

Conor O'Callaghan's first collection offered readers *The History of Rain*; his new pamphlet, *A History of Hello* (Grand Phoenix Press, 1 Grand-Rue, 3000 Nîmes, £6.50), an equally unlikely annal, is named for a sequence which offers a set of lyrics which, by the way, track down various literary "hillo"s and "hollo"s and "hola"s. It also works out an enjoyable and irregular rhyme scheme that rings out "l"s and "o"s like church bells: "Oh, you know.../ A brace of syllables,/ phatic and simple,/ like the mating call/ of your average hoopoe". The poems range nicely from a sort of literary historical miscellany to domestic lyrics and they smoothly segue into the eponymous word at the beginning of an awaited mobile phone call, "humming this way/ in big looping lines/ over valleys and major roads/ and May's shallow night/ and the split second delay".

There has been a change at the helm of *Agni*, the literary magazine edited from Boston University. For long years edited by Askold Melnyczuk, the magazine published a mixture of poetry, reviews and fiction. The critic Sven Birkerts is the new editor, and some of his contributors—Seamus Heaney, Evan Rail, Dan Chiasson, and John Kinsella—will be familiar from the pages of *Metre* (all right then, and elsewhere). Perverse souls who trawl the biogs at the back of magazines will be amused to find an entry for Virgil: "born on the ides of October, 70 A.D., not far from Mantua.... Virgil the man was large in person and stature, with a swarthy complexion, a peasant's brow, and uneven health, for he commonly suffered from pain in his stomach, throat, and head; indeed, he often spat up blood. He was sparing of food and wine". The other contributors are more restrained in their disclosures. Virgil appears here with an excerpt from the *Georgics* in David Ferry's translation, which is not bad, but then again it is not as good as John Dryden's. One of Heaney's poems is entitled "Pit Stop near Castletown" and concerns an occasion when Robert Lowell and himself were "pissing like men/ Together and apart against the wall". Lowell died a few months later, just after he had broken up with Caroline Blackwood and was returning to Elizabeth Hardwick. As one of his biographers put it: "Lowell arrived in New York on the afternoon of September 12, and took

a taxi from Kennedy Airport. When the driver reached West 67th Street, he saw that Lowell had slumped over on his seat; he was holding a large brown-paper parcel and he seemed to be asleep". At the memorial service, Heaney said that the unpaid cabbie:

already had been
Paid in the coin of the language, that East River was Styx
And so on, rising to the occasion

Perhaps too highly. Mary McCarthy's verdict—
As reported back to me, at any rate—
Took my rhetoric and wrung its neck:

"The biggest cover-up since Watergate."

Lowell no doubt would have been pleased at the proportions of that. (His *Collected Poems* have reputedly just been published, but at the time we went to press the Amazon pack had not arrived. Let's hope they're not having second thoughts, once more, at Farrar Straus & Giroux.) *Agni* costs \$9.95; for further details, see www.bu.edu/agni/.

Denis Donoghue's seventy-fifth birthday was celebrated with three days of lectures and readings at Queen's University on 12-14 June. Participants included Frank Kermode, Marjorie Perloff, Colm Tóibín and Harry Clifton. Donoghue was instrumental in alerting two generations of Irish writers to the achievement of American Modernist poets—perhaps most importantly, to the poetry of Wallace Stevens and T.S. Eliot. Without his presence, many Irish readers might have persisted in the belief that poets such as Patrick Kavanagh and Austin Clarke were the only game in town. His lavish critical gifts were displayed recently at their best in *Words Alone: The Poet T.S. Eliot* (2000).

An Guth is the first ever journal of Irish and Scots Gaelic. Edited by Roddy Gorman, issue 1 features poems by Meg Bateman, Deirdre Brennan, Paddy Bushe, Michael Coady, Gorman himself, Liam Ó Muirthile, Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh and Eithne Strong, among many others. As well as acting as an informal anthology of contemporary Scottish and Irish poetry, the journal's blessed with either translations or short glosses which are an education in themselves for anyone who'd thought that they could get by in the other language. The editorial address for *An Guth* is Cruard, Eilean Iarmain, An t-Eilean Sgitheanach IV43 8QS, Alba and it costs £10.

Paul Farley's second collection, *The Ice Age* (Picador, £7.99) was published last year and is well worth a look. At first glance, he might appear to belong to what has been called the "school of shrug"—regulation cool for British poets for the last fifteen years or so—but on closer inspection he's much more interesting and surprising. We hope to print a longer notice in the next issue.

