

Painted, spoken

edited by Richard Price

number 27

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Gerrie Fellows

Between Air and Geology

How can we live
as if in a child's painting:
 earth sky
what is human between them

How can we live
between sky and earth
and not be compressed

by the air in the alveoli
 dense as if water
were flowing through us

Under our footsteps:
 graffiti bones
 the fossil layers
 the mineral chains

attach us by lightsome metals
 mined to make
 our miracles

 Earth pushes up
through our footsoles
 air spins us
in its thinning spheres
 time flies through us

from **The Syllabary**

Peter McCarey

www.thesyllabary.com

24.1.10

The body of the lute is the weight of an echo.
A quiver of notes is loosed off
Soft as syntax looped around a stop
In the pulse. A hundred feet below, if you looked,
You'd see the rioters bearing loot from Indian corner shops.

24.3.10

A lot of the time
I get locked in the loft,
The haft of the key
Lopped off and lost.

24.3.11

Poor swan: cold eggs and a flotsam nest
It lolled to build again, too close
To the reservoir. The razor wire
Was sung through by the wind, that tore
The tear gas from protesters who were taking a quiet
burger
Joint. Complaints were lodged on reinforced
Concrete bricks and lobbed at folk brought there
For that, who hadn't logged the far rainforest;
They longed, it's true, to kiss their teak
Night sticks goodbye, live off the land
And pension funds dependent on flotation
Of jetsam from the Yanomani nation.
It doesn't matter, laud the lord above:
the Heads of State sing All you Need is Love.

24.2.11

Language is my lode I follow
Down to the dark.

1.2.11

Ode to Uncle Ben
The King of Lichtenstein
A tithe of the tenth
Of the life that was left
For your children
Plucking the fragrant rice
From their reflection
Caesar's face from a coin
How old they are.

1.2.10 Oat

"We're aa dry wi drinkin o't
We're aa dry wi drinkin o't
The parson kissd the fiddler's wife
And he couldnae sleep for thinkin o't."

1.1.10 Oot

Clockwork corks! With neither wings
To fly nor weight to cut
Water. They found a slat, their opposite,
Wallowing listless, neither lake nor shore, lined up
And paddled over onto over it, about,
And bobbed back up down again.

They didn't notice the pike
Over a yard long, more than I would lift
Washed up, protruding from the lake like
Handle of butcher's knife from inside pocket
As I've seen, in Paisley, when the pubs came out,
Slit just aft of the midriff, where
A duckling would have gone down nicely.
Thief.

2.11.1

When the bough bends
The cradle will fall
Europe to starboard
And Asia to port
And the sun shining out from my brow
I pass through in a skiff
And all the known universe
The shadow before my bow.

Robin Fulton Macpherson

ISLETS

I thought I was sailing
past rocky islets each
fixed to the hard globe, each
with its cargo of pines
dragonflies and wagtails.

I was wrong. At the speed
of asteroids they flew
from remote to remote
past me where I balanced
on my thin present tense.

UNLIKELY

Blunt cliff faces, slithering
scree: it's not impossible
something like a Paradise
might be heathery upland
and a badly maintained sign
pointing at Ord of Caithness.

ROOKS

They insist on my attention
still,
these rooks at home in sycamores
loud at the top of Station Brae.
They can be relied on to fend
off uninvited silences
both
from remotest constellations
and from those far depths of the brain
not to be measured in light years.

UNSEEN ISLES

As in a painting the light
comes perhaps from a window
out of view

so isles I've never stepped on
such as Egilsay, Handa
or Tiree

keep me distant company,
shedding a relenting glow
softening

the obstinate surfaces,
my unalterable past,
my habitual mainland.

LOOKING AT LIGHT

A wet-slate sheen from asphalt after rain –
hoping to see light unencumbered by
the thoughts about light I've inherited
and added to for decades, I pretend
I have no village pacing behind me,
no North Sea between the halves of my brain

but the light I see won't look back at me
till it finds something in me to shine off
like a frail harbour lamp in the Fifties
or a wave top far from land anytime.

