

Shearsman 55

summer 2003 issue

*featuring **poetry** by*

Michael S Begnal

Martin Burke

M T C Cronin

C P Crowther

Leza Lowitz

Simon Perril

Estill Pollock

Frances Presley

Penelope Shuttle

edited by Tony Frazer

Shearsman Books

58 Velwell Road

Exeter EX4 4LD

England

*& **prose** by*

Dennis Barone

editor@shearsman.com

www.shearsman.com

Single issue : £2.50

Subscriptions : £7 (4 issues)

Cheques payable to Shearsman Books

Europe ex-UK : add 65p / £2.50

Rest of the world : add £1.25 / £5

This issue of *Shearsman* is dedicated to the memory of Richard Caddel, poet and Shearsman author, 13 July 1949 - 2 April 2003.

FRANCES PRESLEY

Belated birds of prey

for Colin Simms

Garrigill

1 Nov 01

Dear

*that day of the Helm wind you will remember
past Rotherhope Fell carrying you
and the belated birds of prey*

belated belated belated
 birds of prey

a cluster finds the forest

 that fell
 those birds of prey

and you with no phone at all

Stonestreet

1 Jan 02

Dear

I was dreaming of (escape)
dreaming of that high rising bank
your birds of prey

vague in its outlines
a different quality of darkness
a line of fells

can't see above
the underlines in your letter

can't see above
the line of address
and you are illegible

Presley

shearsman 55

? *Red Start*

can't see the words
the woods

pair
why
here

stonechats

Garrigill

23rd May

broken bones in
r.h. & wrist
in a fall on Fiends' Fell

Eden Vale

25th May

urgent letters
clarity of the left hand

phone numbers
given

this line of clouds
across the fells

fleece snagged –
contours –
to emphasise –

on wire
that children draw
a separation

Presley

Black burn

binocular
coincides
the bird
and the shadow of the bird

these adjustments
I can make
though still struggling to
distinguish
the male and the female
which is quite different
again
love

harrier (female)
in quad lights
banks

buzzard (female brown)
outmoving the lens

hands and feet
balancing the contours

words underlined
downstream
stressed by spars

Notes:

Garrigill is the home of poet and naturalist Colin Simms, whose works include *In Afghanistan: Poems 1986-1994*, published by Writers Forum, London, 2001.

“Belated birds of prey” forms part of a longer sequence, *Paravane: 9/11-11/9*.

Presley

Othery cope

And there appeared a great wonder in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars

(Revelations 12:1)

Who's that a-sewing?
Ann the restorator
What's she a-sewing?
Ask the restorator
A cope of the (indecipherable) sun

She was clothed with cords
and t- ties
twisting out the sweating
minor volcanic
in the sewers of the ruins
the daughter-house
of the rere dorter
harebells in the runis

Who's that a-sewing?
Ann the restorator
What's she a-sewing?
Ask the restorator
A cloak of the (indecipherable) son

She was clothed with the sun
Mary the Virgin, Mary the engine
Origin and trenchant
More guy ses than sh®ines

she is the plasmic
closed with the one

centre stitches a-bursting
pom e

granate

Who made the patches?
Who defines
Ann the restorator
Split between cope and car

the outlines?

Presley

2

Window through window
Push over Dis/
Solution
In the blue sky Scriptorum

Lady Justice said to me
She said, Christine
Tell me the truth
She said Tell me the truth

Show me the City
Show me the City
Of Ladies that you've built

Then Lady Justice
Led the Queen of Heaven
Into the highest tower
To greet all of us

She is clothed with a book
leaves dangling from her ear lobes
doubling her chin
folding on her belly
dancing on her navel
tasted with her seeds
pages gripped prehensile
letters on her (indecipherable)
scroll

CHORUS

Note

Othery Cope is an exploded blues, inspired by *John the Revelator*, sung by Blind Willie Johnson and his wife Angeline. The *Othery Cope* hangs in the Glastonbury Abbey museum, and was restored by Ann French. I also quote from *The Book of the City of Ladies* by Christine de Pizan. The second stanza (page 5) does *not* feature any misprints...

