

Digging for Poetry

Simon Armitage, *Selected Poems*. Faber and Faber, £9.99 (pbk)

Simon Armitage, *The Universal Home Doctor*. Faber and Faber,
£12.99 (hbk)

Tom French, *Touching the Bones*. Gallery Press, €10 (pbk)/€17.50
(hbk)

I first heard Simon Armitage read on a radio show in 1992 where, in between songs by The Smiths, Armitage waxed lyrical about Ted Hughes. The link to Hughes is easy to make, but also rather misleading. While an atmosphere of bodily and spiritual decay haunts both poets, in Armitage the bleakness is nearly always offset by a consistent use of irony and wit—a stubborn determination to find humour in horror. Both writers frequently begin poems up brambled lanes and half-covered ditches, but whereas Hughes ends his moorland verse on a “grimace”, “gasp” and “gesture of death” (“The Casualty”) Armitage’s poetry tends to conclude on the opposite foot with a grin, a guffaw and a gesture of life.

Struggling to order my own impressions of Armitage’s first collections of poetry, particularly *Zoom!* (1989) and *Kid* (1992), I tend to recall the soundtrack of voices that surrounded Armitage’s hero-worship of Hughes that night rather than the substance of what was actually said. For me, Armitage’s work has more in common with the songs of The Smiths than any book by Heaney or Hughes. Look back at the reviews of his work and the majority seem to double as descriptions of The Smiths’ music: Morrissey’s maudlin words set to Johnny Marr’s glorious lyric arrangements—tragic themes placed in continuous edgy relief. For Peter Reading, Armitage “creates a muscular but elegant language of his own out of youthful, up-to-the-minute jargon and the vernacular of his native northern England”. For Jamie McKendrick, he “writes with wit and feeling about experiences

and conditions which poetry often turns its back on". Reading and McKendrick celebrate Armitage's work in a manner reminiscent of the way teenagers everywhere responded to The Smiths. While my generation of twentysomethings waited in vain for the band to reform throughout the 1990s, Armitage was in a sense continuing their good work without the incessant radio play. He took the place of Morrissey and Marr without the pop star exposure. Armitage is at his best when he keeps the tonal balance that made The Smiths so memorable; at his worst when he tries to hum and haw like Heaney and Hughes.

Armitage made his name as a poet at the tail end of the 1980s. As a Probation Officer by day and writer by night, his split life seemed to recall Philip Larkin's accidental employment as a Head Librarian or Wallace Stevens's famous impersonation of an insurance executive. This career path certainly brought a whiff of seriousness to the poems. Here was a poet who appeared to have been there, done that, and seen rather a lot—most of it resolutely desperate or strange. Subjects for poems include an adulterer who freezes to death in a snowbound car ("Snow Joke") and a local drunk who pretends to direct the buses about town while at the same time pissing his pants ("A Painted Bird for Thomas Szasz"). Armitage uses these unusual stories mainly to entertain his readers. The anonymous man who dies on the moors because he cannot keep warm is ironically from a place called Heaton. In fact, the poem is told as if it were a joke ("Heard the one about the guy from Heaton Mersey?") before ending in a pub argument as to who should "take the most credit" for finding his body:

Him who took the aerial to be a hawthorn twig?
Him who figured out the contour of his car?
Or him who said he heard the horn, moaning
softly like an alarm clock under an eiderdown?

While the poem's final comparison is both beautiful and suggestive (particularly of the life the dead man will no longer wake to), its effect is diminished by the jokes about names that precede it. In lame limerick fashion, Armitage describes how the cold man from Heaton is eventually discovered "slumped against the steering wheel/ with VOLVO printed backwards in his frozen brow". Armitage seems to laugh at the surrealism of the man's death without encouraging us to feel any of its pathos or tragedy. This is

poetry as stand-up comedy rather than art or polemic, a change in emphasis which inevitably reduces a poet's subject matter to caricature and an audience to hysterics.

