

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

Since several poets associated with *Metre* are included in this new anthology, it wouldn't be fitting for us to review it, but we can't resist a brief mention here of *Something Beginning with P*, edited by Seamus Cashman. It contains a hundred poems by Irish poets, and the work of two illustrators, Corrina Askin and Alan Clarke (the latter's pictures, reminiscent of Lisbeth Zwerger's illustrations, are especially impressive). The highlights are without doubt the poems by Mary O'Donnell, Vona Groarke, Kerry Hardie, Dermot Bolger, Biddy Jenkinson, Paula Meehan and something particularly wicked from Gerry Murphy, entitled "Oops":

The old woman
so small that, when I held
the shop door open for her,
she passed in easily
under my arm.
Somewhere in that split-second
between the chivalrous act
and the thought
that the ungrateful cow
might be treating me
as a doorman,
I released the heavy,
tightly-sprung door.

I still hear the thump
as it caught her
in the small of her back.

Perhaps that one's more for "young adults" (or even older ones), but children's poetry is not always for children. *Something Beginning with P* costs €24.95 and is published by the O'Brien Press.

Poetry Ireland Review 81 has the responses of a range of poets to last autumn's Kavanagh celebrations. Many of them constitute the

usual old fare that's served up in Ireland when the poet's name is mentioned (for instance, two contributions begin like this: "Patrick Kavanagh's poems realize the grace of being ordinary..." and "To me, Kavanagh represents honesty, possibility and faith. He crafted something beautiful—both earthbound and vision-ary..."), but Conor O'Callaghan's piece is well worth a look:

I was surrounded by people who either knew him or were aware of his presence in the 1950s and 1960s. A close friend of my mother, for example, used to drink with "Paddy from Monaghan" in the Adelphi Bar, but had no idea at the time that Paddy put pen to paper. Our current milkman says Kavanagh was a second cousin and "a very ignorant man". For years I tried to write poems like "Kerr's Ass", despite the insurmountable misfortune that a) I already lived in Dundalk so didn't have to borrow anyone's donkey, b) didn't know anyone who owned a donkey anyway, and c) was never likely to become conversant with the whole business of selling butter.

Also of note in the issue is an interview with Dennis O'Driscoll. *Poetry Ireland Review* costs €7.99.

Paul Muldoon's nightmare cabaret opera *Vera of Las Vegas* had its European premiere in Dublin's Helix Theatre on 2 December 2004, and was performed to a packed house. Revolving around the adventures of two IRA men in Las Vegas and its heroine a transvestite lap-dancer named Vera, the unlikely plot failed to sustain interest on the stage, sagging in places, only to dissolve into near farce by the end. Although Muldoon's libretto—with all his trademark puns, allusions and wisecracks—sparkled and resonated throughout, it couldn't redeem Daron Hagen's jaded score, played here by a competent instrumental ensemble led by David Brophy, and a versatile chorus of singers and dancers. In the programme notes the composer writes that "By causing the musical structure to progress at cross-purposes to the libretto I hope to manifest the underlying disconnection between the popular-culture image of America and the truths that surround it". However, the actual music fell far short of this. Better to have stayed tucked up at home and with the libretto alone.

The annual Aldeburgh Poetry Festival took place back in the first weekend in November and played host to an array of inter-

national poets including Michael Longley, Tony Hoagland, George Szirtes, Margaret Atwood, Christopher Reid, Paul Muldoon and many more. The final day of the festival featured a very lively master class by Muldoon during which he offered analysis and comment on poems by three young poets with help from the audience. One of the festival's highlights was surely Michael Longley's lecture on Louis MacNeice, "Keeping the Colours New", which revealed much about his own relationship with the older poet and a lifetime's influence on his work. This intimate tribute was adorned with many entertaining personal reminiscences and a particularly touching story about MacNeice's fear of sleeping alone. Longley spoke of his love for MacNeice's work, of how he first encountered him as a sixth-form student, pointing with particular insight and affectionate enthusiasm to poems such as "Soap Suds", "Autobiography", "Snow" ("so endlessly fascinating") the "theological explorations" of "The Stand", "The Truisms" and exploring the relationship between the love poems "The Introduction" (a truly "scary" poem) and "Meeting Point". He spoke too of MacNeice's "uneasy cultural identity", of MacNeice as a lover of ideas, a political thinker; MacNeice's greatest merits being his "portraitist's sharp eye for the singularity of others", his "receptivity to place"; his talent for "the virtuoso jumbling of mundane detail".

Patrick McGuinness's collection, *The Canals of Mars*, published last autumn by Carcanet (£6.95) and shortlisted for the inaugural Roland Mathias Prize for Welsh Writing in English, is an impressive début. McGuinness translates from French, most recently Stéphane Mallarmé, and perhaps that accounts for the different acoustic of his poetry: it's quite unlike the work of any other British poet we know. Haunting, delicate and exact in their observations, McGuinness's poems also manage to express familial tenderness in a manner quite distinct from the usual tawdry tones and epiphanies that are used for such subject matter at the moment. Warmly recommended.

