

*Red-Eyed Guy
in Tie-Dyed Shirt*

Kerry Hardie, *The Sky Didn't Fall*. Gallery Press, €10.00 (pbk)

Medbh McGuckian, *Had I a Thousand Lives*. Gallery Press,
€11.40 (pbk)

Lachlan Mackinnon, *The Jupiter Collisions*. Faber & Faber,
£8.99 (pbk)

Since the launch of her first collection back in 1996 Kerry Hardie has been something of an emerging name in Irish poetry. I should say at this point that though I was certainly aware of its existence, her work had made no real impression on me until I opened and began to read this, her third collection. The first poem, "Rivers", begins in a promising enough fashion: "After the frost-locked week/ the grey day eases open like a hand". "The grey day" of the second line is admittedly a little clichéd; "the day eases open like a hand" would certainly have been better. However this is about as good as it gets. After another nine unexciting lines "Rivers" limps to a conclusion, and Hardie leaves us with the self-consciously poetic image of "A heron standing in the long shine of the weir". Where she really begins to strut her stuff though is in a poem such as "Comfort". Dedicated to fellow poet Joan McBreen, it demands to be quoted in full:

You followed me into the kitchen
where my mother sat in the fall of light from the window,
not looking up.

*Ma, I said, this is Joan.
This is the woman I spoke of,
the one who steps into the bush of churches*

lighting flames against the darkness for you

*although she doesn't know you
and it's three months since he died.*

She looked up then, her face bright,
her hands lifting and reaching in welcome,
and I woke with tears on my face.

The banality of the scene described here is breathtaking. Indeed, the thought of Hardie, her mother and Joan McBreen stuck there in that kitchen, with Hardie going on in her pseudo-poetic way about how McBreen is “the one who steps into the hush of churches” almost made me want to cry too. And there’s more where that came from. In the first stanza of “She Hasn’t Been Paid for Six Months” Hardie informs us that:

I’m with Valentina in the kitchen.
She tells me there’s a problem with her e-mail.
The office of the journal that she edits
is in the National Library of Moldova
which hasn’t paid the phone bill.
It’s only temporary, it will soon be sorted.

Now, this is Hardie at her awful worst, where she seems to have somehow got the idea that a straightforward description of such a non-event—without metaphor, simile or a single original turn of phrase—can somehow be poetry. Elsewhere she isn’t quite so bad. She does produce the occasional memorable phrase, such as “January’s closed rooms” in “All Lives Know Longing, All Lives Are Contained” or the raven’s “blunt wings drubbing the air” in “Trapped Swallow”. And a poem such as “After a While, We Go In” is actually quite good, in a clipped, minimalist sort of way:

Today at the house,
his jacket and shirt
are stretched on the line,
his dog watches out.
None of us speaks.
Nobody comes.

But in “The Day of the Funeral” Hardie is back in that kitchen: “She sent me on errands because I was annoying the kitchen./ My sister and my sister-in-law doing food”. Now, there’s nothing

wrong with poems set in kitchens—Sylvia Plath’s “Lesbos” and Langston Hughes’s “I, Too” are just two that spring to mind. The problem with Kerry Hardie’s kitchen is that on the rare occasions when something of interest actually happens there, she still usually manages to make it sound like just another big, long Sunday afternoon yawn.

After forty eight pages of such over-earnest transparency, the occasionally baffling complexity of Medbh McGuckian latest offering came as something of a relief. Even her harshest detractor would have to admit that, in terms of what she can make language do, McGuckian is in a completely different league to the Kerry Hardies of this world. That said, her work is by no means universally accepted: the mere mention of her name can be enough to make the typical Irish advocate of the accessible poetry, which he knows for a fact the man in the street really wants, start banging the table and foaming at the mouth. My difficulty with her work has less to do with this school of thought than it does with the fact that McGuckian seems to want to have it both ways. Like Wallace Stevens and John Ashbery she writes beautifully difficult poems. Unlike either of them she makes, or at least allows others to make on her behalf, grandiose claims about the cultural and political significance of these same poems. According to the blurb on its back cover, *Had I a Thousand Lives* is the “memorial collection, honouring the bicentenary of the resistance organisers Robert Emmet and Thomas Russell (both were executed in 1803), and what Dante calls their willingness to be unmade... above all [it] weighs the morality of its heroes’ compulsion towards self-sacrifice in the cause of political advancement”. I read this book from cover to cover, and though it certainly contains references and allusions to various events in Irish history, I have to say that I found it to be a collection of poems which are as much about themselves, about the possibilities of language, as they are about anything else. No doubt Irish Studies scholars everywhere are, as you read this, busy trying to thread McGuckian’s references together and prove me wrong. However, in my view a poem as excellent as “The Sleeping Room” is best read without any such claims attached:

This summer’s evening red
is for others. Wind and light
of an earlier face
will gather the apples.

A sound, warmed by being
lived in, crumbles off
the set of the houses,
persists in being no-one's.

No one has stayed underwater
longer than this hyperwakeful
need for sea or, still untouched
deep within it, Easter's voice

avoiding all my summer paths
like a round corner room
full of last June.
Day in my blood,

night in my blood,
the journey to September
lies inside me, costing me
all but your faithful hands.