Presley

DENNIS BARONE

Wishbone

Our professor told us at the start of one particularly arduous session that we had already examined all the formations of static necessary to co-opt the rumor wedged in the starched creases of corduroy. We saw when the second week commenced that a class such as his creates myriad possibilities for the most hypertrophied, not for us. We lived during that week on a see-saw, a tenuous balance at best. He maintained his control while we carried crosses shoulder high after nearly every class. A whole historical ethos informed our protested intersubjectivity that he so pridefully thought his syllabus had constructed out of us. We would have rebelled more forcefully, more violently had we been granted the language for rebellion, but our course of study does not consider the Oedipal until next semester.

Taproot

He can still recall that night, even now as he looks across the water to where a lone tanker begins its slow crawl out to sea. He can remember that little boy who watched a canal man pole his boat along its way. He wonders how that little boy in that distant house became the lanky, weary man that he is now, this man who stands and carefully brushes the seat of his pants and pulls his check blazer close about him as the wind seems to rise at just the moment that he stands, leaves here, and starts for home. He lives in one of those chic apartments etched inside the archaic, cavernous vaults of former warehouses. The carefully placed contents of the rectangular spaces that form his home might yet recall everything he would muzzle. He enters, hangs his check blazer in the closet and goes to the sink and washes his hands. He lights a cigarette and opens a bottle of wine. He takes a glass from a cabinet, some ashes from his cigarette fall into the sink. He pours wine into his glass and walks to his study. He looks briefly at some pictures hung on the wall, turns and looks briefly at some others placed along the outer edge of bookshelves. Now he steps toward his desk. He sits down and looks out the window, out across the water. He closes his eyes for a moment and considers once more those faces locked safe in their frames. He opens his eyes, places his hands upon the keys, and begins to type.

Apprentice-Work

He sits above the closed atlas, next to a history of opera. At his age he has neither rabbits nor hats. Frank is his name or Robert. His legs are crossed; his palms are up and open and waiting for something to begin – nothing in particular, not one moment or an other. The nets long ago have been sewn; the saws retain some infinitesimal sparkle. Winter follows summer. Any moment is so hard for him to remember now; any object, so hard to hold. Cravat, links, spats, even pants he's loosened to let flesh relax and unfurl. Would the grandson recall a magician's errand-less wanderings in the dark at night? Every house, after all, thinks of itself as bolted and distinct. Would that boy when grown and likewise in the trade sense – in his bones or in his genes perhaps (that'll have him wandering, too) – fear as he did the night he espied an ancient figure in modern dress ramble from cave to cave muttering something that the poor child could not understand? Though be sure of this, if it were a song, he'd sing it, too. At night he'd lift high his black jug, gulp, then bellow forth, and the next day he'd not recall a single note of it. If it were a spell, he'd be, as it were, himself sawn in two and then in two again and again and again, but never so small as to pass through the net: thin as a pine needle or flat as an angelfish.

Postcard

He comes out of his house every morning broom in hand. Jane Shore wrote a poem called "Washing the Streets of Holland," but this Dutchman prefers to sweep. He doesn't sweep the entire street, just one block. He seems to be king of it: his broom, his scepter. There's something regal about his back and forth movements, spine stiff and straight, a matter of state importance. Occasionally, he pauses and mutters disgust at small cigarette butts that defy the urgency of his strokes. He begins at one end of the block and advances toward his objective, its other end. Then he returns, satisfied, pats his small shorthaired dog on its square head, and goes inside. His work is gratifying, fulfilling, never halted by taxi or tourist. On your way to begin your work, he completes his. On your way to the university, the hospital or the office, on your way to the tram, watch him now. He pauses, bends, and, like a surgeon, slowly, carefully removes one particularly small and troublesome butt from the crevice between two bricks.

LEZA LOWITZ

Rivers So Small

– *Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe*

Vanishing point
 on the canvas
black cross with red sky
 hole in the skull
through which
 to see the sky
cow skull
 not representing death
just being a shape I liked...
 the landscape of the shell
or flower
 is the body female
womb
 labia
clitoris
 that is the desert
landscape
 – opening out.
“I’m going to paint it”
 she said,
“so big
 they’ll have to look at it!
If I would paint that flower

Lowitz

just that flower
the size it IS
no one will
look at it.”
Student of the sky
seer of the land
figure of the
evening star,
mystic of the lonely horizon
mesa, mountain, surface of moon
soul unadorned
reborn in the wetness of
paint
your desert eternally alive
on the canvas.
People asked her
why she painted
flowers so big –
why didn't they ask her
why she painted
rivers so small?

