

*edited by tony frazer  
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## **shearsman 57**

poetry by  
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laurie duggan  
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**Michael Donhauser**

*(translated by Iain Galbraith)*

*'Again still once'*

from *Sarganser Land* (1998)

Care leaves and that  
broken as with  
ringing autumn  
falling it stirs

Nuts whisperings  
breathe and fragrant  
float with midges  
strands like hair

That sweet they lie  
or lamenting rustles  
the swirling  
leaf-escort

It was and healing  
I heard the trickle  
stems that tumble  
on damp grass

\*\*\*

The fervent or seeing  
the branches bend and  
warmer still or breaking  
heavy with fruit what  
tender along the leaves  
and lost lies shining

For lonely and mild close  
it was said to last light  
sinks haloed by voices  
the head the hand it  
was I called you and  
stillness the autumn light

Your park your bench  
with chirping chestnuts  
falling splitting open on the  
gravel sand I saw your  
foot a feather almost white  
see-saw down and rest

\*\*\*

Again still once and gravel  
with leaves the lighter  
ones and tips or midges  
reeling rising touched:

They were days lonely plane  
you called it home and bare  
stood the tables the chairs in the  
warm scent of the late grass

Kids' grass soup you said the  
cock crowed a smile mute  
sore a little dusty pale light  
bulbs swung between the branches

We stayed drank cider close  
fell the shadows the dew lay and  
gleaming on the trunks the  
sun as if in the high branches still

Birdgrass pinkish by the gravel the  
evening resonant was a far  
bird calling then a second and  
death rose chirring from the levee

\*\*\*

Rows trees slopes their  
radiance as colouring  
leaves softly stirred  
by a wind from afar

Railings warm the flow  
a faltering still foliage  
surrounded by as if  
the rites of autumn

Crowns full and pears  
lying split open wasps  
pale smoke drifts  
through the branches

Rises and clusters berries  
bow when cooler  
shadowy evening  
falls on the gardens

And troubled the twigs  
beat against the wall  
laughing a voice  
calls counting rhymes

\*\*\*

Edge of the bushes words  
assuring paths with wet and  
leaves Hungarian with  
autumn as blackening as  
wood bark trunk branch

Miraculous hovering it  
lay in puddles and set for the  
fest as a lost land gleaming  
was wall staff pennant

Geraniums dishevelment  
the gaze the blossoms urged  
to climb so they might sway  
or fall naked with ankles  
hips welts and red

Careful it called being late  
a garden glittering as  
native listing with treetops  
that rush soft with roots

\*\*\*

The landscape all about as  
something fleeting or seeing as  
stretching out all the way from  
the hills draped in cloud

Earth in footprints the paths  
miry spoilt and  
unfrequented no coat  
heavy as if bent over

Roe-deer stubble pale  
and fields hedges along  
this half in October of life  
its name the forest close

No beast towing the meadow  
as a border colonized and the  
embankment sunk in shadow  
hunter's hide anger-tended

Evening there were bells  
gates and gables plums  
lying thick in the drain  
their sweet ferment rising

\*\*\*

Clouds scudding nightly  
close it was and pink the  
town skywards and  
talk was bread and tar was  
wine tar and fish we

Broke ate then warbled the  
blackbird and called the bare  
branches black and wind  
garden fenced in rows  
of lights boxes heavy

Stood the walls paths  
gravel and torrential leaves  
in swarms and eyes drank in  
its joinings the pavement's  
heels and delicate as ankles

A smiling here flurry of  
shreds lines mossy cracks  
brushwood a faltering  
still whispered greetings  
a-tremble in the tall grass

Good damp loam and  
hushed as with a finger or swaying  
with buds branches said I  
where loving one are you we  
were fields winter corn

\*\*\*

There is was the wood and  
rotting in the snow the leaf  
mould slept crushed withered  
herbs twigs stuck out the  
brambles thick and tangled

Puddles the ice cracked  
milky and hard-frozen the  
mud the tracks apples in the  
grass tears and mould the  
sun deep in over the field

Return away from the village the  
frost bright and rimy on the  
wire the silvering silence sung  
was crows the drumming and  
hooves heaps of cut branches

Beds beets and reeds the  
shingle grey the bend as the  
place close to the dyke  
loose soft are the shadows and  
twigs the elders touched

\*\*\*

Fruit trees pale the slope and hard the  
dark bough-work gently veiled the  
willows by the burn and whitethorn blossoming  
hedges the gardens fringed deep yellow with  
forsythia the squares the pasture it has come