George Szirtes's latest collection, *Reel* (Bloodaxe, £8.95), has won much acclaim and a prize or two in England (most notably the T.S. Eliot Prize). Deeply autobiographical and comports itself in fluent *terza rima*, the book is expansive both in its geographical range (moving from England to Szirtes's birthplace, Hungary) and in its length, which reaches to 136 pages. The figure of W.G. Sebald pervades the collection, hardly an inspiration

to Szirtes, but rather a confirmation of his particular rich homelessness. Sebald's character Austerlitz ranges across Europe trying to make sense of his own past and in the process tells a fairly large chunk of the history of the continent in the twentieth century; the same can be fairly said of Szirtes's *Reel*.

Time to get rid of all those pictures of poor doomed Sylvia and replace them with one of her smiling through daffodils. The Restored Version of Plath's *Ariel* has finally appeared, four decades after the publication of Hughes' much-contested version and giving Plath a much-needed make-over. Headlines such as "Queen Bee loses her sting" (*Scotland on Sunday*) have heralded reviews on both sides of the Atlantic, with Plath now deemed "upbeat and sunny" (*Independent*), the words "Love and Spring" fast becoming her mantra. In any case, for those of us who have had to make do with home-made copies of Plath's original sequence it does come as a welcome gift. This version, produced by Frieda Hughes as a way of restoring the balance—reclaiming her mother's voice while also exonerating Hughes—highlights the staggeringly unstable nature of Plath's published work, the appendix at the back listing the contrasting punctuation and word-choices that exist between) the manuscript of Plath's poems and the *Collected Poems*.

It has generated a substantial deal of media interest, on both sides of the Atlantic. WAMU radio in the US featured a revealing hour-long interview with Frieda Hughes on its popular Diane Rehm Show during which Hughes talked candidly about her work on the restored *Ariel*, her view of her mother's poems and more personally about her own life. In an astonishing moment, Hughes read the title poem of Plath's collection, her voice eerily matching her mother's exactly. The book itself received a monumental launch at a sold-out reading in the Graduate Centre, CUNY, New York in December which had Frieda Hughes, Helen Vendler, Jorie Graham, Richard Howard among others reading the entire version through for the first time from beginning to end. It is hoped that the publication will return the focus to the work and away from the lurid anecdotes, but with a biography of Assia Wevill due for publication soon that hope may be short-lived.

This year the Poetry Now Festival in Dun Laoghaire celebrates its tenth anniversary and features readings by Margaret Atwood, Valerio Magrelli, C.K. Williams, Simon Armitage, Claude

Esteban, John Montague, Lavinia Greenlaw, Conor O'Callaghan, Maurice Riordan, Kate Clanchy, Rody Gorman, Nick Laird and many others. The festival will also mark the presentation of the first *Irish Times/Poetry Now* Award, worth €5000, for the best book of Irish poetry in the calendar year 2004. The shortlist, selected by *Metre* contributing editor Selina Guinness, poet Simon Armitage and novelist Colm Tóibín, is: Paul Durcan for *The Art of Life*, Alan Gillis for *Somebody Somewhere*, Medbh McGuckian for *The Book of the Angel*, Dorothy Molloy for *Hare Soup* and Peter Sirr for *Nonetheless*. It's a strong-looking shortlist given that it is surprisingly easy to imagine an alternative list featuring the latest collections of John Montague, Michael Longley, Eamon Grennan, Gerard Fanning and Colette Bryce. The winner will be announced on 31 March 2004, the opening night of the festival.

The Academy of American Poets (www.poets.org) has been advertising their "Adopt a Poet" project. "To adopt a poet, simply give a contribution of \$30 or more and let us know which poet you have chosen. In acknowledgement of your gift, your name, city and state will appear on the biography page for the poet, or poets, you select for a period of one year". This year why not give a poet a home? Up to five poets can be adopted for as little as \$100.

Although the phenomenon of poetry readings has prompted much comment from critics over the years the readings themselves are rarely reviewed in themselves and perhaps for good reason. More often than not readings pass off in a fairly routine fashion, inspiring little to be said about the events themselves. Medbh McGuckian's reading in Trinity College Dublin in November shouldn't be allowed to pass by without mention however. Reading to a tiny gathering of students in the Swift Theatre of TCD's Arts Block McGuckian not only read her new poems (four of which are published in this issue) offering illuminating comments into the meanings of these poems (even more valuable for this poet who is frequently labelled difficult and oblique) but as she did so, engaged her audience by looking back over her own work, analysing her own process of composition and teasing out links and connections between the poems. McGuckian stopped after reciting each new poem and reflected on it, thinking aloud as she drew connections between those that had gone before, noticing things it seemed for the first time, laying bare her work in progress.

