

Painted, spoken

edited by Richard Price

number 36

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Robin Fulton Macpherson **Crowdings**

I hear words thicken the air.
I think I see them leaving
not one space for one non-word.

Refuge from crowding perhaps
in, say, Fra Angelico's
sundry Annunciations?

We don't hear the angel's words
but know they're brief. What I like
are garden corners, set back

far left, the people in them
unaware of the angel
but absorbed in what they see
and apparently without
any pressing need of words.

Gerrie Fellows **Gold Struck Coin with Shadow**

Ryal
Edinburgh mint, 1555
7.58 grams

In profile, facing left a woman's face
as if she could not have been a child promised
not yet a bride an imagined queen
absent from her own kingdom

Who is she *Mary, by the grace of God*

an image with tilted head, crossed pearls
her fair copy fixed
her outline backed by lion rampant
on a coin minted from Scottish gold

or the fake *4.56 grams, maker unknown*

a half-weighted alloy core struck in perfect detail
MARIA.DEI.G.SCOTOR.REGINA
head just a tilt out
crown beadless angling east

on a surface dulled by base metal to a stain of peat
tempered resistant indurate
true metal of the kingdom she was a stranger in
but of Mary herself all images are false

Greg Thomas **Three Poems**

fringes
of air

fringes
of hands

fringes
of light

fringes
of hands

liminalanimal

flue

&

smoke & steam

smoke & steam

smoke & steam

smoke & steam

smoke & steam

smoke & steam

smoke & steam

smoke steam

Jacqueline Schaalje

Between the head and toes you begin to unravel

Love, giddy with the prospect of dark
You begin tunnelling through
For now we see only one side
Which is of course the pleasure side
The one way in, the same way out
And so it seems it can go on.

Too many things can happen in the hips
Will we ever see the light again?
And which light? In each other's eyes?
These tracks, love, shunt back and forth
Trembling, rolling us further on
The self calling back on themselves.

Neck grunts, where will we return
from all that pleasure in the dark?
Holding a sack of gold, kissing hips,
shifting over, a call to the clavicle.
Tunnelling through, trying again,
Shyly, love, I'm trying to find someone.

Love, why is it good to preserve this?
Too many things can happen in the hips
At this point you see only one side
Which is of course the pleasure side
Knocking around with your hands and lips
Then giddy with the prospect of dark

You think you meet the heart
Where will you go? Where will I go?
Tunnelling through, knocking any sack
of gold or lucky wood, is this the same,
love, as it was the last time around?
Was this the last time, love?

Anemone

Offal aerobe
Aeolian insouciance
Bloodbath parody
Macho roar
Approachable barony
Glamour earldom
Aureole gloat
Baroque overhang
Compassed anaphor
Tonal canon
Bombast afloat

‘And while he stood with lowered face’: Dante returns *James McGonigal*

After Dante: Poets in Purgatory, edited by Nick Havely with Bernard O’Donoghue (Arc Publications, 2021). £19.95, 459 pages. *Purgatorio: Dante Alighieri*, translated by D.M. Black, Preface by Robert Pogue Harrison (New York Review of Books, 2021). £17.99, 288 pages.

Two new versions of Dante’s *Purgatorio* show clearly why his poetry is still read. These are profound translations, reaching below the surface of their original to reclaim or remake key truths that keep it current. Each is radical in a different way. While the translators have clearly studied previous versions and scholarly editions, their marked difference of approach echoes Dante’s own articulation of what he was concerned to do. As outlined by David Black in his Introduction (p. xiii), quoting from Dante’s prose *Convivio*:

The goodness and the beauty of every act of speech are separate and distinct from one another; for the goodness is in the meaning and the beauty is in the pleasing ordering of the words; and both are delightful, although goodness is particularly so.

Black will follow Dante in foregrounding goodness and meaning, with a focus on Dante as a deeply psychological thinker before that discipline had been invented. Havely and his team of translators are drawn forward more by beauty, one might say, and by a shared creative endeavour towards the most pleasing ordering of the words and voices encountered on Dante’s journey through *Purgatory*. Black provides a parallel Italian text, allowing the clarity of his poetic lines to be checked against the original; Havely’s admirable orchestration of twenty main translators is presented as a continuation of the poetic influence of the *Purgatorio* through the centuries: from Chaucer and the Pearl poet, through Donne, Marvell and Shelley (whose unfinished translation of Canto 28 is worked in and completed here) and into modern times with T.S. Eliot, W. S. Merwin and Seamus Heaney.