To an end early bright spring and the pale  
first green of the grass with arms again  
full warm and cool and sweeter they said  
with the breeze was the scent of the earth dug  
over densely burgeoning tentative its onset



A wafting ending in tips or a drifting as  
evening as a space bushes lonely and  
radiant with villages walls inward  
smouldering and tree-trunks stripped in  
piles resting now and close as night

\*\*\*

Rites of the evening glen  
path and violence the eyes  
burst open buds we said  
look and the sky glowed  
the mountains attuned

From over the river the  
traffic flowing water the  
stones ti penso and always  
with pebbles brushwood  
leaves I've thought of you

Warming levee coltsfoot  
you wept your hands  
sank tired and fleeting  
shadows bare brushed  
the asphalt with their lips

Jabbering up flew a blackbird  
called whistling warbling  
jubilant with pauses and now  
comes known as a dwindling  
ribbons rippling wires the path

\*\*\*

Fruit tree blossom between bushes  
walls in rows and fields with  
gardens sheds birches unending  
passage clouds and leaves there  
were villages hours names

Arrived and there mossy dark with  
soot was sweat and sleep and stood  
as one who stands by his bag in the  
dust there was humming a few  
birds singing something forlorn which

Word I asked would be the first  
here or smoking looked and  
along the main street where no  
person was only flowers in  
the gravel swayed troubled from

Afar by knowing bricks lost land  
it was I belonged to the lost land the  
morning fringing with grasses the  
beds which lay there broken up  
grown over with vetch wreathed

CATHERINE WAGNER

*Induce*

I had to get ready  
to have a baby, and I'd already had him.  
Inside expectation.  
What was it the two boats said.  
Induce/Inmost.

Web between thumb and finger wrinkling. Hands diamonded.  
He's none of that. A rounded sheen.

Introduce the boat to the water.  
The boat's a house and won't go anywhere.

The water abandons the boat at the top of the water, at water level.

The water also abandons itself at the top of itself.

Then my son, and his mouth-corners  
out and up; he dazzles.  
He came to me to eat.

Then the water abandoned itself back toward the sea;  
left the boat in a muck

and rocked and rummaged it up again, in some hours;  
the river was tidal.

The water abandoned its muck in a line on the boat  
and borrowed its paint.

The milk abandons me but I don't want it. He may as well have it.  
The boat could do nothing to the water; it dents the water.

The water flees and recovers, and plays with the hole in itself. It's brilliant.

The inverse of the hole was a house.

The boat was called Induce. It made some people  
up and down, up and down, and a hole in the water.

### *Inmost*

Skin. Before that, outside of that: house→own→atmosphere→  
sky/skin emptied and lit up from inside.

Aiming in, skin→womb→amniotic sac→  
inmost, the dividing baby.

I am predicted to have one by my insides.

Inmost, awaiting. There we go.

Inmost, a bit of foam.

Inmost grew me out to hold it.

Ah, fuck. Inmost came out.

Inmost the name of a boat on the Thames,  
the docking position of a boat on the Thames.

I saw the mailbox 'Inmost.' Sent the letter.

Formally – I thought not of it. From inside I had  
the baby, nothing formal about it. I didn't structure it.

From outside I had the baby and was stunned  
to find it outermost, most obvious among things boundaried.

**JOHN WELCH**

*At the Centre*

1

A usual kind of paralysis  
Installed here – is it compassion fatigue?  
The years one spent in there,  
Its administrative clatter,  
The years of lost good causes.

Another meeting has been called.  
Sings the party of permanent government –  
What meeting in a meeting?

These are the Minutes, read them, be unshriven  
And how the live thing in you suffers  
Open at its most tender part.  
Maybe it's an illness you've subscribed to.  
I came out, then I went back in,  
Years spent climbing an endless staircase  
Like an aural illusion, a note in music  
That going up and up gets nowhere.

For half an our or so perhaps I'll come  
Closer to the one wish in your head  
And moving off from there  
The photocopier spews it  
Fed toner ash. We've each  
A code embedded into plastic.  
The machine grows hot all afternoon  
Where it sits, just underneath  
A window full of traffic.

2

Which architect designed this mania,  
Arranging pronouns in the social order?  
Being privatised will hide behind a logo  
Even unto the air we breathe.  
Post-modern are  
Greek columns waxing lyrical in sunlight  
Beside a half-emptied river,  
Bitter the polluted air that eats them.

