

Painted, spoken

edited by Richard Price

number 41

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 **paintedspeken.com** for more essays, reviews, and features

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 41 2025

In translation *James McGonigal*

Whisper across the river. They speak
a different dialect over there
and can't tell what the words mean
when you shout.

Quietness carries over water. Raindrops,
seepage, a confluence where pebbles click.
All of that's a second coinage, their currents
run silver.

So, lightly – but not monotone.
Trees on the far bank take all weathers seriously
and reckon passing minutes on each hand.
Don't distract them.

Whisper back across the river.
Say something about yourself: how you came
to be standing on this shore, your good ear
bent in their direction.

Penelope Shuttle

I feel sorry for the anchors,
sorry for the piers,
they have seen too much.
I drift down to where wrack
shimmies across a seabed,
and I'm briefly anchored
among my dead,
this horde kept in ocean's holding-pen:

a sudden in-breath hauls me back up
to a bright room,
waiting fascinations of the day,
tender chairs, concerned table,
blue glass suncatcher
snagging the light
like some kind of expert.

the false child *Penelope Shuttle*

is never royal
never safe
never worth forgetting
the false child is mostly on active service
prone to summer house hours
even in autumn
he's spurned then hunted
is both alive and dead
like the rose argent
he's never left alone
or given a brother,
false child in garb of velvet and lace
sporting the aristo look
living on his wits
like a fetter-locked falcon
how else will he seize the crown?

note: after the supposed murder of the little princes in the Tower of London at the behest of Richard the Third, various child pretenders posed as the younger prince who was rumoured to have been smuggled out of prison, in attempts by factions of the day to seize the crown.

my very early path *Penelope Shuttle*

when I was a child
I wanted to be a venerable old man
loved and respected by all,
a scholar perhaps, or one who travelled the world
doing no harm, had I seen him on the telly?
perhaps that old man spoke
of battle elephants, he was very wise
also, when I was a child
I loved the wren in his noble dusky robe
to this very day he dabbles in half-mourning
he has many cock-nests
he's loud as a shooting star
he spruces up the sky
note by note
or is alarmed *chack chack chack*
as I continue along my very early path
green air unfolding its mystery play
everything becoming rivery:
I'm bringing you my portable omphalos and my ardour
I am bringing tales of my old people for luck
wren is token-wing a wide-spread bird
meanwhile a red cardigan is hard at work
in the very bosom of things bestowing love
and taking it away from the girl
who wished for flight quicker than silver
wanted to be a winterling
once found on a farthing
weighing no more than a pound coin
upon which the queen's profile claims precedence

one night *Penelope Shuttle*

I dreamt about Ted
he was old and frail
but tall and commanding
he hugged me
he had a tweed suit on
we walked along a corridor
maybe going to a reading
he asked me how Peter was
I told him Peter had died
Ted says, ah yes
but in a light-hearted tone
as if he doesn't believe me
or as if he's dead too
so everything's okay

Boldness: the poetry of Geraldine Clarkson

James McGonigal

Monica's Overcoat of Flesh (Nine Arches, 2020)

Medlars (Shearsman, 2023)

Dream Island Home for Isabelle Huppert (Verve, forthcoming)

Two of the boldest British poets of the last fifty years shared a life but never met. Both chose to change their given names. Both emerged from Celtic margins where traditional community languages had been largely occluded by English. They are Dom Sylvester Houédard (1924-1992), baptised Pierre, whose Breton grandfather had emigrated to Guernsey; and Geraldine Clarkson, who grew up in a large working-class Irish family in the 1980s, living near Birmingham but maintaining close links with ancestral communities near the western Gaeltacht.

The life which these two poets chose to share was the ancient Benedictine rule, a celibate formation in meditation, work and prayer. So their time on this earth overlapped, even if (I'm guessing) Clarkson was entering the Order as a novice even as Dom Sylvester was finally departing. And to any nitpicky comments that she spent 'only' ten years as a Benedictine nun and is one no longer, my response would be that for both poets the monastic rule of silence, as a devotional and meditational practice, had a profound effect on their poetics in visual, imagistic and sonic terms.