After Dante

The title of Havely’s Introduction, ‘Resurrecting Dead Poetry’ (p. 11) hints at the depth of his literary scholarship but not at its liveliness. The idea of

resurrection aligns this version with the original's key themes of pilgrimage, atonement and community. Emerging from the Inferno,

Dante's journey will now be a reconstructive pilgrimage. It will explore the forms of penance rather than those of punishment, and the nature of community rather than that of conflict, enacting the purposeful 'movement of the spirit' [...] with migrant souls winding up the terraces of a mountain, not trapped down in the vicious circles of Hell's hollowness. Escaping the travesties of creation [...] the *Purgatorio* will also frequently portray forms of community – human and divine – and amongst its communities whose members often address each other as 'brother' there will be a fraternity of poets.

Matching Dante's emphasis, Nick Havely and Bernard O'Donoghue have brought together a broad community of male and female voices, and of 'Englishes' too, including American and West Indian, Scottish and Australian. Their harmonies and discords of discourse and style become part of the humanity which readers respond to in the *Purgatorio*. This journey is a tight one. From the pilgrim-Dante's emergence from Hell with his guide Virgil on Easter Sunday morning, to the moment when he reaches the Earthly Paradise and his vision of Beatrice whom he had thought long-lost, a mere three nights will pass. This constraint creates a moral and rhythmical need for forward progress. The poet-Dante's choice of the interlocking tercets of terza rima (rhyming aba, bcb, cdc etc.) is the perfect form for this onward pacing, and is also a marked feature of this version. More than half the translators here choose to meet it mainly or in full, despite its inherent difficulties for English which lacks the multiplicity of rhyming words available in Italian. And they do so with remarkable panache.

In such a co-operative enterprise it seems invidious to select a few poets for praise, but I was struck by the confident terza rima of A.E. Stallings, Michael O'Neill, Andrew Fitzsimons, Patrick Worsnip and John Kinsella (I will return to the latter's version of Canto 32). Here is Stallings in Canto 3 (ll. 46 ff.) evoking the pilgrim-Dante's onward journey and Virgil's role in encouraging him towards maturity:

We came to the foot of the mountain now,
a cliff to climb so steep and sheer,
the nimblest legs would not know how.

Compared to this, the most austere
Ligurian cliff-face, in the end,
would seem a stairway, easy clear

‘Which side’s best – who can apprehend –
to scale it?’ Virgil stayed his pace,
‘so one with no wings may ascend?’

And while he stood with lowered face,
and in his mind, he mulled the way,
I looked around the rocky place.

There is also variation and experiment within the tercet form. Steve Ellis finds a clipped energy in short clear lines and monosyllables to convey the poem’s moral urgency. Colin Donati employs older Scots words to bring an almost medieval earthy note to the journey, matching the spirits who encounter Dante and are often awed that his body, casting a shadow, must still belong to the earth below. Jane Draycott uses terza rima lite and a longer line to convey a sense of expansion as the pilgrim-Dante nears the end of his journey and meets the revelation that is the spirit of Beatrice; and Patrick Worsnip’s sustains that expansion into the final Canto 33, combining terza rima with iambic pentameter.

Set between Draycott and Worsnip comes the most radical translation of all. John Kinsella has retitled Canto 32 as ‘Terror of Capital and Dante’s *Purgatorio* 32’. The contrast is initially shocking and may well have readers reaching for the original Italian or wishing for D.M. Black’s parallel text. This version at first sight appears tendentious and odd, a riff on Dante from a 21st-century activist perspective:

And as time plays distance so it plays the politics
of measurement – the arrow in triplicate
is the spatiality of Beatrice’s aeronautics

And caught in the gender binary with the constellate
Adamic, they oscillate about the tree
whose limbs have been shaved of leaves and florets. (Canto 32: ll. 34-9)

Compare it with David Black’s closer version:

Perhaps we had moved through something like the distance
you'd measure by three firings of an arrow
when Beatrice descended from the chariot.

All murmured (as I sensed) the name of 'Adam!' –
then gathered round a tree that had been stripped
of every leaf and twig on every branch.

Elsewhere in Kinsella 'the bird of Jupiter' becomes 'a camouflaged drone / called Jove'; or a starving vixen on the attack becomes 'a Fox that had been fed on depleted uranium bullets'. How odd. And then suddenly we realise that he has found a way of evoking the near despair expressed by Dante in this Canto's grotesque tableau of a corrupt Church undermining the very moral and spiritual growth to which it provides sole access. Here is an urgent existential equivalence in the climate destruction of our time, as global capitalism depletes the globe it claims to serve.

Both these books of translation end in a reflective commentary. Havely's is appropriately poetic, with very beautiful and powerful translations by himself and Peter Hainsworth. Here are Dante's poems on the impact of the living Beatrice, together with works in a range of forms by seven poets who influenced him, or who are referenced in the *Purgatorio*. This earthly gathering of artistic talents balances the ethereal Beatrice whom we have just encountered alongside Dante at the end of his pilgrimage. The evident scholarship and creativity combined here are a fitting farewell to the teacher's voice that has guided us to this point. Fittingly too, the design of this volume is aesthetically very pleasing, with a sense of space and clarity to match the imaginative reach of a great poet and his translators.