There was the one who always wore  
His wound on the outside,  
A suit of lights. He said  
'This is the nothing I was meant to bring you'.

But here consumer particles  
Move all too quickly to be counted,  
Passing abandoned dockyards,  
Extending to the city's river delta  
Where it empties itself in ocean.

3

In a tower block beside a river  
Just touched by morning sunlight  
I imagine you learning the names  
Scrawled on the walls there,

And, hot on the track of exile,  
Is a voice weaving its way  
Like the ghost of a refusal  
Reflected in passing shop windows.

So we go on defined by our absences.  
This is the shop windows' message,  
The carefully chosen colours  
That flare with a dry radiance.

Shortage, depletion,  
Headlines manufacturing scarcity,  
You are what you shall not have  
And the noise of it, it was light on water,

Do you remember?  
It was gold falling out of the sky,  
Those trees blurred in a hot heavy wind  
Engendered by the thrashing blades.  
To what purpose? And then, this intoxication,

It crept along at ground level  
In a haze of scented smoke, and the men  
Who pass and who will not be recognised  
Are the dream we endure, of the parcel recovered.

*'English as a Second Language'*

Refugee trying to fasten  
A red rose to the windscreen.

Grown in a greenhouse  
It's not quite the colour of blood.

Enormous hidden populations  
City afloat on some sort of raft

But safe in here in here we're doing the language dance,  
It's English as a Second Language

And that means I am in here  
Teaching the words to do their best to find you.

When the time comes  
To fix these words in your mouth

There is that space between us  
And the language is like the news

Just before it reaches you.  
It waits in the air, weighs down your bag –

This evening, walking down  
A street whose rubbish blows towards us

Why should it resemble  
The wasted landscape of a dream?

'In Turkey' you had told me  
'History is difficult.

We have to learn the Sultans  
Whose names all sound the same'.

You talked about Hikmet and you showed me  
A greyish photograph, your father



Some sort of Party gathering years ago  
Somewhere near a lake and I had thought

The most of politics might be  
An intelligent refusal

Watching your tower block subside  
Into an effusive sunset.

---

## **JOSHUA AUERBACH**

### *Like Flints*

It is a glance turned away,  
that grows & grows insatiable –

David's stolen or Solomon's many wives.  
In the memory of time, a man

stops by the sea shore, calm,  
bends to look at splintered shells,

gathers the skeletons of fish,  
littered on an island of salt.

Death-bodies, dream-dodgers,  
sailed to an icy land,

away from heat that splits.  
Time will tell a clock from a vase,

hand that curve upwards,  
lighting like flints

*Dream Tracks*

Dry sticks crackle near the flower  
& it is a flame, a white-light

glow come alive. Shapes  
sift into protean forms, mercury

without body & helium without mass.  
Roads lead here, &

point to seven highways,  
hills on maps, signs to journey north,

to the white mountain, the lookout peak.  
In the valley scythes scratch & screech,

cut sheaths & chaff,  
wheat formed in the veneer.

Blue smoke & wiry flames float,  
locomotives run silent.

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**Joshua Auerbach's** work has appeared in journals internationally and has won several prizes including *This Magazine's* Great Canadian Literary Hunt Award, the Warren Keith Wright Award, the Irving Layton Award, the Orion Prize and the Ray Burrell Award. A resident of Montreal, he currently serves as co-editor of *Vallum: contemporary poetry* ([www.vallummag.com](http://www.vallummag.com)) His recently completed manuscript is entitled *Natural Exile*.

**Erling Friis-Baastad** lives in Whitehorse, Canada, where he works as a copy editor at the *Yukon News*. He is also regional editor for the Anchorage-based circumpolar poetry magazine *Ice-Floe*. His most recent collection of poems *The Exile House* was published by Salmon Publishing in Ireland in 2001.

**Catherine Wagner's** second book, *Macular Hole*, is forthcoming from Fence Books, New York in 2004. Fence also published her previous collection *Miss America* in 2001. Her poems are online on [www.gutcult.com](http://www.gutcult.com), [www.slope.org](http://www.slope.org), and in the DC Poetry Anthology at [www.dcpoetry.com/anth2003.htm](http://www.dcpoetry.com/anth2003.htm). She lives in Boise, Idaho.

