

IN BRIEF



John Ashbery's detractors may long since have fallen asleep, but the seventy-year-old poet's new collection, *Wakefulness* (Carcanet), finds him in vigilant mood. There has been something more valedictory and wistful than usual about his last few books, but even this can't keep his spirits down. As he writes in "The Friend at Midnight": "Keep in mind that all things break, / the valedictorian urged his future plans on us: / Don't give up. It's too soon." *Wakefulness* is one of Ashbery's most human and tender books, full of passages as candidly moving as the conclusion to "Homecoming": "Later I'm posting this to you. / I just thought of you, you see, as indeed I do / several million times a day. I need your disapproval, / can't live without your churlish ways."

Denise Levertov's posthumously published collection *Sands of the Well* (Bloodaxe) proves that Robert Frost had a point: if revolutionary when young, you'll be conservative when old. After having lived through some of the most exciting times in recent American history and having been associated with some of the most experimental poets in the US (Olson, Duncan, et al.), and having helped map out the terrain between poetry and politics, it is ironic that her final poems should be so staid and uninventive. The book is mainly landscape description, but what in the hands of Amy Clampitt or Elizabeth Bishop is acute, exciting and strong, in Levertov's hands turns to dross. A sad and disappointing book.

Poetry Review recently reported on an internet translation programme that back-translated the first line of Larkin's *This Be The Verse* from German as "It fuck you above, your mummy and dad". It wouldn't be overly shocking to discover that Adam Zagajewski's *Mysticism for Beginners* (Faber) too was the product of an internet programme, one for the creation of bogus Polish poets. *Mysticism for Beginners* is sententious, obvious and banal. Zagajewski's idea of high seriousness is to throw around platitudes like "Poetry summons us to life, to courage / in the face of the growing shadow". Avoid.

If you worked for the Samaritans, what would you say to Peter Reading when he phoned up threatening to blow his brains out? He seems to be doing it (threatening, that is) on every second page of *Work in Regress*, and even his admirers can't deny it gets a bit wearing after a while (and signs are his next book, *Ob.*, is even worse). You're making a bad mistake though if you let it put you off reading him entirely: Reading's bile is still worth any amount of most other people's uplift. "Obit" shows just why he's worth persevering with: "That old woman dead / in the downstairs apartment. / No more old-fangled / nether garments pegged outside / to offend our aesthetics."

A poet whose services might be required if Reading ever gets trigger-happy is Thomas Lynch, Michigan's most celebrated funeral director. *Still Life in Milford*

(Cape) finds him exploring much the same territory as his previous collection, *Grimalkin and Other Poems*. A long tribute to a grand-aunt from Clare stands out, but otherwise *Still Life in Milford* is a likeable but lazy collection.

Not as lazy, though, as Alfred Brendel's *One Finger Too Many* (Faber). Brendel's piano-playing is as distinguished as his poetry is embarrassing—it is a matter of some astonishment that a book as weak as this should be afforded the hospitality of a Faber and Faber cover. Enough said.

Michael Longley has had frequent recourse to pamphlet-publication over the years, and has produced a small classic of the genre in *Broken Dishes* (Abbey Press). Its fifteen poems include elegies for Sean Dunne, George Mackay Brown and the following marvellous four-liner for his father: "He would have been a hundred today, my father, / So I write to him in the trenches and describe / How he lifts with tongs from the brazier an ember / And in its glow reads my words and sets them aside" ("January 12, 1996"). Mark Roper's *The Home Fire* from the same publisher is also worth looking out for. Attractive typography and design greatly enhances the effect in each case.

Not a pamphlet, but a mini-anthology of Eric Gregory Award winners, *Singularities* (Hubble Press) also deserves a mention. Tim Kendall's poems sometimes savour of Christopher Reid ("Astronauts") and, more unusually for a young poet today, Eliot ("Remembrance"), but he comes into his own in a fine piece like "Chocolate" ("Voltaire drank dozens of cups a week, / and would surely have agreed / with his own Pangloss, who considered / the New World's gift of syphilis / a paltry price to pay / for such unimaginable bliss"). Polly Clark's biographical note mentions that she once worked for a pornographic publishing house, so let's hope for her sake the Bloodaxe catalogue doesn't get its hands on her, after the mileage they got out of Jane Holland's snooker-playing and Roddy Lumsden's quiz-machines. In the meantime, her poems are spryly self-assertive. Which leaves Graham Nelson, a poet who writes with the passion for accuracy one would expect of a trained mathematician, but with dry humour too. "Yours sincerely" ends: "I'm touched, I'm smitten. *Dear firebrand, / Forgive me though I importune. / This flame-bud opens like your hand— / It liquefies all I have planned.*" *Singularities* is available at stg £3.50 from Hubble Press, 3 Cripsey Road, Oxford OX2 0AH.

George Szirtes and György Gömöri's Bloodaxe anthology, *The Colonnade of Teeth*, showed the strength of modern Hungarian poetry. Sotto Voce Press have enterprisingly published a pamphlet by a writer not in that book, Olga Czilczer (b. 1940). *Chess in the Afternoon* places Czilczer firmly on the neo-Surrealist wing of Hungarian writing. Her short prose poems sometimes don't give themselves time to do more than baffle, but when they do they make for enjoyable moments of verbal disorientation. *Chess in the Afternoon* is available at £4 from Sotto Voce Press, Maynooth, Co. Kildare.

And finally, a new book from the most linguistically gifted, resourceful and restless Irish poet writing today: Paul Muldoon's *Hay* (Faber). A full review will follow in *Metre* 6.

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CONTRIBUTORS

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