I start from the immediate impact of the poet's first full collection, *Monica's Overcoat of Flesh* (2020). Clarkson might have thought that pandemic lockdowns would hinder its chances, but came to see that the constraints of convent life, which are one of its themes, were somehow intensified for readers by the social restraints they now found themselves struggling with. Her boldness of voice seems to have emerged fully formed: resonant, impertinent, unpredictable. Other poets clearly recognised this: Steve Ely deftly

encapsulates her writing as ‘Ferociously alert and intelligent, playful, witty, profound and funny.’ There had been earlier chapbooks from 2016 onwards, of course, from Smith | Doorstop (2016), Shearsman (2016, 2018) and Verve (2021), but the array of national and international journals, anthologies, prizewinning poems and bursary awards now dutifully recorded in this first collection’s Acknowledgements suggests speed of recognition arising from energetic commitment to the talents gifted to her.

The sheer drive of publication continuing into *Medlars* (2023) creates a trajectory that I find myself wanting to call transcendent. That is not necessarily a religious term. Abraham Maslow’s ‘Hierarchy of Needs’ comes to mind. Developed in the post-war United States, it proposed a five-stage ascending psychological scale from basic physiological needs for food and safety up to self-actualization in morality, creativity and sense of purpose. In the 1960s and early 1970s, Maslow expanded this into a subtler eight-stage model culminating in the need for transcendence. Here some individuals may move beyond self-actualization into a deeper sense of unity and belonging within the vastness of the universe, towards mystical experience, possibly, or into deeper aesthetic, religious or scientific exploration, or service to others. This is not simply a linear progression, any more than eternity is an unending sequence of days. In a timeless world, everything must be equidistant, encountered in a state of all-at-onceness. My sense of Geraldine Clarkson’s writing is something like that – perplexing in its range initially (high ritual meets higgledy-piggledy meets delicacy or bawdiness across her formally inventive pages) but moving sure-footedly between personal concerns, altruism, wit and connectedness.

Her fondness for punning may be an aspect of that, as if wordplay acts as an echo of the alternative or shadow meanings of thought. For example, Monica of the book’s title becomes [*monikers*] in the subtitle of its first section. Monikers here are not merely nicknames or family names, but foreground the issue of postulants

in monastic orders taking a new ‘name in religion’ as an outward sign of altered spiritual identity. When the title poem ‘Monica’s Overcoat of Flesh’ appears in the second section [*overcoat*], a note refers us to different mystical traditions which imagine the body as garment: ‘in Sanskrit the body is “the jacket made of food”’.

Again I am reminded of Dom Sylvester Houédard, whose letters to his fellow concrete poet Edwin Morgan are full of wordplay and jokiness but at times swing easily into cross-cultural religious imagery, as if viewing his own typographical constructions as icons or mandalas, and concrete poetry itself as a meditative practice. Edwin Morgan tended to tiptoe around that topic, as I recall, while liking and admiring dsh tremendously.

I’ll quote that titular poem here, partly because it is brief enough at sonnet length, but mainly because its poignant theme of a dead child resonates so deeply of family grief and the attention to the child’s rebelliousness seems, to me, so telling.

Am I still a mother if the girl I reared happened
to sicken and die, fast-tracking there as she did
everything else? There is no word for it,
not widowed nor barren, nor maid, no moniker
to give a warning to would-be interlocutors.
Bond of selkie-silk, little twin with double
helping of brass. Could she, *cushla*,
have inveigled the boatman, like she would,
slipped a nod, a wink, a broken-stemmed dandelion;
rusticate, tangle-haired, red-cheeked, tearing
out of childhood, eschewing what wilts.
Shrugging off the fussy overcoat.
*Monica. For the last time, will you
come when I call you. Bold child.*

The note informs us that *cushla* is an anglicised corruption of the Irish *A chuisle mo chroí*, which means ‘oh pulse of my heart’. There’s an Irish intonation too in the word ‘Bold’, which I sense as Hiberno-English for *Ná bí dána*, ‘Don’t be bold’, which an exasperated Irish mother would say where an English parent might use ‘naughty’ or ‘disobedient’. The Irish word also carries connotations of daring, forwardness, audacity: a double helping of brass. There’s a wildness in this emboldened child, then, a refusal to conform even to the norms of life expectancy, ‘tearing / out of childhood’ with a shrug, and with a show of charm even for the final fateful boatman to the other world, ‘like she would’ – again that confidential conversational phrase making us present here, bringing us into the family mourning. And with a nod and wink the poem turns sweetly into its sestet.