PROBABLY

Too far away to hear wind in needles.
Too dark to read the bark's hieroglyphics.
Too rooted for my short life to catch up
and overtake their steadfast journeying.

AN ENDING

That last day's weakened sunlight
reaches me undiminished.
It could be light years away

now. Our goodbye had come to
years of ink-exercises,
Latin declensions, Euclid:

eighteen-year-olds on school steps
in Golspie, a sun's eclipse
making our faces moonlit.

UP-TO-DATE

Must everything be contemporary?
Fjord-edge wavelets copying each other
and dandelion fields which turned yellow
all at the same time think so, up-to-date
in a world with one date. I'm a whole crowd
observing them, me and my jostling past.

A breeze from 1940 tugs at me.
It wants my attention, but won't say why.

WHY STOP?

Why stop at places where the past
is no longer there?

South of Carolside Avenue
in November mist
father lit a threepence rocket
in a milk-bottle.
It blazed up. My gaze was too slow.
Beneath new houses
the old rock minds its own business.

Sand, not to be built on, between
Thurso and Scrabster
is still where it was when mother
with sisters smiled at
an Ikonta in the Thirties.
The Pentland Firth churns
variations on the same wave.

Why stop? But I do.

DISTANCES

Watched by a red eye
from between birch boles –
who'd have thought the sun
was so neighbourly?

Earlier I'd gazed
at wind stirring grass.
Someone who'd been dead
for years gazed with me.

TURNING-POINT

The longest day and the brightest midnight:
earth's slow lean northwards has paused.

The black tree tops are the heads and shoulders
of an agitated crowd who can't see
where the threat is coming from.

Beverley Nadin

High and Low

Where the muddy footpath bends
and a green-thick wood of pine begins
I scrutinise the straight-up trees:
they give away the shifting breeze.

I rummage in a timber stack,
turning each log front to back
and out of luck, chance across
sponge-wet clouds of clumpy moss.

Ankle-deep, I check the brook.
I stoop down for a closer look.
Bubbles crowd the weedy mire,
each a rushing, crashing star.

If leaves let up and light blinks down
I'll puzzle over sunlit stones,
single out and balance some:
their spell suspends my looking game.

Up from nowhere, piece by piece
each structure frames a universe
overrun with scuttling lives,
while our big sun hardly moves.

Back at home, out of sight
my boiler's gone: but that can wait.
Woodland crams the hillside full;
behind the hill's another hill.

All this always falling short.
All this stubborn holding out.
I've yet to scout beyond the weir,
just upstream. It might be there.

An Information / Richard Price

The Marvel of Biographical Bookkeeping by Francis Neník (translated from the German by Katy Derbyshire, published by Readux) is a very short dual biography of poets Ivan Blatny and Nicholas Moore. Blatny was born in the modern-day Czech Republic's second city Brno in 1919, and disowned to the point of the Czechoslovakian state declaring him dead when he fled their post-war totalitarian regime in 1948. Nicholas Moore (1918-1986) is best known for his poems of the 1940s, broadly speaking within the fascinating New Apocalypse configuration, where rhetorical energy and linguistic ingenuity is celebrated rather than repressed. Both poets were frail mentally, withdrawn and clearly heartbroken for very different reasons.

At the same time they had enormous resources of endurance – I wonder if such strength is actually common within those who have mental illness, it would certainly be a blessing in dealing with the unnecessary stigma nevermind the actual illness. Neník's narrative is a clever paralleling of the two poets lives, with each stylised narrative placed face to face, allowing the reader to marvel at the coincidences they share.

The book concludes with a brief actual correspondence between the poets, touching and painful in turns. Only later did I hear that the letters were entirely made up by Nevin – no-one should invite me to be a literary expert witness – a revelation that only doubled the pang of loss that this

brilliant book conveys. Poetry can be a curse for a poet, that compulsion to make linguistic beauty, and in all kinds of political world poets are not easily forgiven for it (or worse, they are forgiven).