**John Welch** lives in London and recently retired from his post as a teacher of English as a foreign language in a London school. He is the author of four major collections, *And Ada Ann* (Great Works Editions, Bishops Stortford, 1978), *Out Walking* (Anvil, London, 1984), *Blood and Dreams* (Reality Studios, London, 1991) and *Greeting Want* (Infernal Methods, Cambridge, 1997). Shearsman Books will publish his latest collection *A Poor Am* in April 2004.

**Sam Sampson** grew up in West Auckland, New Zealand, attending Auckland University where he majored in Philosophy and taught Ethnomusicology. Recent poems have appeared in *Ariel*, *Slope*, *Stand*, *NZ Listener*, *Poetry Review*, *Jacket* and *Salt* V17.1. The poem printed here first appeared in *Landfall* 204 (New Zealand, 2002) and was dedicated to the late Allen Curnow (17.6.1911-23.9.2001); the epigraph is drawn from the author's correspondence with Allen Curnow. Section 2 features borrowed details, in most cases extensively reworked, from L.T.C.Rolt's book, *George and Robert Stephenson: The Railway Revolution*.

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## SAM SAMPSON

### *Contraptions*

Contraptions (Auden's word) ...

— Allen Curnow, 30/6/99

*i*

A mercurial gauge  
he forced the wing nut

counter-clockwise, stripped  
out luck's predestination;

factored-in, a secular flight  
the torqued fish bowl

blurb: 'my life is a series  
of revolutions'.

O (pinion):

a wrought thread? a waxed  
mechanical cadence? Perpetual

motion: *a fish-bellied segued contraption.*

ii

Let the contraption effectually consume itself. The contraption must be capable of drawing, day by day, on a level plane, a train of images; including tender and *cogito*. The contraption must have two safety valves; one completely out of reach, and neither fastened. The contraption must be spring-loaded. The contraption (with complement of blood and bone) must not expect omniscience, and the contraption of lesser properties will be preferred. The contraption may be put to the test of a pressure, not exceeding 150 pounds per square inch (the contraption not being answerable to any damage that may occur as a consequence). The contraption must have a mercurial gauge, with index rod, showing pressure above 46 pounds per square inch; constructed to blow out a pressure of 60 pounds per square inch, for an unspecified time.

\*

25 cognition tubes. 3-inches diameter.  
Lobe-jacketed chatterbox. Fitted regulator.  
2 blast pipes. 1.5-inch orifices. 150-pound soundbox.

\*

Every contraption combined to combust. Friction reduced such that a silk thread could interconnect: hydrogen, steam — columns of water and columns of mercury — a hundred atmospheres, and a perfect vacuum; contraptions working within a circle; sound generated at one end of the process and giving it to the other — contraptions within contraptions — multiplying contraptions, without diminishing contraptions; balancing countervailing forces, to the *ne plus ultra* of perpetual motion.

LAURIE DUGGAN

*A visit*

*i.m. Ric Caddel*

holes in my sandshoes  
(my real shoes locked indoors)  
and a single pair of underpants  
Durham 1992

hospitality in a space  
under the stairs  
poetry and a walk (wet feet)  
on the Roman Wall

*Positive black*

*after Dorothy Napangardi*

It's the double negative,  
the not not there that holds you:  
tracks where there seem to be none,  
contours of sand, salt lines  
converging in a dip.

Wavering colours behind the nets  
regroup when you alter focus.  
Does the dark recede or advance?

A square of linen may measure space  
when the space we know is destroyed.  
On a white wall, somewhere else maps itself out  
and the daylight streets are not the same.

*The prospect before us . . .*

I go downstairs to buy wine  
slightly paranoid the guy in the shop  
will be thinking 'you again'  
(but it's his job: to sell wine,  
so why should I worry). I buy  
an Australian shiraz and a  
sauvignon blanc from New Zealand.  
Upstairs, the heater on,  
I read two poems Ken sent.  
The builders outside have stopped building  
(a third floor of concrete laid today)  
and the light begins to fade. It's that  
Brisbane winter clarity, sharpness  
of buildings in Hamilton and Bulimba,  
a white yacht moored on the river  
under the cypresses (the old  
Rheem factory). A crane hovers,  
cement blocks as counterweight. What  
will the light be like in Yorkshire  
where we'll be in three weeks?

\*

'everything . . .

small in comparison'

(Ken's poem

written during the Gulf War,  
our life

'in the interstices'

'almost furtive'.

