

Painted, spoken

edited by Richard Price

number 40

Painted, spoken is edited, typeset, and published by Richard Price. Please send an A5 stamped self-addressed envelope for a free copy to 23 Magnus Heights, Hampden Rd, Hornsey, London N8 0EL

Visit **paintedsspoken.com** for many more essays, reviews, and features, and follow the project on twitter/X @paintedsspoken

Earlier printed issues have been digitised at www.hydrohotel.net/mags.htm.

Painted, spoken's editorial policy is constituted in instalments by the contents of **Painted, spoken**

Painted, spoken appears occasionally. If you would like to write poetry, prose, reviews or features for the project please contact Richard Price at hydrohotel@hotmail.com

Copyright remains with the authors.

Painted, spoken

edited by Richard Price

Painted, spoken number 40 2024

A Glimpse of Prose Poems *Richard Price*

Recently it's been the Olympics everywhere. It brought me back to twelve years ago – the London Olympics 2012 – when an unlikely poem – a prose-poem no less (that contested, poor-relation, little scrap of a form) – a prose-poem about a group of scruffy little birds, “Hedge Sparrows” – won the UK nomination of the world-wide Cultural Olympiad project *The Written World*.

There was a significant response from the centralised media. The actor Jim Broadbent read the poem on most of the BBC radio national channels, was interviewed about it, and spoke fondly of the birds he knew at the bottom of his garden. A fair few of the BBC regional stations featured it, too. *The Guardian* ran a news (not features) article about it all: the prose-poem was literal news. In fact I don't think a prose-poem in the UK had ever received so much attention and I don't think it has since. As I happened to be the author – and the nomination had happened without my knowledge – you can bet I was pretty delighted by it all.

Appropriately, ‘Hedge Sparrows’ is a poem about ambiguous borders, the porous, sustaining borders that hedges provide. A friend calls it one of the few anarchist poems they know. The Olympics may have a peace-and-love patina (and who wouldn't agree with peace and love?) but they are absolutely about people and states in competition with each other. They are about the enforced borders of identity and territory. “That's half the entertainment!” Yet, countries represented in one year of Olympic Games have disappeared by the next; ‘new’ ones emerge; what is a human body, what is allowed to be recognised as natural and what is not, are contested and defended and ‘beliefs’ and ‘rights’ and ‘science’ switch around, pouring into each other, resisting, dissolving, moving this way and that. Our world is a parliament of birds, sometimes it's a parliament of drones.

The prose poem is messy like that, too, though until recently it hasn't been so controversial. Maybe Imogen Wade's prizewinning ‘The Time I Was Mugged in New York City’ is a prose poem, though those hard margins give reason to see it otherwise, too. Fittingly ‘maybe’ is a key aspect of the prose poem right down to its form, *Is It or Is It Not?* (“That's half the entertainment!”).

‘Hedge sparrows’ had been written a long time before the 2012 Olympics, in the last half of the 1990s. Reflecting on it now I can see creative reasons for writing it. These include inspiration from the very particular anthropomorphic games of Douglas Lipton's sequence ‘The Flora and Fauna of Scotland’ collected in *The Stone Sleeping Bag*, Ian Hamilton Finlay's *Glasgow Beasts...* and the japes and pathos of the Aardman short films *Creature Comforts*. Then there is James Joyce's prose poetry of course – he has an urge to start one book, *Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man* with the prose poetry of childhood's glorious mistakes (the main character remembers his toddlerhood in toddler language) and to finish another book, *Ulysses*, with Molly Bloom's glorious, hyper-blethering erotics, another prose-poem.

Finnegans Wake is the extended prose-poem par excellence. Prose poems don't have to be short, but, like most poem poems, they generally are. The first section of Faulkner's *Sound and Fury*, in which the disabled boy speaks with such complexity within a framing ‘simplicity’ is also an outstanding prose poem by my way of thinking. It's interesting that these are starts and finishings, as if prose poetry either needs dissolving later into ‘clarity’ or become the clarity, a new kind of

concentration, to conclude a larger work.

Clearly, a fair number of these examples are dramatic – they are a kind of monologue. We all know that the Auntie in Joyce's evocation of childhood is called "Dante" as a literary and knowing device but also to evoke the family setup in Stephen's world, for example.