Purgatorio

Reading David Black's translation, I found myself drawn to his presence rather as the pilgrim-Dante is to Virgil's. He is an astute and rational companion, working from long professional experience in psychotherapy to guide us through the challenges of life, as imagined in this ascent of Purgatory hill. We might say that he examines Dante's allegorical method more adventurously than Havely does, taking nothing for granted but reframing it helpfully for an agnostic age. Allegorical writing and reading represented the medieval world to itself in multiple dimensions, subtly and simultaneously. An event could be understood literally as part of the narrative; or historically, as related to real-life

personages; or morally, as an ethical lesson in human behaviour; or anagogically, as focused on a spiritual or mystical view of existence. The Greek word *anagoge* suggests a climb or an ascent, so tackling Purgatory is a perfect emblem of that.

Now Black brings that medieval cast of mind into the present, with no less concern for holistic human healing. The 'soul' in Dante, he suggests, is what we might now call the human mind, ever liable to diverse or conflicting motives and emotions. Allegory is recast in the light of a late-Freudian insight that the ego can retain residues of other egos encountered in life, which may reappear in dreams or unbidden thoughts. Currently, it also seems highly relevant that the poet-Dante wrote as a refugee in a time of civil war, under sentence of death if he should ever return to his native Florence. So the historical actuality is painfully present, pushing the poet towards the brink of psychological crisis. What is the meaning of life after almost everything has been lost?

Black is experienced in dealing with states of confusion, breakdown and recovery. Some puzzling features are clarified through his perspective on, for example, the newly dead arriving in Purgatory so confused that it takes eight cantos before a proper ascent can begin. Throughout the journey there is a poetic focus on looking and discernment, and Black matches this with an emphasis in his Notes and Commentary on the precise workings of the mind. Dante's allegorical characters are akin to the appearance of 'people' in our dreams representing individual shades of our own emotions. Also examined is the psychological experience of time, which appears to move at differing rates in different states of mind. The 'deadly sins' (of pride, envy, anger, sloth, avarice, gluttony and lust) on the seven terraces of the mountain which Dante must revisit are discussed as self-destructive or obsessive tendencies of human life, which must be admitted in order to be overcome. This is why the repentant spirits in Purgatory re-circle the terrace of their particular flaw – to relive it, to regress in order to be cured finally of its hold on them. But all of this is explained lightly and helpfully.

This translator is a poet as well as a therapist, of course, and the integrity of his translation is apparent in the detail of presentation and structure. In the interests of accuracy and in recognition of the differences between languages, Black has opted for an iambic pentameter line to present his version within the long tradition of British poetry, rather than trying to imitate the *terza rima*'s interlinked rhymes. Some of Havely's team prove that this form is achievable in English, but with a sense of bravura, perhaps, that distracts from Dante's

purposeful clarity. The breath of the iambic can match the syntax of his original ideas here in a way that feels sincere rather than showy.

Yet the poetry is not lost. This is evident if we compare Black's opening lines of Canto 1 with those of C. H. Sisson's translation in Oxford World's Classics. Here is Black:

To run through better waters now the little
ship of my talent here must lift her sails
and put behind her that so cruel sea;
and I will sing now of a second kingdom,
where the human spirit undergoes purgation
and makes itself fit for the ascent to heaven.

And here is Sisson:

To run on better water now, the boat
Of my invention hoists its sails and leaves
Away to stern that cruel stretch of sea;

And I will sing of this second kingdom
In which the human spirit cures itself
And becomes fit to leap up into heaven.

Sisson's boat seems to be running on water as fuel or else to be skimming the sea's surface. Black's 'through better waters' seems more nautical, and 'the little / ship of my talent' appears more shipshape than 'the boat of my invention'. In 'a second kingdom' (still a mystery to be explored) Black's 'human spirit undergoes purgation' in honest humility, whereas Sisson's somehow 'cures itself', to leap like a superhero into heaven. Black's more penitent pilgrim soul 'makes itself fit for the ascent to heaven', catching the theological reasoning behind the doctrinal invention of Purgatory: for if human souls are to be united with the divine, then atonement (at-one-ment) or alignment with a more advanced set of values must be arrived at through self-awareness and understanding, not coercion. The sails in Black's ship accordingly 'lift' freely; Sisson's sails are 'hauled' aloft by anonymous crew.

Mary Jo Bang's version of Canto 1 in *After Dante* is so energetically involved in creating a different lexical atmosphere that direct comparison is not particularly helpful:

Heading over waters getting better all the time
my mind's little skiff now lifts its sails,
letting go of the oh-so-bitter sea behind it.

The next realm, the second I'll sing,
is where the human spirit gets purified
and made fit for the stairway to heaven

.
That pop-song lyric of the final line soon has Calliope jumping up 'to sing backup with the same bold notes ...' (l. 10). But the energy can't be denied.