Armitage's forays into Wendy Cope territory are actually quite rare, although a tendency to easy humour mars his entire body of work. The title poem of his second collection, *Kid*, is emblematic in this regard. Armitage adapts a well-known cartoon strip (Batman and Robin), gives the story a wry post-modern twist (Batman as the immature one), and then abandons the poem halfway in with nothing to intrigue the reader beyond the initial reversal of roles. The opening joke is a good one—Batman as the cad about town sleeping with married women—but after that the poem loses its way. Armitage's revision of the superhero models many of us inherit as children is similar to Carol Ann Duffy's recent rewriting of male myths of power in *The World's Wife*. In both poets, there is a reliance on cheap jokes over philosophical insights, the throwaway phrase over the monumental statement. Armitage's parody of cartoon speech thus becomes indistinguishable from the source it mocks, as Robin swaps his tights for jeans yet still sounds very much the junior partner in the relationship:

Holy robin-redbreast-nest-egg-shocker!
Holy roll-me-over-in-the-clover,
I'm not playing ball boy any longer
Batman, now I've doffed that off-the-shoulder
Sherwood-Forest-green and scarlet number
for a pair of jeans and crow-neck jumper;
now I'm taller, harder, stronger, older.

Robin's refusal to play second fiddle to Batman is celebrated in the poem as a triumph of the younger generation over the older, of the unspun superhero over the fraud in a cape. Armitage is perhaps making a similar point about his own use of language and persona. His aim, like Robin, is to cut through the disguises and rhetoric that separate artist and audience—to find an unmediated means of communication free of masks and mystery. As Robin dresses down to blend in with the citizens of Gotham City, so Armitage uses shortcut and slang to speak to a wider audience.

There is obviously an element of poetic one-upmanship here as well. Armitage sees himself as a "real boy wonder" too, "taller, harder, stronger" than his peers. The "pair of jeans and crow-neck jumper" is the uniform of a different sort of artist than a dandy

suit of green and scarlet. Armitage is presumably attempting to align his own work with that of poets like Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes. The “crow-neck jumper” is both an allusion to Hughes’s general persona as well as to his eponymous collection of poems. Yet Armitage can only dress like a superhero poet as Robin can only aspire to replace Batman. He did not yet have the language or tricks to keep up with the “real” boy wonders.

Readers used to Armitage’s trademark gags and punchlines must have been surprised by the seriousness of his third collection of poems, *A Book of Matches* (1993). Its very title seems to announce a burning of bridges. Individual poems still look back to Armitage’s “kid phase”, particularly “Hitcher” in which yet another dead body is disposed of from a car, this time “on the top road out of Harrogate”. Yet the comedy club poems are not as dominant as before, as if Armitage were gradually leaving the rubber face behind. The series of sonnets that make up the bulk of the book are Armitage’s finest achievement. Each poem in the sequence deals with the physical decay of the body and the responses of those who live near to death. Yet while the death of body or mind is the unstated subject of every single sonnet, Armitage somehow finds a balancing image of movement or travel—some memory or object able to outlast and outspoke mortality. Here is the voice of an arthritic patient refusing to let the body sleep:

My dear, my skeleton will set like biscuit overnight,
like glass, like ice, and you can choose
to snap me back to life before first light,
or let me laze until
the shape I take becomes the shape I keep.

Don’t leave me be. Don’t let me sleep.

The speaker wants to remain in the land of breakable things: “the cracks and clicks,/ the clockwork of my joints and discs,/ the ratchet of my hips”. The body is like a machine in need of oil—a working object that responds to touch. “Don’t leave me be. Don’t let me sleep”. The final line is stranded on the page yet begs to be connected, not just with the preceding stanza but also with the reader listening. Armitage finally learns how to use language to move us; we almost reach out to the page to wake the poem’s speaker.