And now I'm thinking about other substreams of what prose poetry might be. We've just seen examples of the dramatised, sometimes tricky, first-person as one of those. Another is in the family of dictionary definitions, nature observation, reportage and translations: the informational turn. Prose poems of this kind feel like they are defining a term, an object, a word; sometimes they risk a kind of prolix fluidity to do so, at other times they are clipped, barely holding on to full sentences. I think of Frances Ponge's elaborate poems to a door or a snail – the praise lavished, with some ambiguity but half a ton of affection on the ordinary is at the heart of Hedge Sparrows, too. By appearing to use the echoes of forms that are meant to be precise – a translation, a dictionary definition, a record in a nature notebook, a journalistic account, an answer to what might be an exam question – the prose poem can destabilise these sacred forms of analysis and even offer another kind – maddeningly elusive, and perhaps elusive enough to avoid the same paratactical scrutiny of itself. Loeb's classical texts, with their prose glosses, are surely one of the little rivers feeding into the history of the prose poem form here; the great encyclopaedia project in France and the dictionary in England, too.

Harryette Mullen's sequence *Supermarket* contains more of the terse, "clipped", kind of prose poem that produces an effect quite different from the fluid work of a Ponge (who is surely a kind of court praiser of the ordinary world). I like that the objects in supermarkets, which are commodified into boxes and tight cans, and have regulated ingredients, are given the prose poem treatment by Mullen with a keen eye to capitalism's absurdities.

Part of this 're-informational' work that these kinds of prose poem are doing can shelve off into riddle – in fact the Anglo-Saxon riddle is surely another contributing river to the Anglophone prose poem estuary. One objection to poems in general is that they can be "obscure" but to me "That is half the entertainment" – the obscurity can refocus the other elements, especially sonic ones, moving the poem towards abstraction and to other pleasures. I would not like the riddle, the prose poem, or 'difficult poetry' to be written off because it invites the reader to do a little work, that it is indeed a clever-clogs. Is it wrong to be intelligent, is it wrong to tease, is it wrong to foreground aural qualities? – is it wrong to suggest that readers might value those qualities? I suppose Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* is also of the abbreviated style of prose poem, which she has developed by producing a kind of shuffled index of 'life moments' (which a vast definition for what a lived life might experience) and then, moving the minimal into a maximal context (I think of Steve Reich's music or, say, the Philip Glass of *Aekhnaten*) producing wonderful rhythms, by repetition, across the whole collection of prose poems. Through Hejinian we can add memoir as an important stream into prose poetry, though always distorted, always stylised. You can see this kind of prose poem being developed further in the recent exemplary work of Sylee Gore.

So far so relational. In many of these prose poems there is a sense of still being attached to the 'real' world, whether commenting, documenting or deliberately over-

elaborating on 'reality' or even finding a way to emulate and stylise aspects of the experienced world, such as speech patterns (or finding speech patterns to intervene in formal language, radically revolving register). Gertrude Stein's rhythmic prose poems in *Tender Buttons* are so often named after household objects or substances but the texts themselves have at best a glancing relationship to their label (or title). This barely or even non-relational aspect has likely been the cause for a divided reception of this gathering as has the clear humour in the poems – 'Thou Shalt Not Be Funny If You Want To Be Taken Serious' is one of the mainstream commandments, issued from those frightened of such instability ("Are they laughing at me?", "I know play exists between yes and no and is pure freedom and this is why I.do.not.like.it").

Rimbaud's forty or so prose poems in *The Illuminations* seem to come from a very different zone of expression, or quite a few very distant places at once and like Stein, but in the opposite direction, break with relationality. This is not so much the world of distorted information I've described above, though he deploys that, as well. Yes, there is still acute reportage – and one can see Roy Fisher's mid-century *City* following elements of Rimbaud's London/Paris (which still remain in *Illuminations* among other more spectralised cities such as Baghdad) into a kind of grimly wondrous Birmingham – but *The Illuminations* is surely a set of texts coming from the language of prophecy.

This is an exclamatory, intense, cruel and beautiful, shocking world. I don't have encyclopedic knowledge but most contemporary prose poems I know are too well-mannered to follow; perhaps they are wary of anger and ecstasy and its hybrids, though I must say extremes of tone do interest me. There is an inexplicability about Rimbaud's poems, an insouciant miscellaneous aspect in its gathering, a visceral messiness and an ethereal gold; at times there is an apocalyptic terror. They are a curious alloy of distancing irony and a kind of cold-blooded passion. It is all very disconcerting and exhilarating, I suppose in the way that the generation of Surrealists that came after Rimbaud were able to use, focussing especially on body-shock and dreams of unsettlement. Does that bring us back to the Olympics?