Leza Lowitz was born in San Francisco in 1962. She has published two books of poems, *Yoga Poems: Lines to Unfold By* (Stone Bridge Press, 2000) which received the PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Award for Best Book of Poetry 2001, and *Old Ways To Fold New Paper* (Wandering Mind Books, 1997) as well as six books of translations from the Japanese, including the award-winning anthologies of contemporary women's poetry, *A Long Rainy Season* and *Other Side River*. For more about the author, see www.lezalowitz.com

Lowitz

C P CROWTHER

Eagle Stone

This will hurt you
heart:
ingoring cut.

You pace
the tasks of blade,
flesh-bored like I am.

Slash slash
pause.
Ignore lost blood.

Wave it on.
Lesions
soon welt over.

Shut down
the aetiology
of scar.

It's my skin,
my thin iron,
I dig through

toward the loose
nucleus,
eagle stone,

sawing the curt
red edge
of words.

Note:

The eagle stone, fabled to be found in the eagle's nest, is a hollow nodule of argillaceous oxide of iron. It has a loose nucleus.

Crowther

Forthcoming Titles

untitled

words selected randomly each day from the artist's original brief to create a wallhung definition of death

Titled:

Today's Definition of Death

untitled

medical plates of the dead brain collected from assorted hospital archives

Titled:

Dead Head Shots, Interior

untitled

plaster casts of the artist's family and neighbours in appropriate shades, hung as domestic decorations. Marie has her eyes open.

Titled:

Memento Marie

untitled

street names which refer to, imply, name or euphemise the notion of death

Titled:

Short Cuts

untitled

photographic studies of flesh lit to illuminate death blows

Titled:

Shiners

untitled

technologically-inspired sadomasochistic fetishes that have caused death each with linked tabloid headline

Titled:

Thumbscrew to Palmtop

untitled

constant-play video recording of the artist and an unnamed celebrity in a conversation constructed wholly of phrases used by the famous when dying

Titled:

I shall Make an Attempt to Fill the Void

SIMON PERRIL

Inwardness is a tonal effect of the elliptical
after William Fuller

what clouds conspire overhead
eventually comes out in the wash
glass dust sprinkles grey-heave

in falling light, halving
sound silts passageways
between thoughts afloat

in the auditory canal
a new kind of water
hollows out the human

rounding up our senses
as stray numbers in an equation
variations on an enigma

assembling what can never be built
a new public monument
from our innermost lights

Marey's Revolver

Edison was deaf when he invented the Phonograph and
Plateau blind when he created a rudimentary form of cinema.

we're in the frame for something
sparkling, emulsified.
Shots patched frame by frame
the re-set limbs still ache:

Bell-Magendie's law.
Mad scientists muscle in
to another creation myth: Plateau
stares down motion, tears

Perril

retinal oceans off sun's eyelid.

The doctor has changed his mind
an uneven swap, granted
there are means, ways

but it's the mean ways we keep
and grow as culture. The box office
records failed flights, compulsive returns
to typecast menace. Marey's revolver

diagnostic; still loaded, safety catch
on the ghost story of reality.
Hatching mad schemes in the dark
under the hood of a Black Maria

the Doctor grants the strangest lesson:
matter can be dissolved, transmitted
and reassembled – the audience
will never buy it! It's 1936!

Simon Perril lives in Cambridge and is the author of *Spirit Level* (Equipage, 1996), and *Volume* (Folio/Salt, 1998), and co-author of *New Tonal Language* (Reality Street 4pack vol 3). He has also written lengthy critical pieces on various poets, and has edited a book on Brian Catling, published by CCCP, Cambridge.

Martin Burke is an Irish poet who has been resident in Ghent, Belgium for the past 20 years. Recent work has appeared in *The Drunken Boat*; *The Lilliput Review*; *Snakeskin*; *Transference*; *Poetry about Poetry*; *Arts Dialogue*; *Virtual Writer*.