At the centre of the sequence is a poem about a son's relationship with his mother which prepares the ground for all of Armitage's subsequent work on the theme of loss. A mother comes to help her son in his new house as he measures up for "windows, pelmets, doors". But as the poem progresses, we realise that he is actually addressing no more than a ghost:

You at the zero-end, me with the spool of tape, recording
length, reporting metres, centimetres back to base, then leaving
up the stairs, the line still feeding out, unreeling
years between us. Anchor. Kite.

I space-walk through the empty bedrooms, climb
the ladder to the loft, to breaking-point, where something
has to give;
two floors below your fingertips still pinch
the last one-hundredth of an inch... I reach
towards a hatch that opens on an endless sky
to fall or fly.

The measuring tape that unspools between mother and son is a perfect metaphor for the relationship between them. It represents the physical characteristics that mothers pass onto children and the psychological cords of collective experience and responsibility that bind the one to the other. The mother holds the tape at the "zero-end". She is the body where a child begins its life, where it starts to lengthen in centimetres and grow away from her. The mother is both an "Anchor" and "Kite", the person that grounds and fixes a child to language and memory in the first years of life and the point from which that same child will eventually fly.

The "line still feeding out" is of course the line of a poem too—Armitage's own means of contact between childhood and adulthood, the living and the dead. For poems also lead us "back to base", to the dates and places that made us. The speaker's "space-walk" through a series of "empty bedrooms" is equivalent to the reader's walk through the poem looking for material experiences and objects to hold onto. We share in the feeling of walking through air, of half-expecting the poem to collapse at any minute. It is an elegy for a mother that also doubles as an elegy for the poem. For as the speaker reaches towards the hatch "that opens on an endless sky", Armitage seems also to be reaching for an exit point to the poem, unsure whether to "fall or fly". The act

of reading the poem, in continual expectation of the line breaking and metaphors dissolving into space, is thus identical to the experience of the speaker whose personal loss evokes the same feeling of almost giving up.

Armitage builds on this work in subsequent collections of poetry, particularly *The Dead Sea Poems* (1995) and *CloudCuckooLand* (1997). While a grotesque fascination with slashing wrists remains part of the repertoire (examples include “I Say I Say I Say” and “The Two of Us”), the imagery is grounded in a more serious tradition. Armitage now takes his cue from Andrew Marvell rather than the average punter downtown. The exquisite “Goalkeeper with a Cigarette”, for instance, seems to have stepped straight out of an Albert Camus novel. The humour of earlier collections is intact, but it is now linked to a philosophical edge that keeps the poems in mind long after the topical jokes are no longer in fashion:

He is what he is, does whatever suits him,
because he has no highfalutin song
to sing, no neat message for the nation
on the theme of genius or dedication;
in his passport, under “occupation”,
no one forced the man to print the word
“custodian”...

The goalkeeper is an existential hero rather than a crowd favourite. He is true not to a movement or nation but simply to being himself: “He is what he is, does whatever suits him”. One might say the same of Armitage too at this point in his career. No longer trying to please an audience by amusing it, he appears to take time over the form of a poem rather than its punchline or slogan.

This seriousness has its flat-footed moments as well. “Five Eleven Ninety Nine”, Armitage’s state-of-the nation epic, is a particularly dreary rewriting of Yeats’s “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”. Ambitious in scope if somewhat monotonous on the page, the poet toys with the reader for a staggering one hundred and thirty-three stanzas before finally stumbling upon a resonant image: a half-baked apple rescued from a fire.

Kicking through the feather-bed of ashes
someone flushes out a half-baked apple.

Softened, burnt and blistered on the skin, but
hardly touched within. Inedible thing,

the flesh gone muddy, foul, the core and pips
that no one cares to eat still fresh, still ripe,
and him who found it heads off down the slope
towards the park and plants or buries it.

We wait, listless, aimless now it's over,
ready for what follows, what comes after,
stood beneath an iron sky together,
awkwardly at first, until whenever.