Self-Discipline

Fiona Larkin

In a channeled land
the meandering instinct
of a serpentine curve
is curbed, redirected.

Concrete confines
both mudflat and marsh
and enforces an edge,
distinct and lipped.

No overspill, no
outpouring where
locks control
all change of level.

But tonight, water swoons
in a vertical plane.

The meniscus exhales.

A figure, out of focus,
feels the pull of a tide.

Mist in a cloud
suspends the facts,
settles like the breast
of a gull on the surface.

Attraction

Fiona Larkin

The pattern's fixed
before you know it,
lit by the simplest
of equations:
call equals response.

The seasons shift
to frame us both
in leaves, in snow.
A look, a touch,
another other.

Always I circle
back, the past still
quick in the present
tense. Out of bare
earth shoots emerge,

called by an
algebra that's always
simultaneous: for
nothing works unless
 x equals y .

Making Poem-Objects

Greg Thomas interviewed by Leah Balagopal

The poet and critic Greg Thomas launched Oo Press (Oo-press.com) in January 2023 as a vehicle for publishing poem-objects in very small runs. He describes Oo as a “micro-micro-press,” with most items appearing in editions of 20. So far, five poem-objects have been produced, *surplus*, *calf*, *the woods*, *body*, and *common grazing*, using materials including pyrite, epoxy resin, jesmonite, cherry-wood dowelling, and card. A majority of the production process is undertaken in Greg’s home in Glasgow, with an emphasis on DIY production.

The press also prints poem-postcards by other poets and artists, many of them working at the threshold of language and image, including Derek Beaulieu, Imogen Reid, Lila Matsumoto, and Jeff Hilson. Postcards are forthcoming from Joe Devlin, Ilana Halperin, and Saskia McCracken. In 2024, Greg launched a series of Oo poem-prints, screen-printed by the artist at Edinburgh Print Studio, with two works, *windpoem*, and *the perambulation of the forests* published so far.

In 2023, two Oo Press items, *surplus* and *calf*, were selected as case studies for students on the UCL MSc on Conservation of Contemporary Art and Media. The following questions were posed by the art conservator Leah Balagopal, who worked on the items for her research. The answers focus on the practical challenges of creating poetry in three dimensions, and the ways in which the solutions found to challenges of making, circulating, and displaying interact with the aesthetics and ethics of the press, which are rooted in an ecological, post-concrete poetics.

LB: How did you make *calf*?

GT: This is by far the hardest piece to explain in terms of the construction process, so bear with me!

Part of the aesthetic of the press is to use craft-oriented, DIY processes. For this piece I used epoxy resin of the kind that’s often used to create homemade jewellery and ornaments. It’s partly about practicalities

(because I'm trained as a poet if anything, I don't have access to studio space as a conventionally trained artist would, so most of the making is done on surfaces in my flat like my writing desk). But there's also an aesthetics of domesticity and non-professionalism (without being deliberately messy or scrappy) behind the press.

calf is partly intended to represent a chunk of ice, perhaps one that's broken away from a glacier (the word "calving" refers to the process of ice breaking away from glaciers, so this is an imaginative extrapolation of that, the outcome of the calving process being a "calf"). I thought an interesting way of domesticating that motif would be to present the piece as an ice cube shape, so I used a regular commercial ice cube tray as a mould. I ran through a few until I found one that created objects in the shape and size I wanted (our fridge is full of unused ice cube trays now).



You have to imagine the casting process as happening upside down

relative to the way the pieces are eventually displayed, if that makes sense. The top of the poem is the bottom of the mould. The making process (which, again, took a lot of missteps to get right) involved filling the tapered base of the cube mould with a little bit of resin then, once that was set, removing the little flat transparent rectangle created and inscribing the title word on it with Futura Letraset, spaced out by eye.



Then I filled the cube mould back up about two thirds full – bear in mind all this had to happen twenty times or more, plus all the times it went wrong – and let that layer of resin set (before pouring I used a heat gun to remove bubbles from the resin). I then placed the little flat rectangle of resin with the title word on it face down on the new hard layer, positioning it centrally, again by eye. Then I poured more resin over the top, ensuring that there were no air bubbles between the two

already-hard layers.

