

B R I E F L Y N O T E D

Briefly noted in *Metre* 15, Pearse Hutchinson's collected translations, *Done into English*, was launched in Dublin on the 13 May. It was a wonderful event: the poet himself was in great form, and Poetry Ireland are to be commended for hosting the gathering. Among those who read with the poet were Martín Veiga and Melita Cataldi, while a number of other poets, including Peter Sirr, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Peter Fallon, turned up to mark the launch of this astounding body of work. The poet read translations from a wide range of languages: from the Gaelic of Pádraigín Haicéad and Caitlín Maude and the Dutch of Judith Herzberg; from Italian (Umberta Saba), Milanese (Franco Loi), and, of course, Catalan, the language from which the largest number of poems in the book have been translated, most of them from the work of Josep Carner, whose writing Hutchinson has championed since the 1960s. *Done into English* contains poems translated from no fewer than thirteen different languages, and this book shows that Hutchinson has made a more meaningful contribution to the extension of Irish poetry's boundaries over the past forty years than has often been acknowledged: *Metre* acknowledges his contribution here and a longer (and long overdue) essay-review on the full range of his achievement will appear in a later issue. The book costs €22.50 (hbk) and €13.90 (pbk) and is published by Gallery.

On the subject of poetry in translation, more Dutch poetry in English can be found in J.M. Coetzee's *Landscape with Rowers: Poetry from the Netherlands*, which has been published by Princeton University Press. This beautiful book contains the Dutch originals with Coetzee's translations of poems by six twentieth-century poets: Gerrit Achterberg, Sybren Polet, Hugo Claus, Cees Nooteboom, Hans Faverey and Rutger Kopland. It is a shame that Coetzee couldn't include any women in his collection—Pearse Hutchinson's translations of Judith Herzberg suggest at least one notable omission—but at €19.50 in hardback this is a real bargain and an excellent introduction to the poetry of a nation about whom the protagonist in Coetzee's novel *Youth* says: "of all nations the Dutch are the dullest, the most antipoetic".

Carl Rakosi, the subject of a special feature to celebrate his 100th birthday in *Metre* 15, passed away in San Francisco on the 25 June 2004. In his obituary in the *Guardian* Michael Carlson described Rakosi as “a major modern poet”, “Unassuming and engaged”. One of the many poets who made a long-distance contribution to a birthday reading for Rakosi in the San Francisco Public Library in November 2003 was Gael Turnbull, the Scottish poet who died at age 76 on the 2 July. Turnbull’s poems, and Rakosi’s, are published in Britain by Nicholas Johnson’s Etruscan Books.

Metre also marks with sadness the death of Thom Gunn. When we set up the magazine in 1995, Gunn was one of the first people we wrote to for poems. Unfortunately there was no response. Perhaps it was the magazine’s title that put him off. In interview a while before that, he remarked on how he had once been approached to contribute to a New Formalist magazine and had replied: “No, I’m not interested in reading the people you suggest printing (he’d given me a list); I’ve just written an article praising Ginsberg and I think you should be reading him instead”. The way his own poetry ranged from exquisite formal lyrics to disjunctive poetics was deeply refreshing. Gunn was reputedly peeved about his neglect in England during the 1970s. But with the publication of his *Collected Poems* in 1993 and *Boss Cupid* in 2000, Gunn now looks in a lot better shape than most of his contemporaries. In an article for the Alumni magazine of Stanford University, Cynthia Haven reports that in his last months, he taught a course at that institution entitled The Occasions of Poetry, in which he covered many of the classics, but also the work of a twenty-something Philadelphia poet, Daisy Fried, whose poems he described as “sexy and energetic and clever”. The article concludes: “Afterwards, Gunn grabs the leather jacket and heads for the Oval. But not to tear off in some trendy vehicle. The San Franciscan-Londoner does not drive. Part of the deal he made with Stanford includes a large lavender car that will chauffeur him back to the Haight—casually, effortlessly steering him through the infamous rush-hour traffic”.

