTIDOTES



Aisling Maguire

- PETER SIRR, *The Ledger of Fruitful Exchange*. *Gallery Press*, £6.95
THEO DORGAN, *Rosa Mundi*. *Salmon Poetry*, £6.99
MICHAEL O'LOUGHLIN, *Another Nation*. *New Island Books*, £6.95
SARA BERKELEY, *Facts about Water*. *Bloodaxe*, £6.95
KERRY HARDIE, *A Furious Place*. *Gallery Press*, £5.95
PAT BORAN, *The Shape of Water*. *Dedalus Press*, £5.95
SHEILA O'HAGAN, *The Troubled House*. *Salmon Poetry*, £5.99
PATRICK CHAPMAN, *The New Pornography*. *Salmon Poetry*, £5.99

The first thing to remark about these eight volumes, with two exceptions, is their absence of formal or technical skill. The exceptions, significantly, come from Gallery Press, which continues to be selective and to maintain high production values. The same cannot be said of the newer presses, least of all Salmon, whose showing here is weak on every count, from choice of poets to cover design and proofreading (there are ridiculous errors in O'Hagan's book). In this last respect New Island Books also sin, giving us "clods" for clouds, "busses" and "cemetary".

As a sample of contemporary Irish poetry, these books ignore the old rural Ireland and look to cities, especially those of northern and eastern Europe and the former USSR. But although emigration is a recurring theme, the post-colonial whinge persists. O'Loughlin, despite being "a European", waxes sentimental about Irish in "On Hearing Michael Hartnett". Dorgan favours a spurious *translatorese* as though from Irish ("When she'd come in from the garden green would come with her", he tells us of "The Woman who was an eagle"), and O'Hagan devotes an "Oirish" sequence to Anne Devlin.

Almost unanimously the male poets lament lost love, but the griefs of O'Loughlin, Boran and Chapman pale beside Sirr's rhapsody on the theme. From the moment of opening *The Ledger of Fruitful Exchange* we know we are in the company of a real poet. "Cures" is a litany of mediaeval antidotes to ailments physical and metaphysical, ranging from the grotesque "For jaundice a stunned bat worn around the waist / until it dies" to the exotic "topaz in a ring to show poison". Sirr's minimal punctuation invests the catalogue form with unusual urgency:

for worms cherry seeds for fever tormentil, honey

Rowans plums sapphire emerald in wine
topaz in a ring to show poison for fleas dried earth
for hatred a doe for silence the sea for pride
alabaster, oak, leopard, the wrecked sun
creeping to its hut, the night hugging and hoarding

its secret alphabets...

The run-on “honey // Rowans” breaks the prescriptive pattern of the previous three verses which opened with “for...”, and the recital reaches a note of panic in line three until “pride”, rhyming with “dried”, halts the line prematurely, as if the speaker is losing breath, or time, or wisdom, an exhaustion manifest in the “wrecked sun”.

These “secret alphabets” signal Sirr’s preoccupation with disrupted communication: an estranged prodigal son (“Home Ballads”), a partitioned room in “Four Songs” where gaps reflect the interrupted space. The theme underpins “A Journal”, which forms the book’s second part, recording a break-up with his Finnish lover. Their incompatibility is presented in terms of light and dark, snow and rain, and language. She speaks “impossible English”; he wants “to be held forever / where two languages come together”. This occurs briefly when she misreads “loincloth” as “lioncloth”, prompting new erotic possibilities:

Roused on the page, the word
admits itself, the soft folds drop, allowing
the great head to rear up, claws and stage growl
and behold its own form in wonder

Finally Christ and the saints are undressed and the lovers meet in the surprise of a prelapsarian nakedness. Throughout the sequence Sirr counterpoints his despair by such ironic improvisations, dramatising love without sentimentality but acknowledging its vulnerability.

By contrast Theo Dorgan hubristically immortalises his love in an unlikely pairing of Yeats and Akhmatova (“To Gennadi Uranov in the Coming Times”). His identification with Yeats begins in the title of this his second collection, *Rosa Mundi*. The cover, designed by the poet himself, features a rose window overlaid with an astronomical map ringed with flame, harbingers of a vision which the poems fail to deliver.

These fall loosely into three groups: politics; love; nostalgia. The themes overlap and in the last, title poem we see the young Dorgan flash-

ing an sos to Collins Barracks: "It sets in early, disillusion with the State, its idle soldiers". Many of these poems are like the child's mirror flashing futilely to advertise Dorgan as the voice of our times. Here he is with his lover in North Antrim where, borrowing words from Heaney's "The Tollund Man", they are "unhappy and at home", but later:

... I reach my hand up to my love walking the
wall,
Pure happy. I imagine pushing her face into gravel
as the shots ring out,
Cowering as heavy boots smack desperately for
cover...

The transition from being "pure happy" to the imagined attack is not evident and by calling attention to its fabrication the poets abuses our sympathy. Worse, he trivialises the brute reality of such events by turning them into a puerile game.

Moving eastwards he lands in "Red Square":

I imagine tank tracks crunching across the setts,
I imagine the steppe wind howling from immense
Voids far to the east...

He seems not to know that the poem is, or should be, an act of imagination anyway and that by having to spell out what he imagined he kills it.

The self-importance in Michael O'Loughlin's poetry differs from Dorgan's. His is the voice of the emigrant who has been there, done that and knows more than the rest of us about Ireland's ills. In "Dublin 1982" he tells the city "Your buildings collapse like Berlin / in slow motion: your wall is still intact / and sometimes visible."