That sense of dislocation from normal life is enacted in language and naming throughout the collection, as well as being present in life and death. It opens with confusion and dismay caught in ‘Las Damas’, a small and isolated prose poem centred down in the blank space of the page:

The Ladies? I enquire gingerly, my
first try, not remembering the
more neutral word. But we are in
the desert, a roadside café shack
off the Panamericano. *Out the back*,
someone motions. A wooden door
whips open, caught by the wind,
slams fast. Vast sands to left and
right, nothing else—oh, but *Mind*
the Dogs! someone calls.

The shock must have been intensified for a young woman who had taken a vow of stability in the Benedictine manner, in addition to the normal commitment to chastity, poverty and obedience. Being based

life-long in the same convent or abbey was part of the Benedictine spiritual path, freed from the distractions of travel. (Prinknash Abbey in Gloucestershire was always Dom Sylvester's base, despite his ecumenical and cultural activism.) This sudden translation from traditional English convent to a desert shack was profound, but there had been earlier ones. Clarkson's intelligence had brought an academic scholarship to an Anglican girls school, distanced from her many siblings in the Irish-family home, estranged on a daily basis by accent and religion and social unease – recalled in *Medlars* as 'Rise and Fall':

I like Hopkins, I said, shyly.
'God's Grandeur... Pied Beauty...
Felix Randall... Henry Purcell...
Hurrahing in the Harvest...
Inversnaid... Ribblesdale... The Leaden Echo
and the Golden Echo – *Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves* –'

'Indeed!' The Oral Examiner lifted her hand,
then let it drop, and brush – like ah! plushy-velvet –
against my marks sheet. 'Perhaps now
you'd like to tell us why?'

The contrast of entitlement and sincerity is scathing, and relived here in image and rhythm with delicacy, satire and powerlessness combined. A more recent dislocation is hauntingly described in the earlier collection (p.26). In trauma-like flashback the poet recalls her disrobing as a postulant being readied for her new habit: 'as she disembarrassed me of one hot layer / after another, tweed, cotton, nylon, loosing / buttons and cuffs, unravelling ties // when she had been undressing me for a month / I dared to say...'. The poem has an erotic charge, and carries a disturbing reminder of the vulnerability of young and idealistic persons within enclosed

communities.

Now she finds herself in Peru, peripatetic and alone in a savage world between desert and sea. Even before this point she has had to change her ‘name in religion’ to Catherine, becoming distanced from the family monikers of *Gel*, *Ger*, *Germolene*, or from her own childhood reversed nom-de-plume of *Enid Lareg*, specialising in piratical romances on the high seas. Ever the individualist, however, she declines to choose one of the expected Catherines (of Siena or of Alexandria), but opts instead for Catherine of Genoa, both a mystic and a hospital administrator, it seems, but enhanced in hagiographies into ‘a fierce leper-licking patron I was happy to sail a decade by’ (*Catalina*). This prose poem’s title is their best attempt to pronounce her new name by the Peruvian novices she has probably been sent here to instruct.

In the Benedictine Order there is never complete silence, but talk is kept to a minimum as a potential distraction from work or prayer. The practice of silence that she now entered into had various implications. Positively, she describes ‘attentiveness to the world around us and receptivity to nature, engendering an open mind and heart. A detachment which, paradoxically, increases capacity for engagement with all our human situations, and for enjoyment of nature’s profusion and exuberance. A full, not empty, silence – comprising *all words*, just as light comprises all colours.’ More negatively, her own creativity was forbidden: ‘While not permitted to write in the monastery (a diary I started, for psychological relief, was confiscated), I devised a transgressive practice of “night-writing”, writing secretly in the dark, and in the morning destroying the pages I’d written.’ (*Only Use Words If You Have To*, *Culture Matters*, 28 July 2020.)

This practice may have developed her commitment to the prose poem (it saves paper). It also aligns with the creative writing exercise of daily uncensored automatic writing for a set number of minutes, with the results being deliberately set aside unread for months, and

revisited only after other poems, perhaps stimulated by the process, have been completed. Writing late into the night might well develop a hypnagogic style, half-awake and half-dreaming, with a dream's strange fondness for puns and double meanings, so characteristic of her later poetry. With years to practise silence, and to listen to and record that transient inner voice and its imaginings, we might suppose that she became as familiar with her language as a musician might with his or her own instrument. Hence perhaps that quick artistic confidence that was on immediate display when she finally left the convent and was able to respond to her other calling, poetry.