War Notes. Like any good slacker committed to spending part of every day browsing the internet at work, *Metre* has been chuckling over David Rees's *Get Your War On*. "What rhymes with 'alcohol-saturated dread?'" asks clipart guy, attempting to write a poem: "What rhymes with 'alcohol-saturated erosion of the Bill of Rights?'" Whatever the answer is, it's sure to be in one of the many anthologies of anti-war poems also now doing the rounds on the internet. John Redmond writes about Faber's *101 Poems Against War* in this issue, but some egregious contributions to the cause came sadly too late for inclusion in that volume. It takes a very special piece of writing to make you think there might be something in the wanton slaughter of Iraqi civilians after all, but step forward Tony Harrison, author of "Iraquatrains" (*Guardian*, 1 April 2003), a poem guaranteed to spare the blushes of even the most diehard liberal imperialist. Here's a quatrain called "Payload":

The Iraqis now are truly shocked and awed
at the inexorable Bushkrieg Juggernaut
all the more crushing since it's got on board
the broad Brum bum and bosoms of Clare Short.

"The broad Brum bum and bosoms"? Swap that woman's pashmina for a burqa now. What rhymes with "inexorably brainless erosion of the English protest poem"?

"So what's it all about then?" a taxi driver once asked his fare on discovering he'd picked up Bertrand Russell. Cultivating his inner taxi-driver, "J.C." of the *TLS* made a public appeal earlier this year for readers to step forward and "share their understanding" of the following lines from Michael Farrell's *Ode Ode* (Salt, £8.95):

living at the z extension 34
tho_ning to race or to worry
cone i saw in lovewith d_blin man
tun my nut au grow me idea

Never one to shirk a challenge, *Metre* is happy to oblige. “The z” is an Australian poetry centre, alphabetically trumping New York’s Y. 34 is Farrell’s telephone extension there. “tho_ning” is a Hispanic-inflected pronunciation of “zoning”, his name for the bouts of intense concentration in which his poems are written, whether very fast (“to race”) or more slowly (“to worry”). From his window he sees a short-sighted local rapper, “d_blin man”, lovingly filming a nearby pine tree which he believes returns his feelings (“love” + “movie”: “cone i saw in lovewith d_blin man”). Farrell is reduced by this to Germanic-sounding despair (“tun [doing] my nut”) and looks to his homeland for organic inspiration (“au[stria] grow me idea”). Couldn’t be simpler.

Had we but world and time enough we’d happily explicate the entire contents of Farrell’s book, but J.C.’s comments nevertheless set us wondering. Who’s afraid of experimental poetry?, as John Goodby asked in a *Metre* article all the way back in issue 5. “The avant garde imagines, and the mainstream regrets, that it exists”, Sean O’Brien has written (though what the mainstream regrets, presumably, is not its own existence...). The latest crop of Salt titles offers a good chance to see how vivid the imagination and how real the regret need be, to which the short answer is: not very, on both counts. The avant-post, or whatever we agree to call it, exists: let’s get over that much and get reading it. Apart from Brian Henry’s *American Incident* and Randolph Healy’s *Green 532: Selected Poems 1983–2000* (reviewed in this issue) other current Salt titles include a *Collected Poems* by John Temple, another by John James, Anne Blonstein’s *the blue pearl*, Andrew Grace’s *A Belonging Field*, M.T.C. Cronin’s *beautiful, unfinished* (this avoidance of caps is becoming a habit), Vahni Capildeo’s *No Traveller Returns*, and two from Jennifer Moxley, *Imagination Verses* and *The Sense Record*. And let’s risk a shocking disclosure about this kind of poetry while we’re at it: that some of it is very good indeed, some good to middling, and some, well, not very; that as far as liking and disliking goes, in fact, it’s much like any other kind of poetry. Liking one does not mean liking all, nor does a nodding acquaintance with anything published in Cambridge entail instant surrender of any Heaney/Hughes/Larkin books in your possession. *Metre* hopes to pay closer attention to the question of small-press/alternative/linguistically innovative poetry in the near future. A glance at the Salt website (www.saltpublishing.com) reveals a promising new critical list, and a Salt Modern Classics series too.

Still on the theme of smaller presses, Trent Books have done John Lucas (and us) a real service with *Starting to Explain: Essays on Twentieth Century British and Irish Poetry* (£9.99), a thoroughly enjoyable mixum-gatherum of mid-length articles and reviews. Lucas's excellent Shoestring Press is also due a closer look from us soon.

Famed for picking up C.K. Williams's long line and running with it, Ciaran Carson has ricocheted in the other direction with the ultra-short W.C. Williamsesque lines of his new collection, *Breaking News* (Gallery Press, €11.40/£17.50). A poem like "Trap" crackles with the after-hours static of may or may-not-be post-Troubles Belfast:

backpack radio
antenna

twitching
rifle

headphones
cocked

I don't
read you

what the

over

Like the aftermath of some colossal explosion, *Breaking News* presents a landscape of fantastical *disjecta membra*, daring us to imagine what things were like before being blown asunder in the book's unending cycle of conflict and war. "Horse at Balaklava" looks like it owes something to Keith Douglas's story "Death of a Horse" or, closer to home, to Michael Longley's poem of the same name. And speaking of Longley, just when you think you've got used to the Carson minimalist makeover out pops a symphonic long poem about World War I at the end of the book, "The War Correspondent". Resplendent. If Carson feels like collecting the whole set of literary Williamses he may yet do a Hugo and start to write poems about English boarding schools and the *London Magazine* in the '60s. But *Metre* doesn't recommend it.