Not that Black neglects experiment. For example, when at the end of Canto 26 the pilgrim-Dante meets Arnaut Daniel, the Provençal poet whom he acknowledged as a master, Daniel speaks to him in Old Provençal. Black translates this speech into Scots, with a nod to his own formative years as a young poet in Edinburgh, and the influence there of Robert Garioch, a senior poet in that language which, because of Scotland's political history, can be both courtly and demotic. In *After Dante*, Alvin Pang works hard to achieve the beauty, fluency and brevity of Dante's Daniel, with considerable success. But I like the boldness of Black's Scots version.

He is not afraid to be radical in theology either. When Christ's double nature as both human and divine is reflected in Beatrice's eyes, this may also suggest a double nature in Beatrice and in us also, echoing other world religions. Moving finally beyond the ethical development that is Virgil's domain, the pilgrim-Dante enters into the interconnection and love that is the realm of Beatrice. Our earthly moral progress, the poet-Dante reminds us, has cosmological ('eternal') importance, and the vision of an Earthly Paradise must be linked to the harmonious balance between rational growth, nature and ecology. We might therefore consider that the emotional and spiritual healing evoked in the *Purgatorio* is more vital than ever in our time.

In this review I have chosen to emphasise the 'goodness' in Black's and the 'beauty' in Havely's version. But Dante's progress in the *Purgatorio* is not dichotomous. In a real sense both the pilgrim- and the poet-Dante have come finally to a unification of art and mind. The final cantos arrive at a balance between the classical and rational moral perspective of Aristotle and Virgil, and the theological claim of Thomas Aquinas that the very purpose of reason is to recognise the good and to match one's conduct to it. Dante had been drawn to both philosophies, and this great poem is a working out of that

tension.

Goodness and truth are to be aligned with beauty too, in its aspects of harmony, coherence, balance. We fear reasoning that is incoherent and unbalanced in others, because we recognise its potential for destruction in ourselves. To follow Dante's progress and recovery (of his true self) and to link both to our own lives, has been made possible again by the work of these remarkable contemporary poets and scholars. It is as if those 700 years had passed in the blink of an eye.

From The Syllabary Peter McCarey

The strong steal
Retained by wealth.
The meek inherit
Not one tenth
Of their own breath. Health?
From the dear earth
The end in dearth.

The empire has a watchword:
STRENGTH. *stealth.*

James Aitchison **Lost autumn**

I can't perform the autumn tasks I love:
pruning gooseberries with a thorn-proof glove
on my left hand and secateurs in my right,
raking out layers of moss from the horse-shoe lawn
and writing poems late into the night.

Those sweet-and-sweaty autumn days are gone.
A second stroke, a cancerous colon;
full stop. I'm gone, too, out of the autumn light.
I'm old and ill, but not too old to care;
poems and gardens still have powers that bind
me to the poems and gardens in my mind;
they are the open secret places where
I said my wholly earthly godless prayer:
wordlessly until I came to write
another hymn to soft fruit and dwarf fruit tress
in lines more mindful, less broken brained than these.

My making days for poems and gardens are past;
this faulty, faltering hymn might be my last.
"Oh, not again, old man! Not another one, please!

Why don't you count your blessings?" Yes, I bless
this glimpse of a recovered consciousness.
I've had life; what's left will not be long;
just long enough to end this little song?

David Kinloch **A Winter's Journey**

1

Margaret is a Queen. Does not
recall of where or who or what
or why. She sits and sits

in Dunfermline town,
done up in insect paste
of lac and kermes,

crimson lipped, crimson
faced, sipping from a cup
of votive tea. At the bottom

left, there is the nurse
— suppliant — her apron
in flower of woad,

her mouth an O of
salad words. A scroll
of knitting trails

drop-stitched epiphany
in silver banderolles
across the miniature.

*

Margaret is a Queen. And this
the Black Rood Gospel
dry as a bone from its soaking

in a stream. Clasped in her bony
hands, she presses it
to remember why she must
remember. 'Do this',
the words just out of reach.
She presses
and in a capital
divided into storeys
her book nods open...

*

Nods open on Margaret as Queen
even of this thumb Bible,
— miniature reflecting back to miniature —
a tiny world of busy dustie-futes
hawking badges of her shrine.
There is her face again
smudged by night-moth
dust: a souvenir that can't recall
itself, that blesses,
remembers no-one's sin.

*

Margaret is Queen of the hospitium's
pressed flowers. No sticky notes,
or colour codes. No necklace
of alarm. But ghosts of herbs
and plants that scent
her way through life.

Lint in the bell and blue-blauers
from her childhood. *Dew-cup,*
dent-dy-lion,

minuscule leaves
of history so distant
they barely make her story.

Margaret is a Queen in Dunfermline
toun. She knits, she weeps.
Dry-eyed, she presses flowers

between the quires of gospel
pages, a black snow of words.