Contemporary British Poetry, by David Wheatley (Palgrave) is the first work of poetry criticism I know of since Andrew Duncan's *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry* in 2003, to attempt

a synthesis approach, moving beyond survey (while there really isn't enough room in the Inn for the complexity of the scene, there is still a significant survey element to this book) and incorporating areas of contemporary British poetry that are not normally brought together in one book.

This is not just a significant acknowledgement of the avant-garde work of the last fifty years alongside the quiet, quietist, Movement line, but an incorporation of history of the book approaches, in which, for example, publishing economics intersect with fostered assumptions of 'quality' (anthologies and the Generation promotions are all part of this). This is a world, Wheatley outlines, in which the strangling grip of Oxbridge still maintains; Wheatley misses the opportunity, though, to incorporate at any length Neil Astley's powerful polemic against the London mainstream publishers (fed, of course, disproportionately from the universities of in-denial exclusion) and their long-standing eye-popping neglect of anyone but white middle class men.

Like Duncan's criticism, and like Keith Tuma's remarkable but reviled *Anthology of twentieth century British and Irish poetry*, this is a disruptive work, bringing previously semi-submerged texts more clearly to the surface, and pushing over-exposed others down beneath the choppy licks (if the metaphor is euthanasia, it may be the most merciful thing to do). Unlike Duncan's literary criticism it is more coherent and far better edited (no continuity errors here, no sense of quick re-hashes from fugitive articles), and, though the reader can certainly read between the lines, sadly, more polite. I regret that it is actually more carefully articulate – there is nothing like being allowed to follow Duncan's exhilarating, out-of-kilter train of thought, at times crude, wrong-headed, at times breathtakingly original. Wheatley's discriminating intelligence – for instance in his judicious contrasting of the political early Carol Ann Duffy with her work's unfortunate falling away in recent times – is nevertheless more than a compensation.

Like Tuma, who didn't include Edwin Morgan's work at all, by omission Wheatley underestimates the significance of Edwin Morgan in aesthetic breakthrough and – where Wheatley is otherwise strong – in terms of community context (in contrast, Wheatley is sensitive to Muldoon's catch-and-let-go relationship with Actual History). I liked Wheatley's careful analysis of generational and national anthologies, in which, like the GCSE miracles that have become better and better over the last twenty years he witnesses a kind of praise inflation measured by an increasing 'inclusiveness' (or rather, simply, a greater number of Terrific Poets per generation – my goodness!). However, he doesn't look in much detail at attack-anthologies (which he calls "dynamic-exclusive")– those which make no claim to be representative, but rather come from a small group, yes even that dreaded word in EngLit, a "school", lobbing grenades from the bunker which explode as flowers. I am not thinking of the big radical *Out of Everywhere* or *Other* or *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets*, since these, too, are large mapping projects (significant ones) rather than the attack anthology's adventurer's chisel.

A Various Art, even though as it was published it was already a piece of archaeology, is one of the few contemporary anthologies of that kind, becoming a work that, I believe, has to be taken into account in discussions like these (I can only think of a few others with that sense of close solidarity, most recently *Better than Language*). Wheatley acknowledges this but passes on too quickly to examine why he, like so many others, are still in thrall to these large-population anthologies which appear to be representational but could as easily be regarded as simple aggregations of (quite samey) individualism, while the low-sale attack anthology, and the group little magazine, assert something closer to a collective. There is a paradox that more popular gatherings and promotions contain a virus of 'selfness' (it hides within the big hollowed out collective cells of nation and other identity solidarities) while much less capitalised projects

offer a model, at least, of participants working together (ironically, how a nation might ideally be). No wonder attack anthologies get so little coverage or encouragement, and 'schools' of poetry are seen as old-fashioned or 'false' (unlike the modernity of the mainstream anthologies which go back to Georgian poetry! and the 'authenticity' of poems produced by an MA industry which relies mainly on female students to pay the wages of mainly male professors, and offers the vast majority of students no realistic prospect of representation in Prof's mainstream world of publication). Attack anthologies are a challenge to the idea of 'competing' poet by poet (on the slant playing field already established in the cultural infrastructure of England), in part because, however small the collective, they are an embodiment of shared ideas, ideals and labour, and even with the hint that alternative infrastructures might just be possible.