Frances Presley lives in London and is the author of *Somerset Letters* (Oasis Books, London, 2002).

M.T.C. Cronin first published her poetry ten years ago, since which time she has published nine collections, the most recent of which are *My Lover's Back: 79 Love Poems* (University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2002) and *beautiful unfinished PARABLE/SONG/CANTO/POEM* (Salt Publishing, Cambridge, 2003), and has won numerous prizes. She was born in 1963 in New South Wales, and now lives with her partner, a musician, and their three children in Queensland.

Perril

MARTIN BURKE

Approaching Dusk

Approaching dusk the shadows danced
among and beyond themselves
and because it was Flanders
somewhere there was a ringing bell.
He could imagine how, beyond his window,
shadows approached then consumed the light,
how there would be those who would watch
and those who would not. Cyclists went by,
one had a light, one had not,
the clock seemed to miss every second beat.
Everything was possible, ambition, detachment,
both could be perfected in the instant of choosing,
the one would equal or cancel the other.
Yes, night was sacred, to those who believed
and to those who did not. Poetry?
that was the voice which did not interfere
with how each thing spoke for itself

Navigations

And there is this:

how we took the wrong road and ended up in the mountains
on a track
barely wide enough for our rented car; where we stopped
and saw
the valley we otherwise would have missed and were
grateful for that
as if our wrong turn had led to a destined rightness as we
sat on the stones
on the side of the track to view it all the better. Such as this
remains
active and glowing when much else fades –as if everything
was a sign
to be decoded according to the signals of the day. As if
our ‘mistake’
was an older language we were returning to –a wisdom

Burke

(if you will)
to be lived through like alchemy. And yet as we sat there
warm in the sun,
viewing the valley, we gave no thought to language or interpretation;
it was enough
that we were there; it was enough that its accuracy was what
it was.
We delighted in that. We took it all in and made ready
to carry on-
not by maps but by following the road where it led,
trusting to it
in a surety more full than our own; a method we were learning
to go by
as we went in wonderment at the language we then needed
for the navigations of arrival.

ESTILL POLLOCK

Mapping the River

Tell me how the days went down.
I remember the chimes at home — in those days
we lived nearly under the steeple of St. Paul's.
I remember a bell that could be heard for miles,
and it shook the earth.

That diva note drifts through the new Jerusalem,
serenades our present state.
Grime degrades the sculpted stone sprawled
lionlike on the pedestal, ash of lost causes,
pretty patterns in a sari-whorl of sky.

The past is far enough. It is yesterday and now,
the rockinghorse rhythm of the day,
cornflower blue for the sparrow as it spires,
sprung from invisible fashionings of air
rent with that rocketing.

Burke / Pollock

How shall half a century answer? A driven life
without tomorrows, the spill of sacrifice through time,
every Jesus needs a Judas, every Judas
a knotted rope: how else coax April
from the chilly coverts?

I am mindful of the weather. The boil of clouds
invites events into our lives — rain, arrow winds
off German Bight, the gales
succulent with sea salt and storm tides'
greedy scoop of beach and cliff.

Near Clacton, a Junkers dumping bombs
against dwindling fuel, the near-miss
then a parade of quiet shops unlucky —
the Hurricanes scramble to the radar,
riddle tail-fin swastikas above cold green seas.

A fishing smack hauls up the bodies,
the pilot, twenty-two, from Hamburg,
in the wreckage the snapshot blonde
dragged down with the others: whose girl,
whose wife commiserates with corpses?

That same beach now — trippers wade and paddle,
windbreak canes and cardigans; perhaps we won.
We note in the margins the brassplate rigour,
our finest hour replete with carpark passes.
Is it really fifty years and now tomorrow?

The flyers are buried in yew shade, easy
with the English dead, among limestone slips
with Georgian dates of death and birth,
hand in hand with parish saints
to serve and suffer without complaint.

When we were children, time slipped away
in the cricket dark, under heavy scent of earth,
summer, and late to bed.
The plane tree sloughed its curl of bark
for ships that sailed the millpond lanes.