2

Campanulaceae: of the bellflower family. *Heterocodon rariflorus*: a British Columbian annual herb. According to my Reader's Digest, he would have seen this on his journey from pahhandle to alpine meadows. Inflorescence of lax, solitary flowers borne opposite the leaflike bracts; calyx lobes leaflike, veiny, egg-shaped; corollas of upper flowers, tubular bell-shaped, blue. I could live in just one of these words all day.

Thermal cracking and slumping, due to undercutting of the glacier by a melt stream, may be responsible for the splitting of Kwaday Dan T'Chini's body into upper and lower pieces and the ultimate orientation of these pieces. In Southern Tutchone, the language of his descendants, his name means 'Long Ago Person Found'. I saw his five hundred year old hat first. Broad-brimmed. A pilgrim hat.

Columbia needlegrass; flowers: inflorescence a narrow panicle, 9-36 cm long, the branches straight, appressed to ascending, the spikelets appressed to the branches; glumes 6-12.5 mm long, smooth; lemmas 6-7.5 mm long, smooth above, short-hairy below, the hairs 0.2-0.5 mm long, the tips minutely lobed, membranous. My eyes close among all the figures. A leaf falls. He would have stepped on this, his shoulder-length black hair swaying.

Charged by the elders, Kwaday leaves the village at sunrise. He steps quickly over the felt-like nap that stabilizes the silt. Then he scrapes moss with his

knife and places it in his scrip. Next comes scouring rush and fireweed, dryas, alder, willows, then spruce, and hemlock forest. I think Caribou, moose, Dall's sheep, a mountain goat, numerous small waterfowl observe him pass by. Maybe wolverine. But I cannot see this creature. He is very fit and may travel thirty miles in a day. I cannot think what he is thinking. He is a young man quickly walking. Sometimes climbing.

The find area is equidistant between the aboriginal settlements of Klukwan and Klukshu. The remains were found melting out of an aeolian feature that had barely moved in centuries. It is unlikely that his death was caused by falling into a crevasse. The harp-like patch of snow he fell on was clearly visible in aerial photography that day. He fell on the harp of snow. And the snow harp held him in its clasp.

Listen to this! Saltgrass *Distichlis* spp.

Sandwort *Honckenya peploides*

Sea lettuce *Fucus* spp.

Sea lovage *Ligusticum Hultenii*

Skunk cabbage *Lysichiton americanum*

Sloughgrass *Beckmannia* spp.

Snakeweed *Polygonum* spp.

Spike rush *Eleocharis* spp.

Sweetgale *Myrica* spp.

Spike rush! Sweetgale! These words carry me through my day. Tiny rafts in the stream of thoughts. I grip tight but sometimes they dissolve beneath me like snow. They were all part of his world. We have not established the names of these plants in his language. Microscopic examination of fish scales on his beaver skin cloak establish that he had recently eaten salmon. No fewer than five types of salmon (sockeye, coho, chinook, chum and pink) are found in the Alsek/Tatshenshini system. I can still make phrases. Though most are of the *Digest's* making. My eyes pronounce them silently.

The forest falls away, then the alpine meadows. A whole field of little coloured dots. The air has a tang to it. Pine needles. Resin. Like Calais Muir Woods near Dunfermline when I was a child and every passing tangle hid the treasure of my future. He wraps his beaver pelts around him. It is cold and he ascends

into the pass between the glaciers. He stoops, cups meltwater in his palms, sips and then spits it out. The day rises above him like a splitting headache. The sun is very high and the blue air transcends through layers of thinness. To his left and right there are nunataks which the *Reader's Digest* describes in a footnote as 'isolated peaks of rock projecting above a surface of inland ice or snow.' He stops again and examines the ground. He is checking the snow. I am relishing his day. His travel. His being among the snow and the nunataks. This new word I have learned. Does it matter where he is going? Shrine? Errand? Love? How this landscape has been shaped to these possible ends?

Figure 2 shows the location of the human remains on the glacial ridge looking east. It is like a silvery miniature of the kind I am sometimes depicted in. The lower part is in the ice on the far side of the person kneeling on the left. The upper part is in the ice beneath the piled fur garments which can be seen as a stain on the crest of the ridge, and located exactly between the anthropologist and the glaciologist.

During recovery of the body, efforts were made to minimise the possibility of contamination. We all wore sterile suits and latex gloves. The remains were approached from downwind and wrapped in two layers of hospital sheeting. We flew him to Whitehorse by helicopter and locked him in a freezer. A procedure for the respectful treatment of his body was established in dialogue with representatives of the first nation peoples, his descendants.