But silence also takes its toll. News of a personal tragedy comes first to the prioress, who interviews the novice in her private room ('empty shelves, / a peach bedspread pulled glass-tight'). We are unsure of what has happened, and feel as cut off as the young nun is. 'It only remains for me to sit quiet / while the details – / *the canal – no medication – discovered by the lock-keeper* // are chanted above my head / which has become too heavy for my neck / which has curved forwards...' ('Ironing Veils'). We are left with an uncertain sense of significance, as if waking from a dream, forced to return with the young girl to her work of prayer ('if you concentrate // on the first two notes of each psalm / the crying seems / to be in another room.') or to the domestic task of learning to iron veils ('and if you turn up the heat and push down / hard you can press out / an amazing number of // creases and you can stuff / an amazing amount of material / into a small space.')

This first collection manages to do exactly that. I am intrigued by the presence within the Benedictine enclosure of the much more outgoing mendicant orders of friars, whose peripatetic work developed in the twelfth century in response to the growth of urban centres and the spiritual needs of the poor there. Several Dominicans find their place in the collection: Saint Dominic himself, Catherine of Siena, Rose of Lima, the Peruvian saint and mystic, and Meister Eckhart, a master theologian whose preaching on the inner

presence of God within each person was deemed heretical by the Inquisition on limited evidence. (Again we can find a connection with Dom Sylvester, who studied his writings and co-founded the British Eckhart Society.) And among the Franciscans, Francis of Assisi is given his own astonishing ‘Homily of Francis’, catching plenitude and humble reticence together with a poise that boldly breaks and yet also keeps the vow of its own silence:

Preach amber, ambergris, preach sweet
pea, purple sprouting, bread. Preach tourmaline
and turquoise, radish. Preach moon’s sprawl, full cream silk,
wind’s punch, yellow, storm, pigeon, squirrel,
monkfish and lawn. Peach.
Preach midnight blue, mackerel sky,
[...]
preach orange fire and white heat, snow, ice,
cacciatore, asparagus, broken crystal *only*
waterfall, drought, flounce of blossom, *only use*
bunion-roots, crocodile, hummingbirds, *only use words*
preach pepper, dance. Preach rocky coves *only use words if*
and prairies, parsnip bouillon; the violin *only use words if you*
played in French *only use words if you have to*

Medlars is a markedly different collection. It registers the shock of a return from Peru to Broken Britain, and the strength of mind involved in surviving here. Aromatic and rather quaint, the medlar is a fruit that becomes edible only after it is allowed to over-ripen and rot, and implications for the UK are clear: this society seems ill-omened and past its best.

Embracing the renunciation of religious life had taken courage, but a greater boldness must have been called upon a decade later to leave it. The cause of this decision is not revealed. Perhaps that will

emerge in the forthcoming *Dream Island Home for Isabelle Huppert* (Verve) originally scheduled for publication before *Medlars*. But aesthetically the formal contrast between the three-part structure and detailed Notes of *Monica's Overcoat of Flesh* and the free-wheeling accumulation of experience in *Medlars* has a dramatic impact. The longer one stays in an institution, of course, perhaps rising through its career path, the more one sees its flaws and compromises – particularly when it is as hierarchical and patriarchal as the Catholic Church is. One may feel driven to transcend the situation by overleaping the walls that restrict individual or creative life. Yet in another odd sense, Geraldine Clarkson as the daughter of a Francis and a Frances, dedicatees of her first collection, had always been a Franciscan at heart.

Now the uncertain mendicant life of the poet was before her. She supported herself by work in offices, warehouses, call centres, libraries and care homes, and as a teacher of refugees and migrants, together with the occasionally successful grant application. How better to engage with the experience of others, or to stress the essential worth of the daily struggle for life, than by reframing and sharing it with wit and positive energy through the gift of words? To the formal boldness of her work is added a new realisation of her own vulnerability, past and present. In 'Even to Kind-Hearted Men' she observes her girlhood self 'uncertain and probing, / that broken-fawn look and that motion-blur [...] endlessly spinning / on the tip of every decision, / never outright or clear'. The eye of experience sees things differently:

... Then you will learn,
as I have now learned, that seeking to please
pleases no one. Unshouldered selfhood
weighs others down. And sickly things, even
to kind-hearted men, and boys, exude spices
inciting them to urgent clarity, cuffs and fresh blood.

Against deference she now presents critique, as in the prose poem 'Break Break Break' which takes the Tennysonian laureate voice and rubs his ears in contemporary reality:

O rogue state which has dough-skin flapping about its neck full to capaz of blue whistled bigotry goitre with it and prorogued. Hounds leaving flour everywhere like maladjusted cooks rampaging in foreign cottages. Someone who shoots you down in your own slaughterhouse.