Derek Mahon’s recent style was much to the fore in his translation of *Cyrano de Bergerac* which premiered at London’s National Theatre during the spring. Mahon’s version is peppered with talky anachronisms which seemed designed to annoy the more smugly proper English critics: Cyrano’s tender romantic

love notes thus contrasted strongly with the sort of duelling bravado with which he referred to weapons of mass destruction, euros, and (a lot) sex. Sure enough, among the reviewers, Clive James and Germaine Greer outdid the natives in jeering sanctimony and missed how Mahon's text tried to remain broadly true to the languages of both public masculinity and poetic delicacy, refusing to cordon one off from the other. The play's staging—a mix of scaffolding, French costume and music, and *West Side Story* gang-dancing—was much less adventurous and more worthy of the critics' brickbats. Mahon's version of *Cyrano de Bergerac* is published by Gallery and costs €20 (hbk) and €13.90 (pbk).

The self-styled Mecca of slam is to be found at the Green Mill in Chicago, and in Galway's Cuba Bar during the Cúirt Festival in April twenty contenders shot for the prize of a trip there. Of the best, Trish Casey was the obvious winner sweeping the audience into a chorus of "neeyaaaa" as she stomped her satirical take on the decreed topic of expansion. While the theme was a craven nod to the ten new EU states, Casey lampooned the palazzo blitz which displays the glory of eurogrants and quotas. Expanding with cumulative effect, her poem mocked the "Italianate verandahs", "feck-off pillars" and marble-chip gravel stolen from local graveyards which adorn the homes of fat cats spawned by the Celtic Tiger.

Five of the six poets in Ainnir Publishing's, *Anthology I*, including Casey, have performed in slams but her ventriloquial skill soars above the work of her fellow-poets. Launched at Cúirt, the anthology is overburdened with front matter (publisher's note, two prefaces, and an introduction) which constitutes special pleading. Casey is a dedicated slammer while the rest use slam as a reading platform, the mistake made by most of those in the Cuba Bar. Maybe next year Casey should run the event, imposing the Green Mill's strict three-minute, no script and instant judging format on slammers.

There is a new rule in many American poetry competitions and it goes like this: "Applicants for the award will not be considered eligible if they have been students of the judge or are close friends". The rule is reportedly now named after a particular poet-judge who is a repeat-offender.

Poetry (Chicago), the continuing story. The inside layout is more or less the same, but the cover now contains more "teases", featuring the authors' names in a new sans-serif font. The cover's

traditional B&W drawings are now photographs, some of which are rather startling, such as Lisette Model's "Singer at the Café Metropole, New York City" on the cover of the April 2004 issue. But beyond the superficial changes, the magazine appears to be much more responsive to readers. It is now printing letters to the editor, and is "looking for thought-provoking responses to work published in the magazine". In the December 2003 issue, an essay on the relative paucity of young, female poet-critics, titled "Is Anybody out There?" evoked a response from Eavan Boland among others.

The magazine also appears to be opening up to new poets, instead of the "usual suspects" approach of the former regime. The old *Poetry* under Joseph Parisi often had just two out of twelve poets making their first appearance in the magazine, or three out of thirteen. Under the new editor Christian Wiman, recent issues have taken it up a notch: March features eight new poets (out of fourteen), including the long-overlooked Bill Knott. April's roster lists seven new poets out of nineteen, all making their first appearance in its pages. In one column, Wiman writes that he has "at times been convinced—and still have [his] suspicions—that 'editor' and 'idiot' are synonyms". Let's hope he proves his own suspicions wrong.

The American poet Evan Rail, a frequent contributor to these pages, has had a few poems in the *TLS* over the last year or so. What happens after your poem is published there is anyone's guess. Most of the time, we imagine that some of the professorial classes scan it and grunt with either approbation or opprobrium. Rail's poem, "Afterwards", has had a different afterlife as it was quoted in its entirety by the President of Tanzania when addressing the World Bank earlier this year. Those curious can try googling "Evan Rail" and "President of Tanzania".