Now, "the journey to September" could be Robert Emmet's political journey to his execution outside St Catherine's Church, Thomas Street on 20 September 1803. And "Easter's voice" could, I suppose, be a reference to the 1916 rising. But, to me, this is all rather beside the point. "The Sleeping Room" is clearly a poem about some sort of catastrophic loss. But the historical references are so vague as to render them almost irrelevant. It is a poem which is far more universal than it is historically specific. Indeed, this is one of its strengths.

The first poem, "River of January", is similarly vague. It could, I suppose, be about the Nationalist population left stranded in the Northern Irish statelet after 1922:

I do not sing of arms and the man,
I have nothing to say which I can say.
People walk about as if they own
where they are, and they do.

But those separated by a forest
of error from the separated

call the deadly loneliness
by many other names.

However it could, just as easily, be about the breakdown of a marriage, or any other sort of separation or estrangement. It sometimes seems that events in Irish history are only important to Medbh McGuckian as metaphors: they give her a framework around which to construct her poems. Or at least some of her poems. But I'm not at all convinced that her imagination is politically engaged in the way the back-cover of this collection claims. The title of her last collection *Drawing Ballerinas* was a quote from Matisse, who when asked what he did during the Nazi occupation of France, apparently said that he "spent the worst years drawing ballerinas". There is an obvious parallel with McGuckian's work here, in that she spent the worst years of the Northern troubles writing poems which some would describe as difficult or deliberately hermetic. Of course it could be said that this was a political stance in and of itself. But those critics who tell us that we should read her poetry as serving a Nationalist cultural agenda, or being about the Northern Troubles in some direct, utilitarian way, are, I think, doing both her and us a disservice.

Perhaps McGuckian has felt pressured both by the Troubles and the presence of more politically engaged and accessible poets such as Heaney and Longley, into donning a political mask of sorts. If so, then that's all it is: a mask. Like or loathe McGuckian's work, it probably has at least as much in common with that of early twentieth-century women experimentalists such as Mina Loy and Gertrude Stein, as it does with that of either of the two aforementioned gentlemen. So, if you do happen to buy this book, it's best to ignore the blurb on the back, and just take the poems as you find them. Surprisingly enough, several of them are well worth the effort.

The jacket-blurb on Lachlann Mackinnon's *The Jupiter Collisions* says that his is a collection "as various in its concerns as it is unified in its search for the close naming of things". When a publisher describes a collection of poetry as being "various in its concerns", it usually means one thing: that it is more a gathering together of all the publishable poems the poet has written since his or her last collection (Mackinnon's last book of poems appeared in 1991) than it is a collection with any sort of unifying theme. And this is certainly the case here. The title poem is a pow-

erful enough imaginative description of comets being crushed by Jupiter's vast gravitational pull:

Curled like the scrolled end of a chair's arm, swaddled
in dust or gas, the comet's rock or ice heart
went to bits in the field
of invisible stress around Jupiter;

that was the first pass. At the next, like wagons
of a goods train or boys in Indian file,
each fragment bowed its head
and fell into the giant's vast embrace.

This is followed by a group of poems—"Riders on the Storm", "Bob Dylan's Minnesota Harmonica Sound", "Not Fade Away" and "On the Roof of the World"—whose self-conscious groovyness makes Mackinnon seem like something of a poor man's Simon Armitage. "On the Roof of the World" is about The Beatles' last live performance on the roof of their Abbey Road studio in 1969. "Not Fade Away" is a five line tribute to Jerry Garcia of The Grateful Dead, who died in 1995:

I play one record then another,
hearing your youth
in your later work and your
late economy in your youth's
profligate, glittering runs.

Can't you just hear the red-eyed guy in the tie-dyed shirt whispering "cool", as Deadheads everywhere suddenly take to reading the poetry of Lachlan Mackinnon? On second thoughts maybe not. Such absurdities aside, there is the occasional strong, resonant line in some of Mackinnon's "rock-and-roll" poems. In "Bob Dylan's Minnesota Harmonica Sound", for instance, we get "Night was indoors, the sound of parents' friends". Having shown himself capable of writing a fine, unselfconscious line, just three lines later he's knee deep in clichés again: "He was pretending he was James Dean, / he was pretending he was Baudelaire". Indeed, I'm sure he was. There's nothing to be done with this sort of poetry, but to be briefly embarrassed on behalf of the person who wrote it, and then move on to the next poem as quickly as possible. But as you do you realise that Lachlan Mackinnon's

poems are riddled with flaws. In "River Psalm" he uses some very awkward phrasing: "We are left to feel desolate or, maybe,/ secretly wish that we too could be getting going". Surely that should be 'could get going'? In "Oxford" though he reminds us again that he can actually write:

so I go to another [pub] and sit an hour with
ghosts and a pint. Recalling happiness a thwart thing
killed hurts me worse than thoughts of the misery
we came to.

And in the interesting, eight-page long "Pips in a Watermelon" Mackinnon puts his anti-philosophy on full display: "the discovery of any system/ of belief is a matter for dismay,/ a retreat from the pointillisme/ of what is". Now, that's just a little bit better than his previous blather about James Dean and Baudelaire. This collection is in every sense a mixed bag and, while some of Mackinnon's poems are quite good, others are so obviously deficient that they wouldn't (or at least shouldn't) make it out of any self-respecting creative writing class.