On the facing page, we find 'S.T. Coleridge Promotes His (Under) Wares', a poem *'after – or before – 'Kubla Khan'* intermeshing lines from Coleridge's great Romantic poem with women's lingerie to such bawdy effect so that, for example, 'caverns measureless to man' may never be read innocently again. Regarding these two opposing pages we may sense the boldness of this woman's stance against a poetic hegemony of the male voice. Other major figures that come in for a sharp shock are Lewis Carroll in 'Underland' and John Ruskin in 'Ruskin's Contract'. Leapfrogging the bent figures of literary greats is an impudent sort of transcendence. But the antagonistic setting of poem pairings on facing pages can be used to lighter effect too. On pp. 68-69, three delicate lines on the common bluebell in 'Hyacinthoides non-scripta' are faced by 'Beryl-the-Peril Bluebell', which ends:

Stalk joy with your stem
and your airy, fairy bell.
Stick your pistils out
and, in that shot-silk thimble,
ring like hell.

Such contrastive pairings appear frequently enough in the collection to make me wonder about it as a structuring device. The major source of poetry during Geraldine Clarkson's decade in religious life would be the Psalms, which are read or sung in choir during the

seven Hours of the Divine Office that punctuate the working day. The main Hebrew poetic device they use is paired couplets, the second line repeating while extending the sense of the first: 'The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want / He makes me to lie down in green pastures'. In English translation, two pairs (or occasionally three pairs) are linked into a stanza, and successive stanzas are said or sung in turn by opposite sections of the choir or congregation. (I speak from limited experience, in non-monastic settings.) The Psalms themselves vary markedly in tone, from praise to anger to despair to gratitude, and the plainchants used will vary too, but the pairing structure gives constancy, and may have provided a poetic grounding of sorts. This is mere speculation, of course, but it is difficult to prevent a born writer from being aware of the poetry around her, no matter the prohibition of using pen and paper.

Sometimes opposition is built into the meanings of language itself. In *Monica's Overcoat of Flesh* the title of 'Inis Ní' seems to direct us towards a critique of W.B. Yeats's 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', with its romanticised Thoreau-esque atmosphere: 'Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey bee, And live alone in the beeloud glade.' The clubbable Yeats would hardly have survived a week there, but the sense of inner freedom ('in is free') resonated with expatriate Irish audiences to such an extent that the poet came to detest the work. Though the island is an actual one on Lough Gill near Sligo, its Irish name of Inis Fraoigh (Heather Island) suggests why it remains uninhabited, underlining the absurd optimism of this horticultural dream. There may be traces here, too, despite his great cultural work towards an independent Ireland, of an Anglo-Irish coloniser perspective. With her familiar West of Ireland roots, Geraldine Clarkson stays closer to linguistic and cultural actuality:

Call it Inish-nee, nee, with twelve permutations of Nee in ten generations, six gorse-humped fields, three starved white beaches with dozens of deep knock-kneed inlets, and seven headscarved

sisters, living together as seamstresses, unmarried, Conneellys.
Bridgie used to come over from their house by boat for Mass

on the mainland. Now a bridge links the two
and she's stopped practising. Scarlet-sailed hookers cut
the caul of silk water. Weeds stink in the shallows.
No longer making shawls but mending fishing nets and darning
Aran sweaters for tourists, she's started swearing, her mind like a sewer.

The placing of this poem towards the end of the collection, together with the use of the phrase 'she's stopped practising' (meaning no longer a regular communicant, semi-detached from the faith) might tempt us towards reading this as a coded version of the poet's departure from the unmarried 'headscarved' sisters in the convent, crossing the bridge to secular life where casual or commercial work replaces subtle traditional patterns of life. But that's too simple. What about the other six sisters, after all, who never joined Bridgie on her weekly voyage of faith? They remained baptised Catholics, part of the clan and the culture. There is irony but not disparagement here. Checking out what this island place-name signifies, we find that *Inis Ní* might mean various things. *Ní* could be 'something' but also 'nothing'; it means 'daughter' or 'descendant'; it is a negative verbal particle; but it is also used for 'washing' or 'washing away' (*ní smáll* means a cleansing of stains).