Time the river, sentiment of perspective,
time the failed foothold, peacock plans
disappearing on the current —
how shall we serve, and what defend
when knaves are shuffled with suited kings?

Zigzag gables connect the houses.
The Thames is matted in our hair, Ganges
a cupped palm, China's gold-weight bangle
and the Mississippi's tangle of upstream life
streams down, a psalm of ooze, a tune less debonair.

I row into the wreckage, through the scum of oil
a face, a boy's face and the body rolls and sinks,
coy to meet the grapnels. It is my own face.
This fisher life is charged, cast
along a coveted anonymity.

All those years, balanced on my own reflection,
a reality poised on briefest light, sky
painted on water and firefly stars
dripping from the oars, time we teased
from nothing, remains unknown.

Again the hook, the catch-net keep
where broad trees overhang the banks:
tell me how the days went down. The anchor's pull
on painted planks proves the limit of the deep,
a satin deadcalm stuttering with rain.

Objet d'art, Miscellany and Views

A soapstone buddha
paperweight lends gravitas to loose-leaf
sketches of the doors
and windows, ha-ha,
the folly and the ruined relief,
the inkwash of ivy and hellebores.

A bronze figurine,
French, late 18C, crowds the lesser lots,
a nervy line of
burnished nicotine.
Next, engravings of sans-culottes
razing the Bastille, etched with smoke above;

plate-silver service,
a 'modern' atlas coloured with empire,
memoirs of Paris
between the wars, kiss-
curl sweethearts in porcelain, sire
stock paintings, a pamphlet, "Against Hubris"—

your shoes, the shell pink
satin with the Deco heels, the tissue
wrappings, reminded
me of New Year's, zinc
bathtub cooling fizz, the horseshoe
of roses, the wishing star love blinded.

A stranger took your
diaries. The secret nod, a sign for sign
and all was his. The
light rays bend in pure
white ribbons through the room. A fine
dust shrugs its weasel anonymity.

Estill Pollock has recently completed the trilogy *Decorative Initials for a Book of Hours*. His first collection, *Constructing the Human*, which is the opening movement, was published in 2001 by Poetry Salzburg Press; it is followed by *Theories of Fugue* and *Tsunami Muses*, selections from which are forthcoming from Flarestack Publications in 2003 and 2004. American by nationality, he lives in Essex.

Claire Crowther is completing an MPhil in Writing (Poetry) at the University of Glamorgan and has had work published in a variety of UK and American magazines. A pamphlet appeared from Flarestack in May 2003.

Pollock

MICHAEL S. BEGNAL

In Toledo

You don't know what you're getting yourself in for,
suddenly it's 1586, winding labyrinthine streets,
little cobblestones (but it's hot and sunny!)
(some wind), everything's at an angle

"Let's go to El Greco's house" (down the stepped stone lane)
(like one time El Greco lived there and his friends used to think:
"Yeah, I'm going to drop in and see El Greco"
in the city built on the hill)

came down to the little park,
smoked some hash in the stone monument,
you just stare across the canyon to the old rich houses on the hills,
look down at the river, ruins of an ancient bridge,
white

wild

geese tiny down on the far bank

City in Nature

and if you lived there
and this was your normal view
and the fog comes
and the snow—
you'd become completely separated from the world,
time medieval Spanish

Monasterio de San Juan de los Reyes,
an orange tree in the courtyard Gothic stone,
but the Church of Santo Tomé much smaller,
but a giant El Greco masterpiece in the dim light,
a middle-aged Spanish lady looks from a bench and weeps,
round the outside, out the thin paths of Moors,
separate, lost

an orange cat alone,
eye gouged in fight,
waiting for help in the dry clay

“In the time of the flying ants...”