But this is to go on too long as far as this fine book is concerned.

Just a few more comments. While Wheatley's chapters cover a lot of necessary ground in what is after all an introductory guide of considerable depth, e.g. "PostColonialism", "Gender, Sexuality, and Class", "Experiment and Language", and "New Horizons" (an ecological chapter), I'd vote for another in a revision: one of humour. Contemporary poetry in a way is a battle between kinds of laughter: I'd have liked a discussion of the comic and the tragi-comic in writers such as Frank Kuppner, Jeff Hilson, Selima Hill, and Ralph Hawkins (perhaps in contrast to the humour in traditional forms of Wendy Cope or Sophie Hannah).

I think there is another vast area which contemporary criticism is shy of, embarrassed about, perhaps envious of (like page poets themselves), and it is to do with the paradigm shift of poetry that happened in the 1960s. This is to do with songs. I would gladly sacrifice most of the 1960s poetry inscribed in ink and paper for most of the 1960s poetry inscribed in the vinyl of popular song, and I quite like 1960s page-poetry. I know I am at risk of raising the bizarre

Keats v Dylan discussion again, but there surely was a massive shift in the reception of poetry in the 1960s, one whose legacy we still gloriously enjoy: the lyric was liberated by electricity and a new technical infrastructure (and commercial model), by extraordinary phonic backing, by creative manipulation of many kinds. Those songs are firmly in the poetry family and it's not good getting too tweed-jackety about their exclusion. If poetry guides like this are finally big enough to incorporate the far outlying patternings of a Prynne (an abstract expressionist in a way), or the sound poetry of Bob Cobbing (sadly, just a passing mention, right enough, here for one of England's greatest poets of the time), or a capella 'performance poetry', they surely must square up to the world of Lennon and McCartney and the lyric world since. That is a work of further study and synthesis of kinds of criticism, containing poetic works as exciting and as sophisticated as any of the works discussed in the two hundred pages of this book. In the meantime this guide to the last fifty or so years is a very good place to start.

Fly-blown

seekers of lice

“dead flies could break my heart”

Daniel Spoerri, Postface to *Krims-Krams-Magic* (Hamburg: Merlin, 1971)

<p>song hear how the fly feels escutcheoned squirmed out what lusts it had</p>	<p>let's . no n ever they see the shadow coming</p>	<p>my fly eyes seize you wasp rest us marvel at how wondrously a fly is constructed</p>
<p>I ate a peach and liked it I saw a shop and liked it lumber / I don't suit you eat it transcend it absorb it</p>	<p>fly constructs its own fly para dise platonic fly-essences fly transforms everything into rubbish</p>	<p>I am not able to // minutes take their time and I can't count them</p>
<p>all flies apart language's flat dull silent structure re spects the poverty of</p>	<p>arthropod transmission me chanically through a contam inated proboscis or feet / bi o logically by growth or replication of an or ganism in the arthropod</p>	<p>problems of causality and stupid empty words a poet has a stomach no less con cern than for a soul</p>
<p>what the poet would to fly eats potatoes so diminu- tive we never meet he'd been talking fly's screech</p>	<p style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;">eye → ear</p> <p>my thoughts flew far away my ears are singing the world is shimmering like a mouse</p>	<p>a fly's foot sugared 10,000 times more shows wan to your tongue writing that's like reading</p>
<p>categories of state falling over write embarrass ments boots biting you look too underneath it's old shirt sorted tight up buttoned</p>	<p>dis closure of knowledge brief mental pre parations</p>	<p>cut wherever you please the less I have to say <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block; margin-top: 10px;">mosca</div> </p>
<p>particles of life and oddness beside one self being plain</p>	<p>only what is useless what people can't like shrug it off</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block; margin-top: 10px;">an incident we thought you were a mirror</div>
<p>sugar septum carpal suture ali- mentary zygot arch nene jelly- like schizo lobe are we still friends?</p>	<p>scarpering / loose ends slouch beside roses or shoes or loaves we loaf and shod and rose</p>	<p>it pools a fly's work food now wash away the fly blood then follow the fly's recipe</p>

