

## ROUND A TURF FIRE



*Fergus Allen*

PETER FALLON, *News of the World: Selected and New Poems*.  
Gallery Press, £7.95

This attractively produced edition of Peter Fallon's *Selected and New Poems* includes the pieces that he wishes to preserve from his first four volumes (1978-1992), an extended occasional poem written when he was Poet in Residence at Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts, and a set of recent poems sub-titled "The Heart's Home". As the author founded and runs the Gallery Press, he is his own publisher, and perhaps it is as well to mention this neutrally at the outset. Among his literary credentials, in addition to the academic appointment in America, are the publication of poems in a number of reputable magazines (*Metre* among them) and a carefully worded tribute from Seamus Heaney.

Fallon lives on a small farm on County Meath and many of his poems have to do with rural society, haymaking, animal husbandry, and the ups and downs of marriage and family life on a smallholding. His descriptions are vivid and earthy. For example:

He is stuck in the mud of four weeks' rain  
backing a tractor through a gap  
to fodder beasts. They worship at an altar  
of a trailer with the tailboard off,

up to their knees in a muck moraine.  
They swish the thuribles of their tails, slap  
incense breath on the silage psalter,  
grain, torn cud; a smothered cough.

Sheep have their problems too. There are dramatic pieces about dipping and about the delivery of two dead lambs by a Caesarean section, fatal to the ewe. Nor does human life seem to be all sweetness and light in Fallon's neighbourhood: he has poems about drunkards, disagreeable braggarts, simpletons, a madman, incest, a deranged child molester, and a childhood pregnancy and possible infanticide. Behind the scenes stand alcohol and

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“God”. There is brooding over old wrongs and reference to the savagery in the North. And the poet has crises and grief in his own family, including the death of a newly born boy, which is handled with delicacy in “A Part of Ourselves”.

The American section—called “The Deerfield Series: Strength of Heart”—is “occasional” in that it centres on no doubt regrettable events that took place in that part of Massachusetts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which will be unknown to most readers on this side of the Atlantic. The verses are hardly self-explanatory and one is left wondering exactly what went on, though some of the pieces make their impression, if a rather foggy one. But the more serious sections are interspersed with quatrains which had better been edited out, such as “Birches”:

Shadows cross  
the road;  
a row of birches:  
barcode.

Fallon’s preferred form is the stanza of four, five or six irregular lines, in which the second or third line rhymes with the last:

They were drawing him out,  
getting great mileage  
out of a row somebody raised  
around and about the mess he made  
of the second cut of the silage

This works well in a number of the poems, whose grainy textures can be reminiscent of Patrick Kavanagh, but there are pieces in which the verses are a little too rough for comfort, where the reader can stumble over the many enjambments. This is not a matter of yearning for Gray’s end-stopped pentameters (or even for more or less regular metre), but too much enjambment in sequences of lines of different lengths with the rhythms of everyday speech does risk the accusation of looking like chopped-up prose. While Fallon’s approach tends to be more descriptive than allusive, small built-in metaphor heighten his effects without straining the reader’s intelligence or inner eye. Martian these poems are not. It is almost as though Fallon is anxious not to appear high flown or to be constructing sentences or using figures of speech that his unpoetical neighbours might not grasp. There are lively, effective and highly readable poems in the collection, and much full-bodied evocative language, but

there are also poems where the poet's vision seems to be dulled and restricted by low clouds and the ivy-smothered trees at the bottom of the meadow. In a poem called "Ambiguities of Travel" (1968), Roy Fuller wrote "Poetry is something between the dream / And its interpretation", and Fallon tends to fly so close to the ground that there is little space between his dream and its interpretation. Wider cultural references are few—though it could be argued this makes the picture of a benighted agricultural community the more convincing. Then there are pieces that are no more than lists of trees and garden plants, like names from a nurseryman's catalogue laid out in verse form. They may have given the impression of being poems when read out in a soulful voice round a turf fire, but any such illusion vanishes when they are seen on the page. This is an enjoyable book that would have benefited from the advice of a kindly but strict editor.

**TED HUGHES**  
**1930-1998**

## OMENS AND PORTENTS



*Aisling Maguire*

TED HUGHES, *Tales From Ovid*. Faber and Faber, stg £7.99  
*Birthday Letters*, stg £14.99

Now that some of the controversy surrounding Ted Hughes's most recent works has abated it may be possible to consider them in the context of his oeuvre. While *Tales from Ovid* stirred the debate on translation versus new text (not forgetting Edwina Currie's rap on the Poet Laureate's knuckles for mixed metaphor and cliché), *Birthday Letters* has revived the issue of Ted Hughes's part in Plath's suicide.

Ostensibly very different, the two books are nevertheless connected. As a critic Hughes reads a story across the work of a poet, an approach epitomized in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992). This synthesis of myth, history, religion and biography is essentially Hughes's poetic credo. The "tragic equation" he makes by adding "Venus and Adonis" to "Lucrece" is solved in "The Tempest", a play with obvious Plathian associations.

Central to Hughes's narrative imagination is the mystical marriage, an extension of his early "preoccupation with the shamanic dismemberment and reconstitution of the body, with *The Bacchae* and the Orphic myths", as Myers Lucas has called it. After Plath's death this preoccupation gained a new significance realized in *Crow* (1970), and *Gaudete* (1977). In *Gaudete* Hughes reversed the ending of *The Bacchae* allowing his priest, Nicholas Lumb (Crow incarnate) to be killed by irate fathers and husbands.

Thematically and stylistically *Gaudete* anticipates *Tales From Ovid* and *Birthday Letters*. Lumb's affinity with Actaeon and the urgent rhythm inspired by Kleist's prose sets the key for *Tales*. The gnomic verses which the otter presents to Lumb *redivivus* use the form of direct address employed in *Birthday Letters*. Compare, for example:

It happened  
You knocked the world off, like a flower vase.

It was the third time. And it smashed.  
(*Gaudete*)