In the time of the flying ants
a twilight streetlamp moulders pink,
pink as the clouds upon grey air,
pink as one’s vulva in magazines,
soft as the smell of lily
in the eternal Connacht summer,
she is a great explosion of hair,
she is someone’s tender moment in a life full of shock,
it is a fine music the rumble of wings,
she (that cat) is taut sleek muscle
a natural aesthetic of fur under a car,
I am an aesthete, I am high,
and I’ve got three realms of thought plus
one controls the mix in turntable scratch,
and I tell you now that
in the time of the winged snakes
I was a black ibis at mountain pass,
seen now in the veins of streets
with winged ants ellipsing the head,
fondly standing, yes, bring on the bats

Michael Begnal has appeared in numerous journals in Ireland, Britain and America, as well as in the recent anthology *Breaking the Skin: 21st Century Irish Writing* (Black Mountain Press). His collection *The Lakes of Coma* was published in February 2003 by Six Gallery Press of Geneva, Ohio, and a second – *Ancestor Worship* – is forthcoming from Salmon. He edits the Galway-based literary magazine *The Burning Bush*.

Begnal

PENELOPE SHUTTLE

Faith

The former synagogue high above the town
bears a plaque
to say here was where
an old faith flourished and faded

and across the town valley
the Methodist Chapel
hangs on by its fingertips, fading in turn

Forget buildings –
Gods are happiest out of doors,
burning bushes,
strolling the tide from St Ives to The Gribben
and back again

I saw The Eye Of The Wind
blown from Southampton to Falmouth,
counting its losses and setting sail again, godly
to Spain

May

May is if-only
Is the colourblind light

A brandnew tallship,
frost-masted

Is colder than March,
yet has the benefit of lilac

Is best not compared
to the May of other years

May is cloud-days,
heads and tails,
the spring's deathbed,

the summer's Norway,
dusks, fiords, forests

DECEMBER X 2

1

You have your day
as the fir and the spruce
have their day

The forest puts one toe indoors,
the shortest day goes on and on,
as if it will never end

*

2

The last speaker,
wordless in the dusk

**

Penelope Shuttle was born in Middlesex in 1947, but has lived in Falmouth, Cornwall since 1970. Since 1980 she has published seven collections of poems as well as a *Selected Poems* (Oxford UP, 1998). She is also the co-author of two prose works *The Wise Wound* and *Alchemy for Women*. Her most recent collection is *A Leaf Out Of His Book* (Carcanet Press, Manchester, 1999).

M T C Cronin

from Prayers Without a God

we thought of ourselves
now we need poetry

we observed ourselves
by the water

did we drink?

we followed the line of ourselves
to where the sun marked the ground
with the beauty of the last tree

when did we write the first poem
sent out to meet the horizon?

there came slowly a day
when all vision troubled us

we turned ourselves into our words
which until then
had not lived

•

commerce closes the flag
the bell the coffin

the benefactors carry empty houses
to the coin
and push flowers into years

if only the lime was still spread
on the chests of the dead

Cronin

and the law had to wait
five days...

skin burns a sound mind
the island arrives
barefoot in its entirety

sleep past the morning-sir
armband the morning

~•~

love mines us
of the final prayer
of need

in darkness it searches
for its reflection
everyone can play the mirror!

there is none in seeing
but cruelty in describing
take care then

not to describe

~•~

the prayer for those who speak
is sung
in the minute before the hour
in the song on the bridge
for what passes beneath
in the one shoe for the other
for the other that is spoken to

see the mouth make a brick
a bird, a plug of the ocean
in a test-tube

the striking green of the rainforest cycad
is no trouble for the tongue
it goes even to curl on those little stones
that have never existed
those imaginary stones
in the no-sun

~•~

the clock of the wind
blows quickly through time

the mistakes of the north
are made in the south

I put my hand deeply
into alliteration

and death translates
the forgotten world

~•~

the weariness
of the hunter's stare
has aged me

I wait for the single
caress of word
that will make me bone again

among flesh

Cronin

any ground that can support you
is bigger than you
even if it is smaller

I didn't realize how broken we are
when we must leave
as if mended

my wound is full
of the dart
that does not seem great enough

certain things cannot get past
the stump
of my tongue

I do not dream without you

I accuse Saturday of death

God has no neighbours

say if you dare
your last word

~•~

winter's-bark
widow-bird
the seminar of Summer
the infant fragments
gentle in their crash
towards what's worthy of their dreams
resist, break worlds –

what is the single sense
of this love?