Each of these meanings resonates. Marginal women who count as nothing in the economic scheme of things are called into being as living somethings, definitely not nothing. These seven aging daughters will not have descendants of their own, but any negativity adheres to economic migration and outdated marriage customs. And the final energetic protest of the single angry sister is accepted, even admired, with moralising disapproval washed away. Bridgie is the echoing bridge between separate stanzas, separate world-views. Her diminutive family name references the powerful Saint Bridget, an abbess in legend linked with ancient Celtic mythology, and the

patroness of learning, health, blacksmithing, and poetry.

Negative and positive are everywhere blended in the encompassing vision of Geraldine Clarkson's poetry. We recall that earlier, as one of the benefits of silence, she cited a detachment that paradoxically enhances the capacity to engage with all human situations. Acuity and gentleness, sharp-witted tenderness, and a generosity of scope with a wonderful precision: these are just some of the qualities of this remarkable poet.

The Orange Book *Geraldine Clarkson*

Use the orange book so that nothing will be impossible
to live with. Peel off the label. Seven layers of persiflage.
Latin ribbons. Penumbra. A galerie giving onto a sandy yard
with clumps of buddleia and an articulated trellis
wound round with dessicated brassicas
and peaches, which I rub. A bibulous bible student emerges
from the porch and preaches. Bonds. Low sounds of cello
and violin wheedling from the ad hoc ballroom
inside. A whirl of lights and pastel robes,
cologne and tiered voices. But you are in the swamp again
near that final limit where you stop.
The retracted baseline. Frangoline. Blandage.
Tattered dress of the body unravelling,
teal veins travelling, like chainstitch.
Mid-mud and modulating.

England's Girlfriends, *or* Chantage

Geraldine Clarkson

All the pretty months leading up to the prison escape had been wasted; the angels and their wives saddening. A child breeze playing through the bars. Flesh has failed, the portly warder tells me over toast in solitary. A meat-madman in the main block is looking for a higher-shaped community. He has sources—*scuttlebutts*—who tell me that my squeeze on the outside is straying, seduced by propinquity, by spicy oxters, though I write to her daily, from the brink, my pen quivering, my heart intent. A lad and a ladder, all it took. I need a gaudy-moon psychiatrist, the neurons in my head popping before breakfast. There are parasimilarities. My spirit flirts with the status quo. You're going to hop good, my supplier says. April is absent, as far as June. Hardyness abounds, unmistakable, becomes excruciating. A grave and letter lost. I am hyper-Hardy, all statins and stains and dreams of satin. Two months, maybe three, short of bliss.

Crossings *David Kinloch*

Oh, I went down to paradise! To paradise on my chubby knees, crawling over the plush towards the window. Who knew a window could also be a door, a door that opened on a wrought iron spiral staircase and that I could enlace my baby feet among its green and rusty whorls, going down to the paradise below. Yes, I went down to paradise, spray in the seaside ozone and I sniffed it like a dog, snuffled it like my woollen donkey, Neddy, abandoned among the filigrees of those high steps. No need of helping hands! I can make the paradise alone, my tiny palms warmed by the sunlit metal as it ferries me down to heaven. 'Heaven's above, he's made it on his own!', down in the paradise below.

And there, through a narrow gate, were the trellises of raspberries, green hairy canes armed with prickles, aggregates of drupelets clustering in profusion and this tall, behatted woman, face hidden in a bee-hat handing me down the fruits of paradise, sweet, tart in equal measure. This woman whom I knew as mother, my other self, longer than my arms and legs, as soft as my cheeks, softer than the soles of my feet naked in grass and among the flowers of the field.

But paradise is sound as well as scent and vision. I was fascinated by the hollow noise of those wooden steps

that led up from the sitting room to the French doors. My whole body was a tuning fork, intimately attuned to that change from muffled tread to air filled ascent. It was like a premonition of flight, of the wings that suddenly crossed my sight, and if I could only get into that shut-in nothingness maybe I could fly it out, out of the window-doors and fly myself down to paradise. Even better, when I got there, I discovered more abandoned and autonomous steps, once used to assist ladies into saddles, and they had metal handles so I could carry them through my paradise a little and climb up to the raspberries and be among their scented juicyness.

And hell? Oh, hell was a ferry ride across the River Amstel, one of us with a lover dying of cancer, the other with a lover dead of Aids. We sought solace in each other's grief and when he lay on me in the sauna his weight pressed down like the weight of the whole river we had crossed. Then we ate honey cake together, high in the gods, not speaking but watching the theatre of wharfs below us and all the huddled figures queuing like burning coals in the winter evening for the ride back to Amsterdam. We cannot cross this river together.// We cross this river. // Old hang-dog friend, we cannot return from the other side. // We return from the other side.