Here is a list of artifacts collected and their provenance in relation to the body: 1: Hand tool, possibly a knife and its hide sheath 2: Woven hat made of plant fibres with attached chinstrap. 3: Numerous fur garment fragments, found on top of and beside the upper body 4: A small bead. 5: A small pouch with attached strap made of hide. We assume this item is the man's personal pharmacy. We will not open it but I can see the plant seeds, the remains of herbs nestling close together in the darkness. Like a horde of private words we must not speak. It remains in the icy state in which it was recovered, and has been placed with the body. 6: a simple wooden dart. 7: a big wooden walking stick. It was a world of wood and ice.

He died amid the rock-and-rubble aftermath of a glacial romp. But he was a tree-smith too. He came from a place of alders and dryas. Sitka alder eventually forms entanglements that are the bane of hikers. But these alders also pin nitrogen in their root nodules and drop leaves that add nitrogen to the soil. This enables spruce to take hold and eventually shade out the alder. A forest community begins. Leaf after leaf falls and turns to mulch.

Incompletely fused epiphyseal rings in the thoracic and lumbar vertebrae and

unfused medial clavicles suggest this is a boy in his late teens to early twenties. There is excellent soft tissue definition. The hand is entirely preserved and partially cupped. By the day of recovery the lower body had almost completely detached itself from the ice by thawing. The upper body was still deeply embedded in a vertical position in an ice crack; a headless man standing in ice.

His hair was long and black. The ice had pushed his staff so that it lay like a bow on the harp of snow. We never recovered his head. Here are the questions that occur: what was the cause and manner of his death? How old was he and what did he look like when he died? Was he healthy when he died? What had he eaten? Where had he previously travelled? I imagine...I have imagined...his scribe or pilgrim's bag contained remnants of moss and healing herbs. Were the herbs against headache? Against a cough? Against dimness of the eyes? If the eyes should water? As a salve? A salve for flying venom; for sudden eruption? They repeat the doctor's words to me day after day. This is the bravest eye-salve against eye-pain and against mist, against teary eyes: take feverfew's blooms, babies-pickle, bell of the brae; take lily and lovage; beat the herbs together and boil them in deer's marrow.

He is standing before me and looking from below his round pilgrim's hat straight into my eyes, creature to creature. I am sure I have met him before. Suddenly there is a 'whooping' sound. Instinctively we crouch, look up, towards the nunataks and beyond to the high walls of snow. Goose flesh prickles up on all areas with skin. The segment reflects substantial anterior-posterior compression which has caused severe bending of the ribs. Due to tilting of the upper body both the head and right arm ended up above the torso. They would have melted out first. The limbs of this boy I once knew. Perhaps during one of the warm summers of our past.

He is standing before me on the ridge of snow. My Malcolm. Every sound here carries. A pressed flower falls from my book, its dry leaves fragment in the air and an avalanche of flakes envelop us. Which century are they speaking from? Is it me that declares we can hear noises, words, the sound of folk talking high in the upper atmosphere? Our courtiers chatter so. He takes off his hat and listens. We listen and we hear sounds like words falling, a fluttering like cards shuffling and tiny illuminations of snow detaching from the scrolls of sky.

His head seems to have moved about 3m laterally and downslope, with the hair freezing into the surface of the ice, to be left behind once the head moved further along with most of the right arm. Both may have been carried away in the meltwater stream that runs across the ice surface like rivulets through sand.

As the head moved did it sing: have mercy on me trinity of unity; help me, I ask, as I am clasped in danger as from a great sea, so that neither the mortality of this year nor the emptiness of this world may take me with it. Shield the right metatarsals among the rocks along the edge of the steeper slope. Be near me, uphold me, my treasure, my triumph. In my lying, in my standing, in my watching, in my sleeping. Release all my body's limbs sound, shielding each of them with a light shield so that the flying venom shall not hurl its arrows into my sides. Put thy salve to my sight, put thy balm to my wounds, put thy linen robe to my skin, my skull, my locks of hair which I, Margaret, of Dunfermline town, I Margaret name. My two gnarled hands; surely to my nape and shoulders be a charm of safety for my head. My head, brow and threefold brain; ear bone, lobe bone, neck bone, nose bone, lip above bone, face, all bone, temples, chin, eyebrows of bone, ears, pupils, irises; I name them, silently, not aloud. All the names swim like salmon in my bony head.

The physical evidence suggests that the body ended up in a prone position. He stretched out his right arm above his head as if he blessed the snow that took him, the forearm flexed so that his head rested on the the wrist or hand; how I sleep, like a stiff foetus; his left arm extended along his left side, the pain of even my thin arm resting on my abdomen. No place for it to lie. The positioning of the legs always needlessly crossed is consistent with this orientation, and further indicating that the person was lying slightly on his right side. Lightly I lie like this, waiting for sleep. I try to match the sounds and catch only half a word here, there. He falls, my Malcolm, with all the little words of snow he does not understand. 'Hin, hin, hin, toc, toc, gog, magog!' He walks. He is. He falls. The snow covers us. The ice presses us tight. The words congeal. Our right arm, our left, our head...