Once that final layer was set, I removed the piece from the mould with the word embedded as if by magic in the "ice" about two thirds of the way down. The texture of the mould-surface meant that there was a matt, mottled finish on the object. I actually quite liked the blurring of the word this created but the word needed to be clearly legible/visible, so I polished the top of the poem (corresponding to the bottom of the mould) with fine-grained, wet-and-dry sandpaper to create the clear surface that "calf" is read through. I got real pleasure from smoothing that surface down to reveal this little hidden secret.

Then the poems were packed in jewellery boxes, in an aqua blue that I thought suited. I ordered a run of stickers to indicate publication details and leaving a space blank to let me hand-number each item. I mention this because I see the boxes as integral to the intended mode of reception of the pieces.

LB: How was the pyrite for *surplus* shaped, and how was the lettering applied?

GT: The making process for this object was much simpler. This was the first piece I made and the idea for the press wasn't fully formed until I'd successfully created this little run of works. I just bought pre-made pyrite cubes and inscribed the title word in white Helvetica Letraset on the flattest surface I could find on each one. This was a very fiddly process but there was nothing to it other than careful hand application. The transfers can be gently scraped off with a lolly stick so mistakes were ok.

Because this was the first object I made, I hadn't yet settled on minimal use of plastics as an aspect of the press's aesthetics/ethics, and, because the size suited a smaller jewellery box, I ordered a job lot of little cheap, round, plastic jewellery boxes. Half of them came with white foam inserts and half with black, and I used Letraset in the opposing colour to transfer the publication details onto the base (so half of the run has black Letraset on the base of the jewellery box, half white).



LB: What is the intended use/display of both *calf* and *surplus*? On the Oo-press.com website *calf* was pictured with seashells and driftwood surrounding it. Can you elaborate more about this imagery in relation to *calf*?

GT: This is a great question! I like the idea of a poem not as a functional object (as in the classic formulations of concrete poetry) but as something like a devotional object, a charm, or talisman. I hope that people who buy or are gifted the objects will find places for them amongst other objects that have emotional resonance for them, on mantelpieces, desks, or bookshelves. In that sense, although the driftwood and shells are my own temporary stage props, they give an indication of how I'd like the dimensions of the poem to overlap with the dimensions of the domestic space, using objects that have meaning and memory attached to them for the owner. You can also think of the photo as another iteration or version of the poem, in which sense the driftwood

and shells become more integral elements of the poem.

As regards how the imagery intersects with the poem, I'm afraid I don't have a super-smart answer to that one. Mine and my partner's flat is full of objects we've scavenged like this. They probably come from a beach in Scotland (the west coast or Orkney) or the Faroe Islands. There are of course aquatic and littoral connotations that link the imagery of the poem with the objects. One thing about Oo is that I'm trying to be totally unembarrassed by imagery that might seem overly folksy, cute, or picturesque (particularly if you are trained in contemporary art and theory).

I want these items to define or open out a space of calm and succour for the viewer, because I see the press as engaged in an ecological practice and I think the mindset I just described is as vital and urgent in fostering an ecological worldview as one of anger, anguish, etcetera (perhaps more so - those latter feelings can feed on the host, and be counterproductive). That's one of the things I think poetry and art can do while still being politically and ecologically engaged: offer pleasure and respite from a damaged world. I find work that is allergic to pleasure and warmth kind of tiresome.



LB: Did you supply the packing materials (clear case with foam for *surplus* and card box with foam for *calf*) and if so which materials that were used?

GT: The casing is commercially sourced. I've discovered a company that produces small boxes in a wide range of shapes, styles, and sizes from biodegradable materials, sent in recycled packaging. There's a box size used for *calf*, *body*, and *the woods* which comes in a range of colours and is perfect for my needs. The foam inserts they provide too. Often there will be a slit in it, because most of these boxes are for jewellery. But I see the appropriation of the box as part of the poem as a legitimate gesture: like a bricolage-y sort of repurposing.



One other thing: although I don't see the unpacking of the items as part of the experience of reading the poem, I do see it as significant in some ways. I pack each housed poem, along with a little Oo "business card," in a cardboard postage box with a lot of shredded paper. The shredded paper is a way of recycling stuff (I'm an arts journalist too so often I'll print articles off to read, then shred the paper) and again, avoiding plastics as far as possible (outwith the poem itself). But I also quite like the idea that finding the item within all the paper is this tactile, maybe gently thrilling process, like doing a lucky dip at a school fete or something.