Hyped as "intelligent", presenting "dark insights" into our native land, O'Loughlin is in fact a lad throwing shapes in his "German Army combat jacket" ("An Emigrant Ballad"), boasting about whores in Hamburg and Amsterdam. The latter appears at the end of a poem about his mother's death ("Afterimages"), giving us a dark insight indeed into the macho mind.

The new and selected poems here were written over fifteen years and are broken into ten sections grouped by location or theme. His paranoia verges on the acute as he assumes the voices of Mandelstam, alludes to Kafka, and identifies with Richard Kimble in "The Fugitive", while in "The Piano":

In my room I stalk on,
Imagining listeners behind the white wall
Their ears bent to the tuneless tentative sound
Of my black boots plodding through virgin snow.

In "Concert-Going in Vienna", however, the boot is on the other foot and he remarks of the affluent audience: "I had not thought death had missed so many." The offence in this sentiment is compounded by its travesty of Eliot's phrase from Dante and it is not justified by the trite closing conjuration of the "hungry ghost". Does O'Loughlin seriously believe that any death would feed the hungry? Is this what the blurb-writers regard as intelligent?

Too much hype is a bad thing, and Sara Berkeley shows why. The plaudits that greeted her first collection, published when she was nineteen, may explain why she now takes herself so seriously. *Facts About Water* fills only forty pages of this book, the rest being a selection from *Penn* (1986) and *Home Movie Nights* (1989). Through these we can see the whimsy and self-absorption of the teenager becoming febrility and self-pity in the adult.

When the imaginary playmates "curious george" and "Penn" are left behind the poet has to deal with men who make her miserable. The frequency of her plight makes one wonder if there isn't an element of make-believe here too, for even when romance blossoms she manufactures misery, as in "Airport":

To keep a footing on the rolling earth
I played a game
of missing you ahead of time.

Striving for a large effect, her vague private images alienate the reader. This weakness can be traced in part to a creative workshop in Berkeley (Berkeley, Ca., that is):

Bob Hass laughs about Dickinson
and tells us it is
okay to be slow
and confusion
is all part of what is meant to be. ("Fall")

Berkeley would do well to forget Hass and remember Frost's definition of poetry as "a momentary stay against confusion".

Although as a victim of ME she has good reason to be miserable, Kerry Hardie sees the world with the eye of the survivor winning through.

"Colours" records a Stephen's Day walk after a bout of illness. The poet seeks the Impressionists' blue which was the "signature of well-being". Turning from the "jewel strong" colours of slate, weds and dead bracken she sees a barn, "its fresh-painted gutters, sky-blue / and too thin a colour to echo deeply." Less durable than jewels, no match for an Impressionist painting, maybe, this homely blue is nevertheless a comforting foil to the barren land. Its light heralds the turn of the year and its frailty matches the poet's tentative recovery.

Behind the various journeys in Hardie's poems runs this tension between the puritan search for glorious revelation and the humanist's appreciation of ordinary life. The "furious place" of the title is the heart raging in "She Goes with her Brother to the Place of their Forebears", the apotheosis of her religious debate. Here she slakes spite for her Cromwellian ancestors by drinking from a Marian well and resolves to "live lightly". These poems show Hardie at her best. Sometimes her pleasure in painting the small scene leads to decoration rather than development and the poems evaporate. Fewer adjectives and surer metre would give her voice the strength it deserves.

Pat Boran's spiritual journey points east, with references to Zen Buddhism and the I-Ching. Yet the epigraph to "Pain Song", first of the three parts in *The Shape of Water*, quotes Larkin's "Water" on the construction of a religion, suggesting that Boran has not yet found a spiritual home. Water and Buddhism come together in "For my Goldfish, Valentine" where the eponymous fish is compared with the Dalai Lama, because it recalls the poet's childhood pet. Absurd as this may sound Boran is sincere. However, he concentrates on his own response at the expense of the metaphor and the poem sinks in bathos:

Today in the meantime
 you look out at me
 with the same bewildered eyes,
 mouthing the same mute syllable,
 the eternal Om that says
 nothing changes

We next hear the mantra in part three, "Way of Peace", where love restored fulfils the poet's need for a faith:

the Om, Omagh and Omaha all know,
 intuitively, the mouth's a well-known sky
 that cannot be described. Their failures prove
 the unsayable is the goal of love.

Here is Boran's failing, he cannot resist the glib association, the obvious joke. The yoking of Om, Omagh and Omaha seems downright silly, given the absence of any meaningful connection between them, or any link with what goes before or after in the poem. Boran's tone may be gentler now than in earlier work but his craft has not matured.

Like Boran, Sheila O'Hagan is recipient of the Kavanagh Award. She cites Heaney, Kavanagh and Keats, but her poems reveal no trace of their example. Many focus on paintings but like the colour plate in "Seurat's Gray Dots" they are flat and pallid. Essaying big statements in a whimsical tone she is merely simplistic. In "Water Woman" she dismisses Bonnard's "still life" nudes to paint herself in the bath:

And my waterlily breasts,
With what brushwave do I cup
Your pink convex, caress
That arch of rhomboid thigh.

Surely the geometric forms named here are more rigid than anything Bonnard painted? Nor can her narcissism forestall contemplation of her body as a sex object.

Sex may be the idea behind Patrick Chapman's *The New Pornography*, but it is a cold-blooded affair expressed in anatomical and pathological terms which mistake bad taste for wit, as in the "Short-Love Couplets":

The reality of hospital.
The memory of making love to your colostomy.

Travel does not broaden his mind: wherever he goes he indulges his ghoulishness, pocketing a human eye in Central Park, and in Prague writing on a postcard of the Old Jewish Cemetery "Wish you were here", recalling O'Loughlin in Vienna. It doesn't bode well for the New Europe.