3.

Long ago person, Margaret, lost
and found and lost again
in Dunfermline town.

A little rhyme helps hold back
the ice the storeyed letters float
free meltwater bones

'air' and 'tree'
and 'snow' and 'body'
sole revelation

A procession winds
down the miniature's field of ice
arm shrine head shrine

chasse for torso
fridge of stone
slate dusted clean

Snakeroot and veneers of certainty

Iain Bamforth reviews Andrew Lees

Brainspotting: Adventures in Neurology by Andrew Lees, (Notting Hill Editions, 2022). 978-1912559367, 154pp.

Anybody picking up *Brainspotting* – Andrew Lees’ short memoir about becoming a world-famous neurologist – in the expectation of discovering a warts-and-all autobiography like *On the Move* by Lees’ elder colleague and friend Oliver Sacks – will be sorely disappointed. While *Brainspotting*’s title suggests that it might have something in common with Irvine Welsh’s lurid first novel, Lees has parked the more “disreputable” aspects of his career – conducting “ethnopharmacological” experiments with drugs in the Columbian Amazon – in his previous Notting Hill book *Mentored by a Madman*, which gave the credit for these experiments to the once notorious William Burroughs.

Brainspotting is, in fact, a well-mannered, unheretical gaze back at his boyhood and career in medicine that develops as a series of interlinked autobiographical essays that open up on key moments in his life and development as a doctor, including – most unusually for a British graduate – a training year at Jean-Martin Charcot’s old haunt, the famous Pitié-Salpêtrière hospital in Paris. Neurology has always enjoyed a certain cachet in hospital medicine, as the most “intellectual” of its disciplines: “neurologists were literally the brains of the medical profession” Lees writes; “their rational approach drew me in.” In his long career (he is now 75), he states that he has treated about 30,000 patients in NHS clinics and several thousand more in his consulting rooms – far more than seen by Oliver Sacks, a “neurological gypsy”, who had to subsidise his small number of private patients owing to American medical insurance costs with income from his books. “I took a different course”, Lees writes, referring to Sacks, “I watched my ps and qs and hoped that I could contribute something worthwhile by working inside a healthcare system that I respected and looked up to. I avoided the cardinal sin of letting fantasy get the better of objectivity, and after twenty years I was rewarded with my own department.” That was in 1982, when he became a consultant neurologist at the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery in Queen Square. He is now one of the world’s leading experts on Parkinson’s disease.

When he started out, neurology had hundreds of diagnoses but only one treatment: steroids. That situation has changed with major advances in immunology (another prestige area of medicine), introducing treatments for multiple sclerosis and immunological disorders that give rise to severe neurological symptoms. “It took ten years of apprenticeship before I felt

competent to diagnose and treat most of the common neurological syndromes and even longer before I felt reasonably confident to distinguish a healthy person from an ill one”, he confesses; “it took a long time for me to appreciate that giving a name to a disease was in fact the easiest part of good neurological practice.” During those forty years, the contents of his doctor’s bag have scarcely altered, although the classification of neurological disorders has undergone considerable change. Lees remains committed to a rigorous clinical method that places emphasis on listening to and observing patients, and which continually attempts to reduce the margin for error in diagnosis by reading the “semiotics” of neurological presentations as accurately as possible – indeed in the manner made famous by Sherlock Holmes, the literary creation largely based, as it well known, on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s experiences of being a clerking assistant for Joseph Bell, a surgeon at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh. “During my training, anecdotes were not scorned as some sort of inferior, unreliable evidence but were valued as an efficient way of grasping new knowledge”, a position that contrasts with the tenets of evidence-based medicine, now enforced by the immense bureaucratic machinery of modern health care, for which anecdote is one of the least reliable forms of evidence.

Unlike psychiatrists, about whom neurologists generally have very little good to say (and Lees is no exception), neurology offers the opportunity of touch, which Lees considers a very important aspect of his practice. “Even if the neurological examination were to become one day redundant, I would still lay on hands during the medical consultation. The intimate bond of touch, as part of the diagnostic process, changes the dynamic between patient and doctor forever, and it is a shame that psychiatrists have been forced for whatever reason to forego it. It also serves as a transcendent comforting force that promotes trust and reduces loneliness, anxiety and despair. Touch comes before words and is the first and last language. It is an essential constituent of healing and another way of listening that never lies”. Examination, it would formerly not have been necessary to add, should always precede investigation.