Cronin

intimage –

we fold like bright eggs
to the make

variations of seven –

owlet-moth
bat on a string
nocent life

days that mean something
have passed

~•~

love is focus
deeper than the eye
we are ever closer
to undoing its claims

to seeing

~•~

I salute you
for living so long
for taking your own life

terrifyingly
the root lifting itself
from its bed

love mines us
until the earth
is empty of us

Jennifer Moxley: *The Sense Record* (Salt Publishing, Cambridge, 2003. ISBN 1-876857-93-5. 93pp, pb, £8.95)

This book is the gem of Salt's recent and very varied output. It's Jennifer Moxley's first UK collection and is a reprint of the US edition published by Edge Books last year. Her earlier US volume, *Imagination Verses*, is also due shortly from Salt. Jennifer Moxley is one of the most unusual recent eruptions from the non-mainstream side of US poetry. Founder of the excellent little-magazine *The Impercipient* in the early 1990s, then a poetics pamphlet series *The Impercipient Lectures*, she is now an Assistant Professor at the University of Maine, Orono, a bastion of U.S. modernism.

Her poetic position, however, is an unusual one in that she is quite content to use old forms (but without parody), archaic language (without being patronising), and meaning (without deconstruction). This sounds like a mainstream poet, doesn't it? The thing is, she isn't one, even if she can write beautiful sonnets like this one, which I like so much I'm going to quote it in full:

Against Aubade

Should morning's snubbed forsaken purpose come
in love's complacent orbit to relent
and to our bid for endless time succumb
could we believe ourselves the more content?
Invention may give credence to a thought
ridiculous, or better yet banal
should in a wishful prison it be caught
dissembling fear beneath the bacchanal;
Alone the mind can store old years anew
with furnishings our Eros will forsake
without concern, the watchman's cry rings true
my love, we should no longer lie awake
but stellar-like in darkness drift compelled
our matter's myth in time shall be dispelled.

What we really have here is a poet trying to engage with the inherited tradition and start afresh from that basis; but that tradition is not one that was cut off at any particular point (as one often feels with mainstream poets on both sides of the Atlantic), rather, it is a living tradition in which all the modernisms are present, and to which the post-modern can lay claim with equal relish. Some versions of current non-mainstream poetry adopt deliberately non-poetic discourses as a method of opening out the form and making it less stable; they avoid formal

methods as unnecessary restrictions; they distrust the apparent certainty of the authorial voice and avoid the first person; they break down syntax into non-sequential strings as a means of releasing new meanings from overlaid semantic units. I have no problem with any of this, in fact, although – inevitably – not all of the results are inspiring. It is peculiarly liberating to find a poet charging into the possibilities of form with such relish, playing with them almost to see what will happen, using inversion, heightened diction, rhyme, metre, albeit not all at the same time. Now the obvious reaction to all of this is “So what?” Well, I see vast numbers of submissions to this magazine that try to engage with some of those disciplines; 99.9% fail miserably. I’ve seen mainstream poets here and in the US try to engage with them and the hit-rate is a bit higher, but not much. Jennifer Moxley can do it; she uses the whole bag of tricks and ends up with the impossible: a fully-functioning post-modern poetry that raids the grab-bag of history but looks forward, not back. [See the Shearsman website’s *Book of the Month* page for May 2003 for a much longer version of this review, with more quotations.]

Peter Robinson: *Selected Poems 1976-2001* (Carcanet Press, Manchester, 2003. ISBN 1-85754-625-3. 139pp, pb, £8.85.)

Peter Robinson’s poetic career trajectory has been slightly odd, in so far as he first came to notice at the time of editing the excellent little magazine *Perfect Bound* from Cambridge in the late 1970s, as well as running the Cambridge Poetry Festival. What’s odd about that? Nothing, except that *PB* was, along with *Grosseteste Review*, the finest exponent of contemporary non-mainstream British poetry at the time, and Robinson’s own poetry has seemed at odds with that background ever since.