LB: What is the importance of the housing?

GT: I absolutely see the box as part of the work, like the front cover or dust jacket or something. I like the gentle dilemma it creates for the viewer/owner: should I display the item outside or inside the box? I'd

like to think the objects come across as somehow tender and in need of protection (if only from light and dust), and the idea of having to open the box to view and hold the item enhances the connotations of ritual (particularly with the recent piece called *body*). But also I'd like to make things lovely enough that you feel that they have to be seen, and held more freely and frequently. So there's that sense of dramatic tension brought to the choice of display method. But if you're going to display an item out of the box, I would hope you'd keep the box close by, like a burrow or shell, a safe hiding place that can be returned to.



‘The full shape of it’ Victoria Kennefick’s *Egg/Shell* reviewed by Kathleen McPhilemy

***Egg / Shell* by Victoria Kennefick. Carcanet. 2024. £10.99. ISBN: 978 1 80017 383 5**

Victoria Kennefick’s first full collection, *Eat or We Both Starve*, was published to widespread acclaim in 2021. Recently married and with a young daughter, she might have seemed to have the world at her feet, but, in the meantime, life had dealt her a double whammy. She discovered that she was suffering from secondary infertility, unable to carry a second baby to term, and the man she had married became a woman. What can a poet do in such devastating circumstances? Evidently, as shown in this second collection, *Egg / Shell*, she writes poetry.

I read this book through the first time almost at one sitting. Pausing to reflect before a second reading, I started to question the relationship between poet, poem and reader. To what degree was my page-turning driven by prurience? What persona was I hearing in the poems? How, nowadays, do we feel about ‘confessional’ poetry? What’s wrong with poetry as therapy?

Conditioned by years of teaching English Literature in school and conscious of workshops up and down the land which encourage poets to write in the voice of anything from a mass murderer to a hedgehog, I am wary of identifying the writer with the voice in the poem. However, Kennefick thrusts her identity in our faces in poems like ‘Victoria re-enacts the stations of the cross. (Don’t we all?)’ The book traces her experience of four miscarriages and the discovery that her partner is trans. These poems are deeply personal, tossing out of the window Eliot’s distinction between the person who suffers and the poet who creates. Except that, as Eliot himself did, Kennefick exploits or draws on personal suffering to create the poetry. The Victoria Kennefick of these poems is not exactly the woman we might meet in the street. The devices of poetry, language, metaphor, form, have been used to create a simulacrum of what the woman has gone through.

The collection has a clear structure with the first half mainly concerned with secondary infertility and the second with the transition of her 'former spouse'. The whole is bound together with a mixture of egg and swan imagery. At the same time, the book could be regarded as messy, hardly surprising when it has so many broken eggs. Some responses have been unenthusiastic, reacting against one-liners, 'Don't tell me how to suck eggs', found poems, graphic jokes and even an 'Incomplete Recipe for Custard', which opens:

Prep: 10 mins

Cook: 15 mins

Easy

Serves 8

and closes at the bottom of the page:

Once you've cracked this technique
for silky smooth vanilla custard
you'll never go back.

You might find this baffling, or you might see it as a brilliant use of white space implying an enormous number of broken eggs. Possibly, 'Serves 8' suggests the lost, a dream of nourishing a large family gathering, mourned also in 'To All the Babies I (N)Ever Had', 'In an alternate life I'd have a brood'. If so, the white space becomes a huge emptiness, and 'Easy' an ironic comment on much more than custard.

There is an immense variation in form, from the jokey, gallows humour of one liners like:

Orientation: a tragedy

I'm so straight I give myself paper cuts

and the graphic:



(I don't know if I can do this)

to major set pieces like the opening poem, 'Ram', which creates a presence that somehow broods over the entire collection. Rams are associated with strength and fertility in Egyptian and Celtic mythology and power fizzles from this ram's skull:

[he] touched my cheek
a circuit forming between him, me, and the Ram
that flooded my body with crackling winter fire.

Its horns are phallic, 'looping, intentional things - // ridged, strong – I can't look for long, can't reach out / to touch them though it's all I want to do.' But this ram is dead, empty, 'a black blankness.' It is other, satanic, resisting attempts to normalise it, even the reductive childish language of the poet's daughter, '*Mama, the baa doesn't need / its head any more.*' Its mystery is associated with the secrecy of the male protagonist, who vanishes, 'as he does, into his head' and it is at the same time 'a

whisper from the future’ undermining the domestic and feminine identity of the poet:

Ram, who am I supposed to be in all this –

the floral blinds, the recipe books, the porcelain floor tiles?
Oh Ram, let us bash our heads off them and weep.