This way of listening informs what Lees, in his central chapter, calls “the lost soul of neurology”. As William Goody, his teacher at University College insisted, neurology “is deadly serious but it must also be full of soul”. Lees’ quest for a “holism” in neurology struck me as more than mildly ironic, given that neurology, as he learned it, was itself based on a rigidly materialist and mechanistic understanding of nerve function: as a young doctor he was convinced “that it was only a matter of time before every brain disease would be categorised in terms of its anatomical, electrical and chemical connections, and that all mental life would be mapped to a neural substrate.” While the advent of computerised axial tomography (CT scans) and nuclear magnetic resonance imaging (brain scans) with their sagittal, axial and coronal planes have revolutionised the diagnostic purview of neurology and provided “a veneer of certainty” (as well as being prestige objects for university teaching hospitals), medicine itself has undergone a massive managerial and

bureaucratic shift: financial gain is pitted against clinical need, and algorithms and protocols have become widespread. Neurological consultations are time-consuming, and of low priority. What was already a service industry by the 1990s is now threatened with becoming a lip-service industry: the changes in the NHS, Lees says, have forced him to become “a smiling handshaker who got on well with people, especially managers and governors.” And the ultimate irony is that as more treatments have become available, “patients have become ever more desperate to be heard and for their laments to be both listened to by someone they trust, and then acted upon in private.”

Brainspotting is full of reminiscences of London hospitals and now half-forgotten clinical eminences, as well as some memorable anecdotes. I particularly liked the one about his 42-year-old patient Mr Z from Gdansk who presented with signs of Parkinson’s syndrome only for a stray remark from his girlfriend to alert Dr Lees to the fact that the Chinese herbal medicine he was taking – containing snakeroot plant – might be at the origin of his symptoms: it contains an alkaloid called reserpine that depletes dopamine levels. Once his patient stopped taking this “natural” remedy, his symptoms resolved and he was spared having to take L-dopa as a treatment (not without its complications itself). Many of Lees’ observations about clinical medicine are eminently quotable (as my review shows) and his book will be highly instructive for medical students who may be shocked to know how different medicine was only a generation ago. There are other little surprises. Synaptic connections, he tells us, in the classic neurological studies by the distinguished Spanish neurologist Santiago Ramón y Cajal, used to be called “protoplasmic kisses”. And he offers us a new collective noun for his profession: a “cortex of neurologists” As if it could be anything else.

Contributors

Iain Bamforth grew up in Glasgow and graduated from its medical school. His prose includes *The Body in the Library* (Verso, 2003), an account of modern medicine as told through literature and most recently, *Scattered Limbs: A medical Dream-Book* (2020) and *Zest: Essays on the Art of Living* (2022). **Gerrie Fellows** has published five collections of poetry, most recently *Uncommon Place* (Shearsman, 2019). She grew up in New Zealand and London but has lived in Glasgow since the 1980s. **David Kinloch's** *Greengown: New and Selected Poems* is published by Carcanet. He is the recent recipient of a Cholmondeley Award. **Greg Thomas** is a poet whose publications include the poem-objects *Cloud Cover* (Essence Press, 2018) and *Moiré* (Essence Press, 2021), and the collection *from im and not this* (Spam, 2022). Greg is also an art critic for magazines including *Art Monthly* and is the author of *Border Blurs: Concrete Poetry in England and Scotland* (Liverpool UP). **Peter McCarey**: *Collected Contraptions* (Carcanet), and www.thesyllabary.com. After 15 years running the language service of the World Health Organization he convened a group of experts to confront a theoretical but prophetic pandemic (the prose-work from the symposium is *Petrushka* (Geneva, 2017)). McCarey is panjandrum of Molecular Press and has curated a collective exhibition on transitional toys (Glasgow 2020, Geneva 2021, Milan 2022). *Orasho* and *Pogo* are published by Red Squirrel Press. **Robin Fulton Macpherson** is a Scottish poet and long-time resident in Norway. Marick Press published his *A Northern Habitat* (2013) and his *Unseen Isles* (2020), and Shearsman Books published his *Arrivals of Light* (2020). He has translated many Swedish poets, including Harry Martinson and Tomas Tranströmer, and the Norwegian Olav H. Hauge. **James McGonigal** is a poet, editor and biographer based in Glasgow. Recent publications include *Edwin Morgan: In Touch With Language. A New Prose Collection 1950–2005* (ASLS, 2020) and a poetry collection, *In Good Time* (Red Squirrel Press, 2020). **Richard Price's** essays on lyric poetry, artists' books, and small presses are collected in *Is This A Poem?* (Molecular Press). His latest book *The Owner of the Sea: Three Inuit Sequences Retold* is published by Carcanet, as is *Lucky Day* and *Moon for Sale*. **Jacqueline Schaalje** has published poetry and short fiction, most recently in *The Friday Poem*, *Free State Review*, *California Quarterly*, and *Six Sentences*, and forthcoming in *The Comstock Review*. She is a translation editor at MAYDAY. She earned her MA in English from the University of Amsterdam. **James Aitchison** is a poet who lives in Stirling. He was born in Stirlingshire in 1938 and has written a number of poetry collections over the years as well as a study of Edwin Muir's poetry (*The Golden Harvester*).

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