The poem

a letter between two provincial capitals;  
it's a month on, two almost  
(since the conflict referred to).  
The crane swings to the east  
depositing wooden pallets,  
hooks up its chains for end of work  
(it's Saturday morning) and the operator  
descends a ladder passing through hatches.

\*

This morning, butcher birds sing near  
an open window

  a gust  
flaps the construction company banner  
draping a side of the crane  
'motionless today'.

Remembered from 'The Country hour' years back,  
the theme from 'Blue Hills'  
and the river heights  
                        that Greg McManus once described  
                        as 'karmically soothing',  
though I doubt awareness of water-levels  
would soothe now.

What are we?

  Clerks  
enumerating failure?

  A day so perfect,  
  
wake of a ferry on the mud-coloured river.

*A Stella Bowen suite*

Behind the curtains, ruins  
primroses above the street

\*

Seven airmen in the shadow  
of a Lancaster

\*

At golf or at archery  
the limbless alphabet

\*

Cards dealt by an author  
with drooped jaw

\*

A round table surrounded  
by the trees of Provence

\*

A window on Paris  
is a widow in Paris

### *Upside down*

Rosemary reads a passage from a novel  
describing the sloth, an animal  
that sleeps mostly, is slow to move,  
reminding her of me.

After dinner

we walk past an apartment  
labelled 'minimalistic elegance'

unattractive

as the description of a potential residence  
though ok if applied to  
a book of poems . . . my poems.

I mean

does it mean 'a minimum of elegance' (cut corners)  
or an elegance of minimal nature (like the Japanese)?

I hang by my toes upside down in the trees.



*Berks and Hants*

Aug. 1, 1771:

‘A neighbour of mine, who is said to have a nice ear, remarks that the owls about this village hoot in three different keys, in G flat, or F sharp, in B flat and A flat . . . The same person finds upon trial that the note of the cuckoo . . . varies in different individuals . . . about Selbourne wood, he found they were mostly in D: he heard two sing together, the one in D, the other in D sharp, who made a disagreeable concert . . . As to nightingales, he says that their notes are so short, and their transitions so rapid, that he cannot well ascertain their key . . . This person has tried to settle the notes of a swift, and of several other small birds, but he cannot bring them to any criterion.’

\*

Lost in the lanes of Berkshire and east Hampshire  
(you *can* step in the same village twice)  
after Burghclere chapel, Stanley Spencer’s murals.

(SALONIKA, 1917:

‘A diary of a man who was killed  
chronicled the weather day after day’

‘I had a Gowan’s & Gray’s Claude Lorraine  
in my pocket

& a repro. in it  
of his “Worship of the Golden Calf”.  
Wonderful pastoral scene, & a lot of vases,  
women & men dancing

. . . why doesn’t everybody chuck it  
& behave like this’

The importance of labour  
on small intensive tasks  
– washing floors, the preparation of bandages –  
while the dead rise from the churchyard,  
upper torsos shake hands . . .

the hills  
above a lone English village and those  
in Macedonia where a red cross  
laid in stones serves as a sign to aircraft.

\*

At Selborne, vapor trails above The Hanger,  
the zigzag (Gilbert White's construction)  
overlooks radar domes.

In the Selborne Arms, a half-pint  
of elderberry cordial, Booker T's  
'Time is tight'.

White's house  
hidden by scaffold,  
his great yew down in the gales  
of 1990.

'The air . . . soft, but rather moist  
from the effluvia of so many trees; yet  
perfectly healthy and free from agues.'

West

through New Alresford, skirting Winchester  
with the Nashville Teens on the car CD  
(who were neither teens nor had set foot  
in the States).

---

Quotations are from Gilbert White, *The Natural History of Selborne* and Adrian Glew (ed), *Stanley Spencer: Letters and Writings*, Tate Gallery, 2001.

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Laurie Duggan, who here makes his second appearance in *Shearsman*, lives in Brisbane. His many Australian collections include *Mangroves* (University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2003), *Memorials* (Little Esther Books, Adelaide, 1996); *New and Selected Poems 1971-1993* (UQP, 1996); *Blue Notes* (Picador Australia, Sydney, 1990); *The Ash Range* (Picador Australia, 1987); and *The Great Divide* (Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1985).

