

“CANOPY”



Seamus Heaney

It was the month of May.
Trees in Harvard Yard
were turning a young green.
There was whispering everywhere.

David Ward had hung
voice-boxes in the branches,
speakers wrapped in sacking
looking like old wasps' nests

or bat-fruit in the gloaming
or shadow adam's apples.
They made sibilant ebb and flow,
speech-gutterings, desultory

hush and backwash and echo.
It was like a recording of
tree congregations stirring,
giving thanks for the summer.

Or a wood that talked in its sleep.
Or reeds on a riverbank
going over and over their secret.
People were cocking their ears,

gathering, quietening,
stepping on to the grass,
stopping and holding hands.
Earth was replaying its tapes,

words being given new airs.
I met the artist and told him
Dante's whispering wood
of the suicides had its answer:

if a twig had been broken off there
it would have curled like lover's
fingers or mistletoe
around the fingers that broke it.

His work had confounded hell
in elysium. Avalon.
Or so I thought as we parted
like shades, and the lights came on.

AL DENTE



Conor O'Callaghan

ROBIN ROBERTSON, *A Painted Field*. Picador, £6.99

JAMIE MCKENDRICK, *The Marble Fly*. Oxford, £6.99

DON PATERSON, *God's Gift to Women*. Faber and Faber, £6.99

Robin Robertson is perhaps best known as the presiding genius of one of London's most respected publishing houses. His first collection, *A Painted Field*, is also the first book from Picador's new list of contemporary poets. The standard of its production alone is to be welcomed. As for the poem, Robertson brings to his work an editor's patience and exaction. Often it seems that whole poems are nothing more than a process of coining the most precise phrase, the most vivid image, for varying emotional states. His vocabulary can be rich and memorable. The simplicity of "Artichoke" has a carnivorous, authentic eroticism ("The meat of it lies, displayed, / up-ended, *al dente*, / the stub-root aching in its oil.") "Static" broods on separations both of love and geography ("Her postcards stir on the shelf, tip over; / the lights of Calais trip out one by one"). There is a definite echo of Geoffrey Hill in Robertson's language, salivating over real and symbolic wounds. "The Immoralist" even has an oblique reference to the third sonnet of Hill's "Funeral Music":

Scissoring the grey cr pe
released a clot as dark as liver;
an African plum in its syrup
slide into my lap.
Jesus, I said...

"Camera Obscura", the book's focal point, concerns itself with a different Hill, David Octavius Hill, a minor portrait painter and groundbreaking photographer in the middle of the last century. It takes the form of Hill's "imagined diary entries and letters" in prose, and other verse fragments in Robertson's own voice. As such, it is reminiscent of Anne Stevenson's collection of 1974, *Correspondences*. Another model may have been Joyce's epigrammatic masterpiece *Giacomo Joyce*, to which a direct allusion is made:

I cannot always hold your hand
or cover your eyes,
my beautiful blue-veined daughter.

Curiously, one gets little real sense of Hill himself in “Camera Obscura”, but rather of the several women who were central to his life. In those fragments where Hill is seen to record the deaths of his first wife Ann, and his beloved daughter Charlotte, Robertson’s flair for mimicry creates a convincing despair. Other good passages include “Dead Centre, 1858”, describing the first successful photograph of moving traffic; “Edinburgh Castle (Detail)” wittily juxtaposes Hill’s labours with those of a contemporary Japanese tourist; and “The Flowers of the Forest”, with its lovely image of the poet shouldering his daughter “like a set of pipes”. However, the piece as a whole feels slightly overdone. The verses of Colum’s “She Moved Through the Fair”, for example, add nothing to its narrative or music.

Robertson is one of those oddities, a poet whose work has been championed even before its publication in book form. Despite the fanfare, *A Painted Field* is in many respects a typical first collection: lots of poems about birds and sex and the sea, lots of exercises written in the mistaken belief that their accumulated descriptive detail will mysteriously click into place as actual poems. Even the much-praised version of Ovid, “The Flaying of Marsyas”, reads like a performance in studied ferocity. None the less, Robertson is a poet with distinct gifts. With luck, his second collection won’t take as long.

Liverpudlian Jamie McKendrick is a deceptively prolific poet. *The Marble Fly* is his third collection from Oxford in little over six years. Having lived in Italy for several years, he is a poet whose work is constantly being linked with southern Europe. Although the title poem of his new book takes its cue from a minute image in Pompeii, the Mediterranean connection is a bit of a red herring. McKendrick’s work couldn’t be more English. He is in love with dereliction, making its every example “a monument to Britain’s now decayed / industrial base”. His language is skilfully textured, relishing the heavy consonants of place- and brandnames (“a vessel stacked / with iron-bound trunks of Swedish pine // on their way to be axed into matchsticks / at Bryant & May’s factory down the road, / or in the hold of a ship from Trinidad / full of sugar-cane for Tate & Lyle’s”). He is a poet of tangible objects. “On/Off” finds several beautiful metaphors for an anglepoise lamp, recalling an early Sean O’Brien poem. “Boneshaker” laments a stolen bicycle. The car of an earlier piece, “Fetish”, is laid to rest in “Vehicle” and “A Roman Ruin”, the latter one of the highlights of the book:

O pilgrim, you who search for Rome in Rome...
Forget it. Neither the Tiber nor the Thames
will be graced again by your antique chrome.