Bibliography corner. If he could leave all those instructions about what to do with his diaries, you'd think Philip Larkin could

have at least put his publishers right on how he wanted his poems to appear after his death. Not so, and the 1988 edition of his *Collected Poems* performed a striking act of disassemblage on the *œuvre*, scattering the four collections' contents to the wind in favour of a chronological run-through, with the duffer of the juvenilia relegated to the back. Now this volume appears to have gone out of print, to be replaced by another of the same name (Faber & Faber, £10.99). The four collections' bodily integrity is restored and "uncollected" poems go at the end, but not those left unpublished during Larkin's lifetime. So we get "When the Russian tanks roll westward" but no "The March Past", no "And now the leaves suddenly lose strength", and no "A slight relax of air where cold was". Hardly a satisfactory situation. *Metre* has grumbled before about shoddy or non-existent *Collected Poems* (*Collected Poemes?*), and on reflection can think of only one solution. Unilaterally declare Larkin, Beckett & Moore, etc., French poets and get those nice people at the Pléiade to do the job right, if no one else can be bothered.

While we're on the subject of typography and *Collected Poems*, Jenny Penberthy deserves the highest praise for finally giving Lorine Niedecker the sort of edition she deserves in *Collected Works* (University of California Press, £29.95). Without wanting to seem carping though, the reader cannot but miss the generously proportioned margins and tracts of white space of her two Fulcrum Press books, *North Central* and *My Life by Water*, or more recently Cid Corman's edition for North Point Press, *The Granite Pail*. Why doesn't someone move in on the original-format modern poetry reprint market and make a killing out of design obsessives like us?

And more generally, we need a break from the English and Irish poetry publishers who impose house type-designs on different poets: in America, publishers get the likes of the late great Harry Ford, Cynthia Krupat and more recently Chip Kidd to think up a design for each particular poet. Ever wonder why the type design of some poetry books from English publishers is a cut above the others from the same list? Because the book has originated in America is why. While presses like Cape, Faber, Gallery and Picador take great care in copy-editing and production, in the end the poems all get poured into the same mould—the same fonts, the same titles. For many centuries, poems all had the same shape because they adhered to the same rhythmic patterns, but

for almost the last hundred years now, this has not been the case and poems differ greatly in the way their lines are positioned on the page. Type-designs that don't take this into account are not traditional, not old-fashioned, they are simply not doing the poems justice.

We didn't get around to mentioning the death of Kenneth Koch last year, but *A Possible World*, lavishly produced by Knopf (\$24), stands as a worthy testament. With so much fun always going on in Koch's poems it's no wonder Frank O'Hara liked hanging out with him as much as he did. His New York school *confrère* makes an appearance in "A Memoir": "Frank O'Hara said to me/ One thing that cannot be taken away from us/ Is Panavision", while later on in the same poem "John Ashbery gets tight/ Noel Chatelin smacks him". If Panavision ever expanded into typography (here we go again) it might look something like the marvellously energetic title poem, a poster art meets *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*-style hybrid. "A Changing China" reports a sign in a Chinese hotel room that reads "No firecrackers in the chamber." Readers of Koch have their own personal supply of the things on tap.

This issue features an obituary appreciation of D.J. Enright, and now that his last book *Injury Time* is out (Pimlico, £12.50) we'd like to quote its hail and farewell as a further hail and farewell to its author, and his wintry-wise good humour in the face of death. Its epigraph, from *Old Men and Comets*: "Many of you will not have lived before. You would never have dreamt of it. Now you are living, and we hope that you will enjoy it. But it is our responsibility to warn you that LIFE CAN GO DOWN IN VALUE AS WELL AS UP, and the past is not a sure guide to the future. Living can be bad for your well-being and can even lead to death." And its last word, from Montaigne—placed, as Enright reminds us, at the very beginning of the *Essais*: "And therefore, Reader, I am myself the subject matter of my book: it is not reasonable that you should employ your leisure on a topic so frivolous and so vain. Therefore, farewell."

But before we say our own farewells, a coming attraction: Peter Didsbury's *Scenes from Long Sleep: New & Collected Poems* appears from Bloodaxe shortly. *Metre* 15 will carry an interview to mark the occasion.

(Mention here does not preclude a longer notice in a later issue.)