*Oxford*

Take the approach of 19<sup>th</sup> century science  
that it is possible to make a whole  
from a collection of parts,  
a culture ranged, visible,  
in the Pitt Rivers museum,  
or rather a set of cultures  
in which objects of similar shape  
can be compared and contrasted,  
and this is knowledge;  
implements of war arrayed  
in battalions, as the feathers,  
rocks, stuffed birds and pinned butterflies  
(ruins of culture and nature)  
under the iron cranium,  
the foliage and painted brackets  
of Victorian architecture:  
a glass case containing  
further glass cases.

‘a tall teddy bear, so old  
that his hair had turned grey’

abandoned on the chaise-longue, Wolvercote,  
with the Sunday papers, the screed  
of governmental perfidy

‘a very fine teddy bear army’.

*North*

Todmorden to Oxenhope  
over the Pennines  
a field of three-bladed wind turbines,  
every barn on the slope a Brontë.  
At late evening, midges  
hang in the dales.

‘Conscious of the strong sagacity and the dogged power of will which seem almost the birthright of the natives of the West Riding, each man relies upon himself, and seeks no help at the hands of his neighbour. From rarely requiring the assistance of others, he comes to doubt the power of bestowing it . . . He belongs to that keen, yet short-sighted class, who consider suspicion of all whose honesty is not proved as a sign of wisdom.’

Blocks of limestone at Malham  
(no water to dissolve these),  
a black-faced sheep trapped  
in a groove, one broken foreleg,  
as crows mass on a higher rock.

\*

Keighley to Haworth:

‘Nearly every dwelling seems devoted to some branch of commerce’

‘ . . . with villas, great worsted factories, rows of workmen’s houses, with here and there an old-fashioned farm-house and outbuildings, it can hardly be called “country” any part of the way.’

‘The air is dim and lightless with the smoke from all these habitations and places of business.’

floors of the old mills soaked with lanolin  
a fire will rip through,  
as the Craft Centre at Keighley  
went up suddenly

‘The flag-stones with which it is paved [Haworth] are placed end-ways, in order to give a better hold to the horses’ feet . . .’

\*

Rain on the slates, Oxenhope,  
rain on a fishpond  
(the nineteenth century!)

The view obscured, back from the Pennines.

Newspapers reappear in focus  
– the spinning lunacy of a 30s movie –  
deadlines and headlines,  
the images poems fail to attend,

MacSweeney drunk on the Orbital  
or gazing over the moors to Brimham Rocks  
printing the news that's fit.

---

Quotations are from Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*.

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## ERLING FRIIS-BAASTAD

### *Relevance*

*i.m. Peter Huchel*

Now it begins, the gift  
poets believed they'd relish,  
announced at night  
by hungry dogs  
down unlit streets.

Now it ends, the old debate  
on origins for lyric verse.  
No instruments. Voice frozen.  
The soloist suspended  
in a web of state.

**Michael Donhauser**, who has lived in Vienna since 1976, was born in Vaduz, Liechtenstein in 1956. He studied German and Romance languages and literature and has published several acclaimed volumes of poetry and prose. Donhauser has translated poetry by Arthur Rimbaud, Francis Ponge and Michael Hamburger, and is the recipient of a number of important prizes, including the *Manuskripte* Prize (1990), Christine Lavant Poetry Prize (1994), and, most recently, the Christian Wagner Prize (2002). His work includes the volumes: *Der Holunder* (1986), *Die Wörtlichkeit der Quitte* (1990), *Dich noch und* (1991), *Von den Dingen* (1993), *Sarganserland* (1998), *Siebzehn Diptychen in Prosa* (2002), *Die Elster* (2002) and *Vom Schnee* (2003). *Shearsman* thanks Urs Engeler of the publishing house Urs Engeler Editor for permission to print this translation of a German text that appeared in the section titled *Wieder noch einmal* in the collection *Sarganserland* (Urs Engeler Editor, Basel, Vienna & Weil am Rhein, 1998).

**Iain Galbraith** is a poet, translator, and prolific contributor to literary and cultural journals both in this country and abroad. Recent book-length translations include *Beneath Black Stars. Contemporary Austrian Fiction* (Serpent's Tail, 2002, co-translator) and, into German, Simon Bent's play *The Associate* (*Die Assoziation*, Per Lauke Verlag, Hamburg, 2003).