Both the eastern and western Renaissance offer great images of paradise and hell. There are canvases full of flowers and fountains and canvases thick with devils

and the machinery of torture. One that moves and amuses most is by the Belgian artist, Joachim Patinir, who offers us a vision of both, paradise and hell separated by the river Styx which runs down the very middle of the painting, a blue hinge in a diptych. And in the middle of that middle there is Charon in a little boat, the Ferryman of the Underworld steering a human soul towards the banks of hell, their faces resolutely turned away from a solitary angel who waves at them from a slope in paradise.

The reference to art interrupts the writing out of hell. Because it must. It must. For there is mother again, lying in that final hospital bed. It's deepest night, just the rasp of her breathing wracking the air, and how I long to escape that endless sound as it crosses me. But if I listen closely — half-sleeping, half-waking — is that not also the wash of the sea or the current of a troubled river; and I see her bed, frail ferry in the night-lit ward and reach out across the coiling sheets to stroke her snow-white hair, softer than any skin, my own, her own, our own.

4 o'clock *Guillaume Apollinaire*

translated by Ralph Hawkins

It's 4 o'clock in the morning
I wake up with my clothes on
I'm holding a bar of soap
Sent to me by someone I love
I'm going to wash
I emerge from the hole where we sleep
I'm ready to go
And content to wash myself which hasn't happened in three
days
When washed I shave
Then blue sky
I merge with the horizon until night
And it is a sweet pleasure
I say nothing more I'm an invisible being doing nothing
Once buttoned up all blue I am invisible to the sky

At Nimes *Guillaume Apollinaire*

translated by Ralph Hawkins

I enlisted in Nice under the most beautiful skies
The Navy with its victorious name

Lost amongst 900 anonymous drivers
I am a cart driver in Nimes ninth division

Love said stay here but over there the shells
Ardently maintain their goal without ceasing

I am waiting for spring orders
To call us glorious intrepid new recruits to the north

The 3 gunners sit holding their foreheads
Their brilliant clear eyes like my spurs

A beautiful afternoon on guard duty at the stables
I hear the artillery trumpets sound

I admire the cheerfulness of this detachment
Who will join our fine regiment at the front

The territorial who eats a salad with anchovies
Talks of his wife's illness

4 artillery pointers steady the level bubbles
Which bob and tremble like horses' eyes

A good singer Girault sings to us after 9 o'clock
A great aria from the opera you listen to and cry

I pass my hand over the small grey cannon
Grey like the water of the Seine and I dream of Paris

But in the canteen this pale wounded man told me
Of the night shells and their silvery splendour

I eat my portion of beef slowly
From 5 to 9 I walk alone in the evening

I saddle my horse and we ride through the countryside
I greet you in the distance, beautiful rose, O Magne Tower

In the Underground Shelter

Guillaume Apollinaire translated by Ralph Hawkins

I throw myself towards you as you throw yourself towards me
A force a part of us a solid fire that joins us together
And yet there is a contradiction making it impossible for us to see
each other

In front of me the chalk wall crumbles
It is full of breakages
Of long traces of tools smooth traces that appear in the chalk
Corners pulled off and broken by the passing of my troop
Tonight I have a soul both hollowed out and empty
It seems that I am endlessly falling without reaching an end
And there's nothing to hold onto
That which lives and falls within me are all kinds of ugly people
and I don't know where they come from
Yes I think they come from life a life in the future in the brute future
that does not have the ability to uplift and humanize
In the vast emptiness of my soul the sun is missing there is nothing
to give light

It is today it is tonight and not forever
Fortunately it is only for tonight
On other days I attach myself to you
On other days I console myself from all the horrors
And imagine your beauty
By lifting it above an enraptured universe
It is then I think that I am imagining vain
I do not know it makes no sense
Not even in words
And my liking for beauty is that also vain
Do you exist my love
Or are you only a being I unwittingly created
To fill my solitude
Are you a goddess like one of those invented by the Greeks gifted to
fill my boredom
Even if you exist only in my imagination I adore you O my exquisite
goddess

Silence *Lennart Sjögren*

translated by Robin Fulton Macpherson

Silence came closer, came in.
The years loosened one thumbscrew
tightened another.