Peter Fallon's translation of Virgil's *Georgics* (reviewed in this issue) was launched in Dublin's Royal College of Surgeons on 23 September 2004, organised by Poetry Ireland. After a wonderfully entertaining introduction by Seamus Heaney that acknowledged the huge labours that had gone into this undertaking, Fallon read from *The Georgics* to a crowded auditorium. At one point the poet himself remarked on how he could ideally read the whole of the book from beginning to end, and no doubt there would have been no complaints from the attentive listeners gathered.

David Constantine presents the second book in the Newcastle/Bloodaxe Poetry Series of lectures, entitled *A Living Language* (Bloodaxe, £7.95) and it contains penetrating, and refreshingly down to earth, insights into the uses and abuses of poetic form. The Whitmanesque line, for instance, may derive from "the rhythms of the Authorised Version" but too often "is a great encourager of blather. What should be the wind of Pentecost blowing through it, is often only wind". His own reservations about the attribution of a democratic impulse to the expansive ego of *Leaves of Grass* point neatly toward his own concerns: "Whitman's mode... does *not* give people their due. Because the due that people are owed was then and is now not always indiscriminating celebration ("All this I swallow, it tastes good, I like it well") but very often, pity and active rage on their behalf". The book also contains some excellent meditations on the relations between poetry, translation and ideology. The first lecture argues that one of the most important factors in Keats's development was his engagement in translation. Constantine shows that Keats reached an English poetic vernacular through his translations of Ronsard, among others, in a similar way that Hölderlin did through his laborious translations of Pindar. The German poet "allowed the identity of Pindar's Greek to press upon him almost to the point of his own annihilation; but came through the ordeal, into his own vernacular, by an equal act of self-assertion". Underlying this argument is an idea of translation not as a transparent rendering of sense from one language to another (a very recent idea), but as a confrontation that affects the poet at the most profound level. Keats entertains "the idea that one might better understand one's own language, and even come into the proper use of it, through dealings with 'abroad'". This is tonic stuff at a time when the closest that most poets get to trans-

lation is shoddy “versions” based on cribs provided by scholars. There is much talk of deregulation and multiculturalism in anglophone poetry at the moment, but precious little engagement with foreign cultures on the level that counts, that is, on the level of language. People want to see the exotic national costumes and cuisines at their right-on street party, but they don’t want the trouble of learning another language. Unless the hours and days and years are spent at this work, there can’t be any real multiculturalism or internationalism.

The book is published simultaneously with his *Collected Poems* (Bloodaxe, £12). The pity and active rage mentioned above are handled with restraint, if somewhat humorously, in the early collections. In their fondness for lone rambles over hill and dale and moments of humble sentiment expressed in the vernacular, his collections to *Madder* (1987) manage to assemble stories of lost outsiders into a contemporary *Lyrical Ballads* without falling into kitsch nostalgia. For Constantine, the pact between man and season has not yet been broken, nature faithfully responds to Eros and to grief in Greek pastoral visions and tales of rural tragedy alike. His distinguished career as a translator of Hölderlin and Goethe brings historical veracity to his most impressive work, the long poem, *Caspar Hauser* (1994), its ABB variation on terza rima holding together the full nine cantos without noticeable slacking of pace. Between 1980 and 2004, Constantine has published nineteen books: a novel, a collection of stories, an academic monograph, a play, translations from the German, French and Greek, in addition to his own nine collections and Selected Poems. *Something for the Ghosts* (2002) showed some signs of dissipating energy in his portraits of fellow sufferers so it’s not surprising to find in his most recent collection, *A Poetry Primer* (2004) a rediscovery of the virtues of classical rhetoric. In its clear, extended syntax and light touch with rhyme, this *Collected Poems* offers an unfashionable and complex sincerity in its avoidance of the trite conclusions so often paraded as compassion in good citizen poetry.

Don Paterson’s *The Book of Shadows* (Picador, £12.99) is a book of epigrams that expands in alarmingly digressive ways as it proceeds, much as did his last, much-garlanded collection, *Landing Light*. Like the “nearly-an-essay” baby books of Anne Enright and Ian Sansom, or like the sidebar column of a literary page (or even like the brief notes at the end of a poetry journal), the epigrams

relentlessly annotate a predictable position and snipe at guessable targets. Unlike his recent T.S. Eliot Lecture (available at www.poetrylibrary.org.uk), they rarely go so far as to sustain a single argument, although this does not mean that there isn't much argument-raising.