There's much of interest in the summer issue of *Poetry Ireland Review* (no. 79), not least a review by Nuala Nic Con Iomaire of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's *Cead Aighnis*. But wasn't that published six years ago? This is Nic Con Iomaire's point: "Tá *Cead Aighnis* foilsithe ón mbliain 1998 agus gan léirmheas ar bith, go bhfiú dom, foilsithe ina thaobh. Cuireann sé iontas orm nach bhfuil scoláirí na Gaeilge ag baint na sál dá chéile le fonn an fhilíocht seo a chíoradh go criticiúil". And the point holds good not only for scholars of Irish, but for common-or-garden reviewers and editors in Ireland. *Metre* is as guilty as the rest, and our excuse that

we never received a review copy probably won't wash. The situation raises troubling questions about the reception of the most popular Irish-language poet. Ní Dhomhnaill has turned into something of a brand, but, it would seem, is only of interest if packaged in translations by English-language poets like Paul Muldoon and Medbh McGuckian. Nothing against those translations; rather a Bronx cheer for people who want the Irish language and its literature to exist, but also want to be saved the trouble of reading it. Nic Con Iomaire's review itself is very positive ("Tá draíocht ag baint le *Cead Aighnis* agus an greann ina orlaí tríd..."), although it is disconcerting to see Ní Dhomhnaill referred to throughout as "Nuala".

While on the subject of minority languages the Slovene poet Drago Jančar has an article in the same issue of *Poetry Ireland Review* entitled "To Write in the Language of a Small Nation". They got the wrong Slovene. The article drifts through a few anecdotes, fires out a few veiled reproaches at Jančar's more successful compatriots, and then concludes with a salvo of Old Fogeyism: "In an era of the global Internet, literary art goes on creating its universal worlds, worlds of a most profuse heterogeneity. A simple invention called the alphabet enables us to browse an infinitely more fascinating network than one based on silicon crystals. The network of the human creative imagination". De dum. Readers not completely turned off Slovenia by this might have a look at the essays of Aleš Debeljak who has written with brilliance about being a poet caught between the Anglophone world and that of the Slovene language.

Our Prague office reports the publication of a selection of the Russian poet Vladislav Khodasevich (1886-1939) in the Czech translations of Petr Borkovec. You may well wonder why we bother to tell you. In the opinion of many critics of Russian poetry Khodasevich is in a class with Mandelstam, Akhmatova and Brodsky. (On the evidence of the Czech translations he even looks to be superior to those three poets.) Yet he is more or less unknown to Anglophone poetry readers. Since the technical aspects of his poetry present more or less the same challenges as the other three poets, the neglect can only be explained by the infatuation of Western readers with martyrology, that is, the idea that the poetry is somehow validated by the poet having suffered under a dictatorship (Khodasevich was part of the White Russian emigration and died in Paris). This was regulation *chic* in the

1980s, and although there's little of it around now, the translators of Russian poetry have yet to catch up. Until they do we're left without one of the finest poets of the last century.

An ad in the *TLS* of 4 June 2004 read simply: "What is a Poem? Short answers required please for literary article. Email jillian27@btopenworld.com". It almost makes one think fondly of vanity presses promising fame, riches and excellent bridge-work to aspiring authors.

Franz Wright, author of the Pulitzer prize-winning *Walking to Martha's Vineyard* (Knopf, \$23), has offered to give William Logan "the crippling beating you so clearly masochistically desire". He wrote to the *New Criterion* (June 2004) to say "I would have to consider myself a complete failure, both as a writer and as a human being, if a grotesquely mean-spirited mediocrity like William Logan liked my work". Wright sent their reviewer the more colourful letter from which Logan quotes in his reply.