	new times	
just flydirt blood sweat articles of use clothes cloths absorbent ironing objects fat girth drip	turning words back into things uncomfortable heedless now cake it over	viscous pang palate rim riggs fungus fuge we wan dered dragged and plodded in more than one direction
mathematics what there is at the shop no eggs no weights no sense keep telling me I've changed	fly blown fly papa dead letter off ice hierarchy of banality bare icon fly	materials love death history winged victory of samothrace it came to life with some dirt in it your things ov er there stopping time
we read and write each other in somnia can't cope (bread butter blackcurrant jam) it's not as if it doesn't matter I almost can't find it	stripping still life gastropod foot stomach light bulb grazed elbows squinty lips lips like lips thick rose petal skin of blister bending to toe nail	fly off the handle elbow the cheek bone hammerfist skullbone runaway feathers behind
image shows downy hairs slight stubble small hairs of hairline pocks curls mole bright light watchword subverting the skin of things should we be more	One punch laid him low The dog laid its ears back Their motives were laid bare at odds with one another still life pitch black flies	legs with shoes shoes without feet feet without legs girdles bras gloves legs and knuckles things done by hand Mama! Papa! baba!
fly alights on anything straddling legs wings and head body foot lungs liver lights blood gas blot tingly	straw and paper weight pin weight we suck straws at you and violet violet luminescence	putting 1 thing in side 1 other el bow on the table fist against cheek in cides I'm blown away I won't be friends with you
anymore one and only one more one more one quivering more balance tis gone and will not answer	phone rings did you cut me off bat flapping bat's vlieg fliege	potatoes are meaning and structure pictures of tongues gums ears the wood grain swells won't you come by
riddle what do you feel like? putty o my	corporeal corpal commons snothing between us tripped us tripping fell squashed by laughter lies slated	sflies slives looko smack foreclosed am bition stings fly by in the evening of the day

fly and trembling bird		where sleep flies
turning words back into things	fly away smad businesses this notebook scrolling out the meatiness of unchewed undoing	a mathematical roomspace with still inside to be beside oneself in a sane sense
loud objects so-called poet so-called fly pacing up and down the room lo!	bits of paper flying about confine oneself to one's own affairs cease being a nuisance	she swallo -ed a fly your molecules rattling from place to place
what do you do every day do the deed with difficulty lapse of pur pose enter Mama enter Papa goodbye baba	venus pudica mutton dressed as lamb I put in what I like the things just have to put up with it	there are no holes in the surface of a sphere larking around alone playing in the margins
three dots dash pause oafish abstract world with tables walls floor doors lax slack sieve craze	transformations sweet & stupid acts visiting holding to my mouth a nectarine	fly's heart darts drop of blood so shards of glass sugar dead flies break
three small ocelli on top of the lap up the blood short antennae re duce drag while flying	warble fly gad fly horzel paardenhorzel schlitz slot placket vent rip slash	breeze brawls up shoes and pinching glue glue bucket brush leave me now

Gerrie Fellows' most recent collection of poetry is *The Body in Space* (Shearsman). Other work includes the book-length sequences *Window for a Small Blue Child* and *The Powerlines*. She lives in Glasgow.

Haley Jenkins's website, Bookshuffler, is at www.haleyalicejenkins.com .

Peter McCarey is the author of the study *MacDiarmid and the Russians* and many poetry collections, including *Collected Contraptions* (Carcanet). He lives in Geneva.

Robin Fulton Macpherson's *A Northern Habitat: Collected Poems* is published by Marick Press

Beverley Nadin's poems have appeared in *PN Review*, *Magma*, and *Poetry London*.

seekers of lice proposes art as an insect bite. Recent books include *Theatre of Objects* (VerySmallKitchen) 2012 and *limber* (The Knives, Forks and Spoons Press) 2013.

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