The most recent instalment in the American Poets Project of the Library of America is a new selection of John Berryman's poems edited by Kevin Young. Before his death in 1972 Berryman prepared a selection of his work up to and including *The Dream Songs*, but this book, published by Faber & Faber, is currently out of print. This is to be regretted because *Selected Poems 1938-1968* demonstrates the poet's sense of the importance of some early poems that have not yet been given the attention they deserve, including pieces like "The Moon and the Night and the Men", "The Spinning Heart", "Whether There Is Sorrow in the Demons", and the title-poem of Berryman's first major collection *The Dispossessed* (1948). Berryman's choice of *Dream Songs* is also intriguing, suggesting that the poet himself realised that his most famous long poem may in fact have been *too* long, and that the hundred odd Songs included here are enough to give readers a good sense of what's going on in the "complete" work. (Whether in fact *The Dream Songs* was ever completed is open to debate.)

Unsurprisingly, given the precedent set by his selection of Robert Lowell's poems in Fabers' "Poet to Poet" series, Michael Hofmann's selection of Berryman's poems is biased towards the later stuff, but *John Berryman: Poems Selected by Michael Hofmann* (2004) is in other ways a deeply problematic book. The appalling cover picture of six shot glasses on the verge of toppling over not only reasserts an image of Berryman that has for a long time distracted attention away from the complexity of his poetry, but it also binds together a selection that is riddled with typos: in place of *Love & Fame* in the table of contents, for example, we find *Love and Fame*; the selection from *Berryman's Sonnets* beginning on page 4 bears the title "from *Berryman's Ssonnets*"; and for *His Thought Made Pockets & the Plane Bucket* on page 18 we have *His Thought Made Pockets & the Plane Bucket*. Many other typographical horrors abound, and with any luck the book will not be reprinted in a hurry, not that it needs to be now that Young's selection is available. Not only has Young chosen poems from the full range of Berryman's career—including pieces published in magazines in the 1930s and not included in Charles Thornbury's

Collected Poems 1937-1971, such as “Elegy: Hart Crane”, “Prague”, and “The Second Cactus”—but his selection is prefaced by one of the most incisive and usefully corrective introductions to Berryman that has appeared for a long time. Retailing at \$20 (or less, on Amazon) this beautifully produced hardback not only replaces Hofmann’s botched selection as the best introduction to Berryman now available but it also provides Thornbury’s somewhat unwieldy *Collected* with stiff competition. For further details about Young’s selection of Berryman’s poems, and other volumes in the American Poets Project series, see www.americanpoetsproject.org.

Dennis O’Driscoll’s *New and Selected Poems* was launched in Dublin on the 23 November last year. In anticipation of a large turn-out Poetry Ireland decided to host the event, in association with Anvil Press, at the Royal College of Surgeons on St Stephen’s Green. The Board Room of the College was packed with admirers of O’Driscoll’s work, and the reading almost didn’t happen because so many well-wishers and fans were queuing up to have copies of the book signed. The book has received a Poetry Book Society Special Recommendation, and judging by the number of people who had two, three and more copies of it in their hands, O’Driscoll has already acquired a strong and loyal fan base. Of course the fact that Christmas was just around the corner may have had something to do with the brisk sales of the book on the night, and together with exquisite readings of O’Driscoll classics like “Porlock” and “Them and You,” the poet also read “Non-Stop Christmas” which gave everyone in the audience, and not just the early Christmas shoppers, something to think about: “Christmas is always striking like a seasonal virus./ There are only ever so many days still left”. It is hard to imagine that anyone interested in contemporary poetry has not heard of O’Driscoll, but for those few who remain unacquainted with his poems the beautifully produced Anvil *New and Selected*, which retails at £11.95, is as good a place as any to start.

On the subject of book launches and poetry readings, Maurice Scully—a frequent contributor to *Metre* who is also interviewed in this issue—will be reading from his recent book *Livelibood* and some work-in-progress at an event in Trinity College Dublin on the 4 April 2005. It promises to be a lively and timely reading, celebrating the publication of one of the most important books of Irish poetry in recent years. For further details

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Carcanet, who re-published the Farrar, Straus & Giroux edition of Eugenio Montale in Europe, recently repeated the trick with his less well-known compatriot Cesare Pavese. Geoffrey Brock's translation, previously published in the U.S. by Copper Canyon, seems a good English-language home for the Piedmont poet and novelist who was himself a translator of Whitman, Melville, Faulkner and many other American writers. It is a pity then that in an otherwise positive review in the *Guardian*, Jamie McKendrick focussed on a few of Brock's errors and the work's "misogyny", a word surely so powerful that it is difficult for it not to infect the many pleasures of Pavese's poems and the characteristic "poesia-racconto" (poem-story) or "immagine-racconto" (image-story) of his first volume *Lavorare Stanca* (Work's Tiring).

With this issue, Justin Quinn steps down as an editor of the magazine.