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**Christopher Middleton**: *Of the Mortal Fire. Poems 1999-2002*. (Sheep Meadow Press, Riverdale-on-Hudson, NY, 2003. ISBN 1-931357-13-7. 110pp, 9 x 6.5 ins, pb, \$12.95). [*Book of the month for November 2003 at [www.shearsman.com](http://www.shearsman.com)*]

Middleton is a magician and the magic has not dimmed with the passing years. Few poets writing in English today possess his ability to construct such highly-wrought word-things: their music dense, the words an intoxicating rush of 'rightness' but nonetheless fitted together with a rare craft, nary a join to be discerned. Assonance, alliteration, end-rhyme, half-rhyme, and more besides; the full armoury is on display, and glitter it does.

And why are these words here? Well, it's the very stuff of poetry; they're here to enchant, to enlighten, to mesmerise, to leave the reader with that flash of realisation that it was just so, yes, and a gasp, a shock that visions can be communicated thus. Miracle indeed, in these parched days of limited song, less thought, and minimal craft.

Derided often enough in English environs for being an aesthete (a word that, to English ears, conjures images of absinthe, a curl of cigarette smoke, a dozen identical grey suits, frock-coated perhaps, and an impenetrable air of superiority), Middleton is in fact one of our premier observers. But he is a particularly well-read, well-travelled, and polyglot observer, and a voluntary expatriate these past 35 years and more. The American south-west has cropped up in his poems in the past, but these days France, Germany and, above all, Turkey seem the paramount

locales for his observations, studies – or perhaps études, for music rides these words almost imperceptibly from page to ear, to inner ear. And the music has a subtle rhythm, a cadence, a structure that is all too rare these days; is that perhaps why he is criticised here? Because the reviewers have no taste, their palates so dulled by years of over-boiled, monochrome gruel that they can't deal with the flights of fancy and erudition on display in a book like *Of the Mortal Fire*, or its fine predecessors?

And what does observation mean in the context of these poems? Well, it means that someone with an eye has caught a detail. He's no mynah bird, mindlessly transposing what's there into random cackle; there's no mimesis here, for what's the point of a meditation on, say, a Rembrandt painting, which got it so right in paint that most observers' words just stumble around looking embarrassed? A painted canvas, an awning in Cappadocia, a coffee in Paris or Istanbul, all trigger thoughts, trains of thought that, converted into poetry, serve to enchant rather than document.

Articulate as a dandelion,  
Up through a crack, here  
Between slabs, tombs, paving stones,  
What a world sprang up to defend itself,  
And has become, this too,  
An uttermost of worlds, a breather;

Or else Caracci, catching his breath,  
Simply had to tell the duo and the boatmen  
Why he made rectangular, to catch the oval  
Undulant eye's attention, this rift in time  
Their beauty issues in and out of —

Content anon to dwell  
On earth as refuge, while, as may be,  
Other planets rising will subside.

(from *Caracci: A River Landscape, 1600*)

Middleton's late style has settled into a mixture of the elliptical lyric and the meta-narrative. The ostensible subject-matter of the poems is often foreign lands, art, history and exotic cultures – but they are more often than not merely jumping-off points from which the author sets off, musing, into the world of language – a compressed environment where all spare words have been excised and the remainder operate in virtuoso mode. There's not a lot of redundancy in these poems. Take the opening poem, the beautiful *Memory of the Vauclose*:

In this French September light  
Picking out profuse

Corals that invade the vine,  
Yellows in the hayrick

And pools of blue somehow  
Round the rooster's comb,

To die—undiseased,  
Tending a lavender field,

A naked eye  
Braving the angel who descends

As angels on the loose  
Holycards in a junkshop do,

Still with time enough—  
Fear forgone, bondage to speech

Waved away—to sense the feathers  
Rush and whisk,

Then giving up on it  
To stand, the more to live.

This poem typifies his elliptical method, and his understated style. I'm fortunate enough to have been in the Vaucluse several times and the colours and natural elements here are very much drawn from nature, but the key to the poem is that it is not a descriptive vacation-type piece (the bane of all amateur poetry readings), but a working through of memory. Memory is never reliable, and it has a habit of putting some things in bold relief, while losing others of equal import, and fleeting impressions can take on the appearance of reality, as those holycards in the junkshop fuse with the angel who descends. No, I don't know who or what the angel is but, frankly, it doesn't matter. The apparently clear surface hides a number of pitfalls, deceptions, and syntactic manoeuvres that confound. But it's beautiful, and it's true, and little else matters.

*Of the Mortal Fire* is one of the best books of verse to come my way this year. It's a wonderful experience to realise that someone's still out there, capable of writing like this. If only others would realise it.