Beautiful vulture-like birds
were on the way
and other lesser species
from a zoology unknown to me.

The things *Lennart Sjögren*

translated by Robin Fulton Macpherson

It was best at the frontier of dawn
where light first appears after the dead of night
when with clear eyes the things could observe us.

The things are hardly humans
not beasts either
but they live like us in their closed shells
and when smashed there's a crunching noise
of broken bones.

Don't ask me about their origin
or their special place in life
but not long ago at the frontier of dawn
I heard them bark like exhilarated dogs
when the scent hits them.

The new-born *Lennart Sjögren*
translated by Robin Fulton Macpherson

The new-born who still travel around
in the leafing boats
their eyes have been fetched
from the coal's innermost depth

with them they observe us
before the black light fades out
in their pupils
and they see the world only as we see it.

The dry heat *Lennart Sjögren*
translated by Robin Fulton Macpherson

The dry heat to be found in late August
in a windless pine plantation
deemed to be unlovely
yet a place where a human
and something outside humanity can meet.
For a short while time has left the timetable
and in a moment almost too short to notice
panic abandons the man who lost his way.
What is without being takes shape,
a hand is offered

No further *Robin Fulton Macpherson*

Russet glimpse in the woods.
A clarity of air.

Letters, emails, phone-calls,
no replies expected.

He'd come to autumn's gate.
Autumn couldn't let him in.

Company

I don't wonder if they're dead or alive.
A few will flow into my present tense
the way the last edge of a thin wave flows
across the smoothed sand, hesitates and waits.

Thresholds *Robin Fulton Macpherson*
(Reading Lennart Sjögren)

Limen, liminis (neuter).

The room where we did Latin
gave a view of Ben Bhraggie.
I'd rather have looked downhill
at The Moray Firth churning
in its haste to reach nowhere
or dead to the pull of tides
like inanimate metal.
I didn't see a threshold.
I didn't see a beyond.

I counted years, then decades,
came to follow how Lennart
used up his four-score-and-ten
on the edge of The Baltic
looking past severe thresholds.
He saw fish-teeth, fish-jawbones,
observed a beyond devoid
of cruelty, of kindness.

Contributors **Geraldine Clarkson's** poetry has appeared in

journals internationally, including *Poetry* (Chicago), and she has performed her poems at the Royal Albert Hall and various festivals and other poetry venues in the U.K., Ireland and the U.S. **Ralph Hawkins** has been writing poetry since the late 1970s when he was one of a number of radical poets gathered at the University of Essex. He now lives on the Essex coast at Brightlingsea. **David Kinloch** is one of the notable Scottish poets of his generation. Edwin Morgan admired his 'sparkling poems full of sensuous richness and linguistic inventive-ness'; and Douglas Messerli declared, 'David Kinloch is surely one of the most innovative poets ever to come out of Scotland ... [his] readers must be prepared to take a long voyage through language, imagination, and space. While it isn't always easy, it's always worth the trip.' **James McGonigal's** latest collection *Life Sentences* was described by the late Gerry Loose as: 'In its grace, in its slow, thoughtful and wise cadences, *Life Sentences* not only the perfect antidote to our rushed times, it tilts the reader into an unknown and slightly unsettling world of the poet's fabulation. There is a quiet masterful felicity of language here, at once compassionate with a refreshing clear-eyed European sensibility at work, reminiscent of Jaan Kaplinski, of Pentti Saarikoski, yet clearly and movingly steering its own course.' **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). **Penelope Shuttle's** retrospective, *Unsent: New & Selected Poems 1980-2012* (Bloodaxe Books, 2012), drew on ten collections published over three decades plus the title-collection. Her later collections from Bloodaxe are *Will you walk a little faster?* (2017) and *Lyonese* (2021), longlisted for the Laurel Prize. Her work is widely anthologised and can be heard at The Poetry Archive Website. She is current Chair of the Falmouth Poetry Group, one of the longest-running poetry workshops in the country. **Lennart Sjögren** was born in the village of Böda on the Swedish island of Öland in the Baltic and to this very day lives on the former farm of his parents, down by the shore.

Painted, spoken

poems

Guillaume Apollinaire

translated by Ralph Hawkins

Geraldine Clarkson

David Kinloch

James McGonigal

Robin Fulton Macpherson

Penelope Shuttle

Lennart Sjögren

translated by Robin Fulton Macpherson

thought

Boldness The poetry of Geraldine Clarkson
by James McGonigal

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