The inedible apple pulled from the pile is a fair metaphor for the achievements of this particular poem, and perhaps even for Armitage's first decade as a published poet. Brash and muddy on the surface, it is easy to view the apple as simply bad and the poetry as mostly inconsistent. Scratch nearer the heart and we find a core perpetually renewing itself—always “new, tender, and quick”. And so we “wait, listless, aimless now it's over”. Armitage is about to change tack again. The burning of fruit, like the burning of matches, announces something else will follow.

And so we end up in the here and now, a new Armitage book on the shelf. In some sense, as other reviewers have commented, *The Universal Home Doctor* (2002) is merely a continuation of similar themes. There is the standard Armitage diatribe on the stupidity of the upper classes (“The Laughing Stock”); the standard grotesque treatment of yet another absurd death (“The Strid”); the standard polite torture of one more human being (“The Nerve Condition Studies”). So far, so *Kid*-like. Amidst the repetition, however, there are three or four real gems that at least consolidate the achievement of *The Book of Matches*. In no particular order, these must include “All for One” (a Yeatsian update on the division of mind and body), “The Straight and Narrow” (nominally about a young girl who has swallowed a toy car but really about a child's effortless belief in the future as something luminous), and “Working from Home” (an Italo Calvinesque fable about the paranoia of the artist writing at home). I am not sure if Armitage is moving on in terms of technique or theme in these poems, although he is certainly confronting absence on a more regular basis—absence of loved ones and of the words poets usually seek to remember them by.

Armitage's elegies, whether for his childhood self or for friends close to him, nearly always end on an image of empty space. At these moments, he comes across a little like Larkin whose most celebrated epiphany also salutes the beauty of a place "that shows/ Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless". Armitage's nihilism, like Larkin's, seems peculiarly transcendent. Both seem to anticipate death smiling. It is this instinct that makes Armitage a curiously attractive poet to follow through tragedy. He refuses to let the fates speak. This is particularly prominent in a poem called "Butterflies" in which the speaker remembers the thrill of being driven over a hill as a child:

Even at our age and alone, some instinct in the toes or heel
wants to let rip over the brow of that hill, let body and soul
divide, the heart in its seat-belt, hands locked on the wheel
but the spirit propelled through the windscreen—weightless,
thrown...

As Armitage has developed as a poet, his images have become more and more weightless. Whereas in his early work everything builds up to a punchline, in his recent writing the journey is always towards ellipsis and silence. I prefer the latter direction to the former, although I still think Armitage has some way to go before he can ever declare himself a superhero poet. Getting the clothes right is one thing; having the body of work is another.

Tom French seems to have grown up as a writer much quicker than Simon Armitage. His first collection, *Touching the Bones* (2002), displays a maturity Armitage took years to master. In fact, there are more good poems in French's single book than in Armitage's entire *Selected Poems*. His poems focus in an almost religious way on human touch. They commemorate moments of contact between tips of fingers and grasping hands as if every human relationship was potentially fleeting or unstable. In contrast to Armitage, French seems an incredibly patient and unhurried writer. He pays particular attention to what John Ashbery once described as the "thinginess" of the world—the surfaces and textures that make every object individual.

As the title poem indicates, touch is nearly always an elegiac gesture in French's imagination. The living touch the dead only to say goodbye. It is the coldest of human partings that can never be repeated. French captures the desperation and selfishness of such

embraces, in particular our inability to let go of the dead person's body:

We grieve because the dead forget us.
We bury their bodies in boxes underground

and when we chance on them in sleep
and reach to bring the skulls up to our lips
to slake our griefs in their crevices and curves,

to roll the shinbones and the thighbones
and the ribs in dust, to touch them with our flesh,
our dream hands reaching toward them make us wake.

Such moments are reminiscent of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and perhaps any poem or story in which a grieving speaker attempts to use "dream hands" to touch an imaginary alive person. French is of course describing a universal nightmare most of us probably recognise, one from which we wake only by shaking ourselves out of sleep. Yet as Shakespeare also said, the dreamer and the poet are often close bedfellows. The "dream hands" of the mourner reaching across space to disturb an unresponsive other seem also to be the roving hands of the poet reaching across the page to wake the reader. French is rattling our shinbones and thighbones too. In the best Metaphysical tradition, he makes us shiver at the noisiness of mortality and its proximity to our own flesh.