This book surveys an interesting career then, the work of a poet who goes his own way, has found his niche, his style and has grown comfortable with it, but not so comfortable that he’s forgotten how to write good poems. It’s fair to say, I think, that he would not now have much interest in the further reaches of what passes for innovative poetry in this country, but he has an undeniable interest in poets such as Roy Fisher — on whom he has written illuminatingly, and whom he interviewed for my edition of Fisher’s *Interviews Through Time* (2000) — which indicates that one should not make facile assumptions, particularly concerning someone who spends most of his time outside the UK (he works in Japan, and passes much time in Italy, his wife’s home), and thus participates in the literary swim here at something of a distance, if at all. The fact is that his work never sought to break down barriers, was always honest unto itself, and was from the very beginning elegant and well-written – as is demonstrated here by the poems from the Many Press volume *Overdrawn Account* (1980). Part 2 here shows Robinson getting into his stride, with the beautifully taut *A Short History* and other poems

of memory and family background, as well as the nigh-unbearable poems that deal with the assault on his then-girlfriend, full of despair and helplessness.

His newer poems are reflections of a life, in Japan, in the UK and in Italy, snatches of family conversation, of meetings with friends, reflections on landscape and fleeting impressions of transient moments caught on the wing.

Apropos of Nothing

Words spoken now to please the dead
are dandelion pollen in this late air.
They roll down a riverbank there
like balls of fluff from under a bed,
words spoken now to please the dead.

The forever dead who don't go beyond,
cross border, boundary or frontier
but in our old thoughts remain here,
they reach towards us with each frond,
the forever dead who don't go beyond.

They're the more living, being said,
as a fresh wind makes aired jackets dance
passionate tangos on a balcony's lines.
Words spoken now to please the dead
commemorate us living, being said.

This is a recent, uncollected poem and demonstrates the best of Robinson's later work, tight lines, not a word out of place, not a word too many in the whole poem, and a superb closing riff. A fine book of many pleasures, if quieter pleasures than most that I find these days. It's good to be confounded, to be knocked out of one's preconceptions, and Robinson's work, in its understated way, does that for me. A book worthy having even if you already have many of the earlier books, as the uncollected and long-out-of-print material here adds greatly to the overall picture.

George Stanley: *A Tall Serious Girl. Selected Poems 1957-2000.* (Qua Books, Jamestown, RI, USA, 2003. Edited by Kevin Davies & Larry Fagin. 222pp, h/c, ISBN 0-9708763-2-7. \$25. L.s.e. ISBN 0-9708763-3-5 \$100). Available from SPD in Berkeley.

From time to time books arrive that are both a total surprise, and a

very pleasant surprise. This is one such. It's time to own up here: I had never heard of George Stanley until this book was handed over by the postman. So, who is George Stanley? Well, he was a San Francisco poet in the 1960s, part of Jack Spicer's circle, but emigrated to Canada in 1971 and, such is the absence of cross-border communication in North America that he instantly fell from view south of the border. Much of Stanley's poetry is unfashionably direct, but gains its impact by a very precise diction, with never a word out of place. A lot of his best works are spread across a number of sections, and are almost impossible to excerpt in quotation without leaving the poem a mess of tattered edges. The poems are records of a life, glimpses of another present, another world. It's a simple kind of verse, and it's tempting just to say that these are the works of another ageing hippie, or a Californian beat who missed his time, but that would be unfair. And it would miss out that strain of his work which can produce the final poem in this volume, the quite astonishing *Veracruz*. The raw directness of the later work is in contrast to his apparently more ambitious style back in the 1950s. This is from the early *Flowers*:

In a world of flowers
the enclosing is pregnant with silent clockwork
and the shade with death,
nothing expires with more exhaling of life,
nothing clogs so quickly as sweetness,
nothing turns and burns the unshod foot
so readily, ruinously as
the corruption of petals becoming
conception in the earth. What word
can stifle as well as jasmine in the throat
or unsex in the thrust as sudden as gardenias?

which seems redolent of Robert Duncan's earlier work, and that's no bad influence, is it?

A Tall, Serious Girl is a very welcome book that fills in a gap in the history of recent American poetry, and shows how borders can prevent us from seeing the truth of what's going on. How much more is there in Canada that we don't know about, and should? This book is *Shearsman Book of the Month* for June 2003, and a much longer notice, with excerpts from the book, can be found on the Shearsman website.

The observant reader will note an increase in the size of the typeface in this issue: reduction had gone too far in n° 54, to the detriment of the magazine's legibility.