Contrary to popular myth (Anthony Cronin's biography of Samuel Beckett, to be precise), B.S. Johnson (1933-1973) did not buy a sports car with money from Beckett's Nobel windfall. He did, however, obsessively pick up paperclips he found in the street, and insisted on starting every book he wrote in his bedroom in his parents' house, and always on 26 December too. He wrote a novel, *Albert Angelo*, with holes in the pages allowing the reader to look into the future, and another novel, *The Unfortunates*, that came in a box. And also, a small amount of poetry that deserves to be remembered, some of which appeared in a Penguin Modern Poets selection with Gavin Ewart and Zulfikar Ghose in 1975. All this and more we learn from Jonathan Coe's enjoyable *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson* (Picador, £20). Just before slashing his wrists in the bath he wrote "not so much a suicide note as a kind of concrete poem": "This is my last/ word". Some might pounce on Johnson, embittered and uncomprehending as the sixties passed him by, as evidence of the ageing of the avant garde, and the slow attrition that eats into the souls of those who sign up for its perpetual revolution. Still, he deserves more than our casual pity: as an interesting failure he looks like an almost total success.

"The Poetry Book Society is delighted to introduce you to the Next Generation Poets": words to inspire the kind of terror previously reserved for "I'd like to read a few sequences to end" or "I've got the manuscript right here in my bag." On 5 June 2004

readers of the *Guardian's* Saturday magazine got to meet the folks in a glossy spread, all twenty of them, though Robin Robertson and Alice Oswald cheekily opted out of the group photo. Simon Armitage threw in an essay remembering how demeaning the New Gen had been back in 1994 (posing for *Vogue*, getting called "pod people" by Iain Sinclair), got his retaliation in early against "postmodernist hardliners and avant garde-ists", and boasted that "True, there's no evidence of a radical shift in style, but there is evolution. [...] Within the Next Generation are poets who don't scoff at the common reader, who don't ignore or patronise the public, and who are able to practise their art without dumbing down or squandering poetry's aptitude for tackling complex subjects in challenging ways". Not much of a sales pitch. Among the roughly two and a half responses to the list to date, internet peacenik and poetry entrepreneur Todd Swift noted for Canadian journal *Bookninja* that "Several major contemporary poets are absurdly absent, such as Roddy Lumsden, Kate Clanchy and John Stammers". That's at least £900 worth of reading time alone, by the way, with the price of entry starting at £600 and sliding down to £300 over five titles from the same press. A total of 156 books was entered, which adds up to... well, do the sums yourself; Armitage, Motion and the other judges didn't come cheap. So at least someone is handing over good money in the cause of poetry-reading, even if it's only the people who publish the stuff, but with a total of three out of twenty chosen titles available in our local Waterstone's a market expansion much beyond that may be slow to materialise. Unless of course the other seventeen had all sold out. Discount incentives for the undissuadable are available on the PBS website, www.poetrybooks.co.uk. Otherwise there's always 2014.

War Notes, continued. Sadly, noted Hitchcock fan and world's most famous Slovenian Slavoj Žižek doesn't write about poetry very often, but in his new book *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (Verso, £16), he quotes a speech of Donald Rumsfeld's much admired for its Forrest Gump-meets-Mark Strand qualities (we quote it here in Hart Seely's linedated version):

As we know,
There are known knowns.
There are things we know we know.
We also know

There are known unknowns.
That is to say
We know there are some things
We do not know.
But there are also unknown unknowns,
The ones we don't know
We don't know.

As Žižek points out, Rumsfeld omits “unknown knowns”, all those little things we know without even noticing we know. Prime among these in the poetry world is our hard-won knowledge that power is bad, war is bad, and torture is bad: very, very bad. But just in case you'd forgotten you knew that, internet peacenik and poetry entrepreneur Todd Swift (did we just say that a minute ago?) has obliged us all with the online magazine “Peace Engine”. He writes: “Just as not everything about ‘other’ cultures (following Said) is to be demonized, so too must we recall what is best in Western culture, even as we critique its latest power lunges. This site is about ‘voices’ transcending the often stereotypical images, and we need to have a place to listen without blaring sound (arguably, we should avoid military prisons, since they do seem to permit such noise) that drowns out the human”. We might ask why “other” cultures are following Edward Said, but we'll let that pass. For more of those voices (sorry, “voices”) from Western Culture (Robert Creeley, Marilyn Hacker, Kevin Higgins and Fred Johnston), all out of earshot of any military prisons, go to www.voicesinwartime.org.