The first section of the book, ‘egg’, takes us through the early days of parenthood with the poet’s first child, before recounting the loss of four babies, Ivy, Fern, Willow and Sage. Each one is a lost daughter and a lost sister for her first child. A poem for each miscarried child is set among reflections on what has happened, the story of a swan which is bereaved, remated, fails to rear a brood first time, then produces eight cygnets in the second year. There is also a poem on materials the poet, also a teacher, has collected to use in teaching the topic of the Irish Civil War, which obliquely connects to her own situation. ‘I cannot get the phrase *war of friends* out of my mind.’ It is hard not to describe this work as ‘confessional’, as Kennefick is clearly and avowedly writing in the tradition of Sylvia Plath. Not only is the title of the last poem in this section, ‘I suppose it’s pointless to think of you at all’, taken from Plath’s ‘Parliament Hill Fields’, but in the second section, ‘The Husband Suit’ has obvious echoes of Plath’s ‘The Applicant’, despite the difference in tone:

He was lovely, we both thought so.
How beautifully constructed,
I didn’t even see the stitches, how the suit
frayed near the pockets.

The ‘confessional’ label has acquired negative connotations of over-emoting and lack of poetic control, licensing a lot of bad poetry; however, Victoria Kennefick’s sheer skill puts paid to such a notion here, both in the way she shapes individual poems and in how she has put together the entire book. The more worrying association we make with confessional poetry is the idea that it can only be written by someone on the edge, where the poetry seems legitimised by a verdict of suicide. This

is surely the wrong way to put together the poet's biography and work. Nevertheless, we should consider what draws us to such accounts of the extreme: is it voyeurism, *schadenfreude*, or, in some cases, the relief of seeing one's own, usually minority, experience represented. My own reaction to the poems about miscarriage was a mixture of recognition (not of having miscarriages but of the whole female experience of reproduction) combined with a sense of shared mourning; on the other hand, the poems which dealt with the transition of the 'former spouse' were educational and uplifting in that by leading us outwards they humanised and made personal an issue which most of us access only through the ugliest of tendentious and hate-filled debate. Thus, the poems go beyond the personal in their enlargement of understanding.

It is a tribute to Kennefick's craft that in the second half of this book, she has successfully expressed anger, bewilderment and acceptance through the poetic devices of typography, language and metaphor without betraying either 'former spouse' or child. 'Vault of obsolete pronouns and defunct descriptors' is a column of repeated cancelled terms – 'husband', 'he', 'his'. The symbolism of the 'egg' and the 'swan' are again put to good use, Kennefick having discovered, serendipitously, that in trans circles, a person who has not recognised that they are trans is called an egg.

Linked to the idea of poetry as personal, or confessional, is the notion of poetry as therapy, something I have always resisted, because it conjures images of psychotherapists prescribing a course of poetry writing and suggests the value of the poetry lies in its efficacy in improving the mental well-being of its author. Kennefick has said that she cried while writing every one of these poems. For her, the writing may indeed have had a therapeutic purpose, but for the reader, it is what the poetry achieves which is important, not because it is separate from life, but because it affords us a new understanding of aspects of life through the shaping of language. No doubt poetry can be therapeutic, both for the writer and in the solace it may offer the reader. Anthony Vahni Capildeo said recently, and, I think, intentionally to provoke, that they had no time for poets writing because they have a Wound, that rather they should write out of joy. I took them to mean that although poetry may come from a place of pain it brings us to celebration and joy.

This, in my view, is what makes *Egg / Shell* such a wonderful book; it triumphs through its humour, its selection of material and its range of poetic devices. The last poem, 'Swan Song', is a ritual of mourning but also of celebration and acceptance:

Into it we place
our marriage,
the full shape of it,
moon-shiny. An egg,
the seed we have tended
for so long, now
we must bury it.
We are both crying,
Of course, but it
must be done.

‘Stumbling over the bare earth’ *Osip Mandelstam*

translated by Peter McCarey

I

Stumbling over the bare earth
On she goes. A lilting gait
Propels her quick across the heavy tilth
Ahead of her lively company; she’s yet
Drawn by that straitened freedom,
By her own inspiring flaw.
And it might turn out – some kind of joy
Stalls in her step, the dawning thought
That this spring weather in all its charm
is primal mother to the vaulted tomb
And is, for ever more, about to start.