The best poems in the collection all re-enact this moment. They place us not just near death, but right alongside those who are about to experience it. "Night Drive", like "Touching the Bones", is another chilling poem about a fairly normal occurrence: a sheep stepping out in front of a car. It describes a further moment of touch, this time a mother grabbing her son's hand as she anticipates a car crash:

Something stepped into our beam and stood there,
dumbly, ready to confront its death.
I remember your right hand in the darkness—
a white bird frightened from its fastness

in your lap, bracing yourself for the impact,
hearing you whisper "*Jesus*" under your breath,

preparing your soul for the moment of death.
Then, just as suddenly, nothing happened—

the sheep stepped back into the verge
for no reason, attracted by a clump of grass.
For days I felt the pressure of your hand on mine.
You would've led me to the next world, Mother, like a child.

There is a coolness about the poem that is not just confined to the ice on the road. Mother and son never communicate with each other in spite of their shared traumatic experience. The son remembers his mother's right hand as if it were a locked-up creature about to be freed: "a white bird frightened from its fastness". The alliteration backs up the sense of the words that this is a person who feels almost claustrophobic inside her own body—the cramped consonants functioning like a verbal equivalent for her imprisoned state. So tight is the mother's control over her body, she even whispers "Jesus" under her breath. Mother and child are completely separate as they confront death. In fact, it is almost suggested that the mother may welcome the oblivion death brings. For days afterwards, the son feels "the pressure" of her hand on his. This could be interpreted as no more than a gesture of panic were it not for the final line of the poem in which the son suggests that the mother may actually have been leading him "to the next world [...] like a child". This is an image not of comfort but of trickery—more Pied Piper than pietà. A night drive that almost ends in literal death thus somehow releases feelings that the son may have preferred metaphorically dead.

While French is obviously a master of the poetic delivery of emotionally concussing shocks, he is also capable of wonderful moments of absurdity. In "The Post-Hole", for example, he celebrates Saint MacAemoc's decision to dig an enormous hole at the bottom of a field in order to have some "respite from the life of the mind/ and divine contemplation". The local farmers, understandably curious about MacAemoc's behaviour, seek out his explanation whereupon they receive the following logical if not particularly spiritual interpretation:

The sight of the saint crouched down in it
stopped them in their tracks. He was grunting
under the shovelfuls of muck he was flinging up,

pumping sweat and cursing when he struck rock,
easing the welt in his palms with gobs of spit,
his cassock knotted at the knees to keep it clean,
his boxwood crucifix and beads lying in a heap

beside the hole because they were a hindrance
to the work. When the farmers sought to divine
the meaning of this sight and asked the saint,
he explained to them what they already knew—
that the post-hope for the corner post—the one
he was digging—needed to be that much deeper
for the post to take the strain and the fence to last.

MacAemoc gets back to earth by literally digging into it. He restores communication between the monks and lay people by downing his beads and cassock and labouring for his living as they do. There is perhaps an allusion to Seamus Heaney's "Digging" here. Could the slightly absurd figure of MacAemoc "grunting" and "cursing" in the dirt be a sidelong swipe at Heaney's own form of turf-flinging? Whatever the case, it is clear French is at least attracted to the Heaney-Hughes axis that still dominates modern poetry. This is not always a good thing. Poets need predecessors, as Amy Clampitt once suggested, but they also need to dig their own holes in the dirt. If I have any qualms about French's general direction, it is the narrowness of the tradition from which he springs. Not all mentors are good advisors, nor are all poet-heroes necessarily good influences. As French admits in "Striking Distance": "I learned about love on a Templetouhy bog". In his second book, I trust he can get out of the bog (however comfortable and reassuring it may seem) and move into a wider poetic world. French is a more gifted poet than Armitage, though they share a similar problem. Having perfected the art of fitting in, they now need to stand out.