“Still in his sixties”, the Next Gen profile that wasn't of Sam Gardiner might have begun. Still in his sixties, Sam Gardiner is a retired architect who has published one book (*Protestant Windows*, Lagan Press, 2000) and now a chapbook, *The Picture Never Taken* (Smith/Doorstop Books, £3: The Poetry Business, The Studio, Byram Arcade, Westgate, Huddersfield HD1 1ND). In “Short Circuitry” forty old folk go missing from a coach and “There may be someone in the garden/ digging a dugout”, except we don't find out one way or the other, this being “one of/ those tales which for want of ??/ and !! lead somewhere, but nowhere else”. A few poems previously in “Bridge” he's telling us about difficult journeys with a departed addressee “where one more wrong turning/ might have seen us right”, and then in “Wreath” a wreath laid on his mother's grave goes on a mysterious walk-

bout, leading to “Grave to grave enquiries” before the guilty (and dead) culprit is found. Gardiner knows how to take a line for a walk in unexpected and quizzical ways, and writes finely comic narrative poems in “Strokkur Saga” and “Variations”. He is Hardy-esque, marking our human exits and entrances with the grateful desolation he describes in “Smile”, but with a Boschian horrified delight in human folly too. Neither of his books to date has had a cover illustration, but for his next we suggest the Dutch master’s “Ship of Fools”. Strongly recommended. As a publisher once telegraphed Mark Twain, in response to his one-symbol inquiry about his sales, “?”: “!” Or even “!!”

“Linus and Lucy”, begins Matthew Welton’s poem “Slow Driving” from *The Book of Matthew* (Carcanet, £7.95). “Linus and Lucy”, runs line two; and three, four and five... all the way through thirty-six lines to the end. That’s the problem with *Peanuts* these days, now Schultz is dead: it’s just one damn repeat after another.

Isn’t it time August Kleinzahler made a record with his fellow West Coast mythographer Tom Waits? There’s plenty of all sorts of music in *The Strange Hours Travelers Keep* (Faber & Faber, £9.99), from Schubert and Monteverdi to a computer-generated Weimaraner singing “I Did It My Way” and a Jesuit, convinced of the existence of visible sound, who invents a *clavecin pour les yeux*. “Lil’ Bits: American Foundlings” (sample: “Chinatown’: TUNE GET/ COIN & BULLION”) mines the same grungy landscape of weirdoes and losers, of neon and trash, as *Blue Valentine* and *Raindogs* for its found poetry. If “Pulp ’n’ Gumbo Sonnet” isn’t a piano number from Waits’s *Nighthawks at the Diner* days, well, it should be. The “long, halting, indelibly sweet good-bye” of “Across the Land” reminds us that Kleinzahler, like Waits, is not without an undertow of schmaltz. But then he suckerpunches you with something as hardboiled as “The Tartar Swept” and you think, no, he’s still got it after all, just like “Starving in the Belly of a Whale” on Waits’s *Blood Money* showed the same thing about him. So what about it, August? Get on that phone right this minute.

A bad August. Before we went to press, news came in of two deaths: Donald Justice in a nursing home in Iowa on 13 August and Czesław Miłosz in Cracow on 14 August. In their different ways, the two poets encompassed so much of the twentieth century: Justice through his haunting portraits of nothing happening

in the great spaces of America, Miłosz through his confrontations with first Nazism and then Communism in his native Poland. Both were consummate craftsmen, and it is hard to imagine any account of twentieth-century poetry that would not accord them a central place.