II

Kin to the raw earth, there are some women
Whose every footstep is a harrowing cry.
Their calling is to accompany the risen
And to be first to welcome those who have died.
To expect their tenderness would be a crime,
But who could ever say goodbye to them?
Today an angel, tomorrow a kirkyard worm
Then all but the merest trace is taken from us.
What was one step away, runs out of time.
Flowers are immortal, the sky is sublime,
And what will be – is just a promise.

(Osip Mandelstam, *K pustoi zemle...*, 4 May 1937, translated 2 April 2024)

Father and Son

Robin Fulton Macpherson

In a dream that tells me it's not a dream
father tells me how old he is today:
a hundred and twenty-five. I don't ask
what he's been up to for thirty-nine years.
I may as well ask how the earth began.

The minister and the minister's son
never once talked
about God and such. We were down-to-earth.
Sixty-five year old dahlia tubers
still blossom. His giant chrysanthemums
tended like babes
would survive, cut, from September to Christmas.

A Correction

"Never once talked about God."
Not quite. At fourteen I saw
sky and sea turn black when that
Mackenzie boy from between
Helmsdale and Portgower said
God doesn't exist. I told
father, who said nothing. God,
I thought, also said nothing.
Nothings they both said saved me
from decades of unbalance.

That Man

Robin Fulton Macpherson

The man I half imagine
keeps pushing aside
the man I only half know
who pushes aside
the man I half imagine.

If we were to meet some day
in an afterlife
where words were in short supply
it wouldn't be hard
to avoid mentioning things

we'd never mentioned before.
We'd have words enough,
though, to admire the new plants.
But did he know me?
Was I his half imagined son?

Contributors

Leah Balagopal is a New York-based art conservator and a second-year Master's student in Conservation of Contemporary Art and Media at UCL. She specializes in contemporary sculpture and is currently completing an internship at the Samsung Leeum Museum in Seoul. **Fiona Larkin's** debut collection, *Rope of Sand*, was published by Pindrop Press in 2023. The title poem was Highly Commended in the Forward Prizes. Her pamphlets are *Vital Capacity* (Broken Sleep, 2022) and *A Dovetail of Breath* (Rack Press, 2020). She manages innovative projects with Corrupted Poetry. **Peter McCarey's** poetry is collected in *Contraptions* and thesyllabary.com. He is panjandrum of Molecular Press and has curated a collective exhibition on transitional toys (Glasgow 2020, Geneva 2021, Milan 2022). His latest volumes, *Orasho* and *Pogo*, are published by Red Squirrel Press. **Kathleen McPhilemy** grew up in Belfast but now lives in Oxford. She has published four collections of poetry, the most recent being *Back Country*, Littoral Press, 2022. She also hosts a poetry podcast magazine, Poetry Worth Hearing. **Robin Fulton Macpherson** is a poet and translator 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. **Richard Price's** latest books are *Late Gifts (Carcanet)* and *Tinderness*, an artist's book with images by Simon Lewandowski, evoking the world of dating apps (Wild Pansy Press). "Hedge Sparrows", mentioned in his article about prose poems, is collected in *Lucky Day* (Carcanet, 2005). **Greg Thomas** is a poet, artist, and writer based in Glasgow. His poetry collections include *Candle Poems* (Poem Atlas, 2023), *particulates* (Timglaslet, 2022), and *thresholds* (Timglaslet, 2023); he also runs the micro-micropress Oo for publishing concrete and object poems. Greg is the author of *Border Blurs: Concrete Poetry in England and Scotland* (Liverpool University Press, 2019). His writing has appeared in *Art Monthly*, *ArtReview*, *Burlington*, *The Guardian*, *Scottish Art News*, and elsewhere.

Painted, spoken

poems

Fiona Larkin

Robin Fulton Macpherson

Osip Mandelstam, translated by Peter McCarey

thought

Egg/Shell

Kathleen McPhilemy reviews

Victoria Kennefick's new collection

Making Poem-Objects

Greg Thomas interviewed by Leah Balagopal

A Glimpse of Prose Poems

Richard Price

Almost Free (just send an A5 stamped addressed envelope – the “large” 2nd class stamp will cover postage)