Jamie McKendrick is one of those poets whose backers, of whom there are many, praise him for his quiet seriousness in a climate of brash verse and self-publicity. This is faint praise indeed. His work is inhibited by an irritating suggestiveness that often leads nowhere, such as the “baleful auguries” of the opening poem. Just when it seems that he is really going to come to the point, he tapers off with a coy phrase like “but that story’s been told”. With all its understatement, his language seldom fizzles. His tone is subtly ironic, if not actually funny. His love poems are always sensual, but could never be described as horny. Irritations aside, *The Marble Fly* has many things to admire. It is easily Jamie McKendrick’s best book to date.

Don Paterson, it would appear, is everyone’s favourite poet. His second collection, *God’s Gift to Women*, reiterates many of the thematic and formal characteristics established in his excellent first, *Nil Nil* (1993). Yet, despite its cocktail of off-beat formalism, dubious scholarship and low-life hilarity, there are definite signs that his work is gradually edging out of Muldoon’s potent shadow. He has largely and wisely given up the sonnet, and seems to be finding a more distinct voice in conventional and consistent metres. Although he remains an incorrigible post-modernist (for want of a better phrase), his reflexiveness could owe as much to the Italo Calvino of *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*. Delivered with that knowing twinkle in its eye, it is continually interrupting itself to explain to you, the reader, its procedures and your responses, as in the book’s jaunty opener, “Prologue”:

A poem is a little church, remember,
you, its congregation, I, its cantor;

so please, no flash, no necking in the pew,
or snorting just to let your neighbour know

you get the clever stuff...

This reflexiveness reaches its apogee in a piece actually called “Postmodern”, which takes the form of a joke told in unlineated Scots vernacular. It tells the story of a man who copies a hardcore porn film with a camcorder, loans it to all and sundry, and then discovers that he also recorded his reflection masturbating on the settee. Its macabre sex-

uality and self-absorption is the territory that Paterson has made his very own. "God's Gift to Women" is a sustained meditation on the relationship between eroticism and physical violence. Elsewhere there is the post-coital debris of "the snot-stream of a knotted Featherlite / draped on the wine glass". Even an elderly relative, otherwise beautifully remembered in the movements of "Addenda", is imagined to fantasize every night about a child he watched "parade / before the Indian doctor, stripped / down to just her underthings". One of the very best poems is "Buggery", quoted here in full:

At round about four months or so—
the time is getting shorter—
I look down as the face below
goes sliding underwater

and though I know it's over with
and she is miles from me
I stay a while to mine the earth
for what was lost at sea

as if the faces of the drowned
might turn up in the harrow:
hold me when I hold you down
and plough the lonely furrow

This exemplifies Paterson's style. It is as beautiful as it is sickening, and vice versa. It is rhythmically perfect, as is its command of full and half-rhyme. Yet its formal finish is undermined by its almost total absence of punctuation. The latent violence of its imagery is dodgy almost to the point of being objectionable. Yet the baldness of the title is denied by the poem's desolate music, its lament for lost love and its ambiguous transition from the indicative to the imperative voice.

"Buggery" is perhaps the best example of the "new, delicately lyrical touch" promised by the blurb. It is also in evidence in one of the volume's flagships, "A Private Bottling", which won the 1994 Arvon Poetry Competition. Ostensibly a poem in praise of whiskey, it seems as close as Paterson has come to being personal, drowning his sorrows for a failed relationship with "a chain of nips". There is also a tenderness to some of the poems named after the stops on the defunct Dundee-Newtyle train line scattered throughout the book. Especially moving is "11:00: Baldovan", in which the planned trip of two schoolboys "to buy comics, / sweets and magic tricks" ends in a futuristic twilight zone. Its last sen-

tence is a triumph of style and pacing, a breathless rush over seven couplets that begins:

I cannot know the little good it will do me;
the bus will let us down in another country

with the wrong streets and streets that suddenly forget
their names at crossroads or in building-sites

and where no one will have heard of the sweets we ask for
and the man will shake the coins from our fists onto the counter

and call for his wife to come through, come through and see
this ...

If Paterson has a fault, it lies in his belief that he can have his poetic bread buttered on both sides. On one side, he thrives on the rigour of the most conventional metre. On the other side, he craves the kudos of seeming experimental. The two titled blank pages ("10:45: Dundee Ward Road", "On Going to Meet a Zen Master in the Kyushu Mountains and Not Finding Him") are handy jokes, but nothing more and certainly not original. Terrified of his work appearing as finished as it actually is, he is constantly trying to fray its edges with scraps of apocrypha and the bogus provisionality of a title like "from 1001 Nights: The Early Years". *God's Gift to Women* has several fillers, and the book as a whole doesn't feel as satisfying as *Nil Nil*. That said, it has about ten poems which are truly brilliant and better than anything in the first book. They alone justify Don Paterson's position as the brightest star in a small cluster of new British poets who are streets ahead of the rest of us.