*Editor's note:*For the essays/reviews, special features and translations some wonderful Ukranian artists have been showcased since the suffering in Ukraine must be in the backs of everyone's mind and the soul of these people is honoured in paint. The paintings were chosen by Ursula O'Reilly Traynor, widow of Shaun, a dear friend and fine poet .

Kateryna Kosianenko b 1978: The army

Reviews

W S Milne

Antony Mair, *A Suitcase Filled With Hope* (Live Cannon Press, 2021)
Mara Bergman, *The Night We Were Dylan Thomas* (Arc Publications, 2021)

Peter Kennedy has written of Antony Mair's capacity for 'acute observation', a comment which applies equally to his most recent collection, *A Suitcase Filled With Hope*. What I admire most in his poetry is his celebration of homosexual love (there are some fine poems to his husband here) and the fact that he does not shy away from social and political issues of concern. Hope, of course, is not an emotion much praised in our time—gloom rather would seem to be the order of the day. It is refreshing then to come across someone who believes in bliss and happiness (these stanzas are from 'The Girl In The A21 Diner'):

> The Albanian lads are hosing down cars.
> Sprays of water hang diamond strings
> round the morning's neck, and the lads
> sing songs from their native land
> as they wipe the paintwork clean.

Seize the day right enough! Although, as I have said there are excellent (and urgent) poems on political issues such as terrorism, racism, climate change, colonisation, the oppression of homosexuals through history, the misery of quarry workers in the Congo, one comes away from this volume feeling that the individual matters just as much, and that at times it is necessary, it is human, to relax and enjoy life (but not complacently):

> Last night it rained, and this morning
> raindrops cling to the back of garden chairs.
> *Let go*, I say to them, *let go*…
> (from 'Holding On')

So it is we see the poet enjoying art exhibitions, cooking, baking, having a haircut, snorkelling, but especially praising love. Here is 'You Are' (the title of the poem):

> that moment I love best, halfway through a sunlit morning
> when sunshine pours into our bedroom on two sides:
> sea glitters in the distance. I sit there
> in quiet light with coffee waking the palate.

It is a great pleasure to listen to Antony Mair's celebratory voice in an age, it seems, of indelible pessimism.

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Jackie Wills has said rightly that 'Like a great photographer, Mara Bergman celebrates the moment and detail at the core of memory', and Michael Laskey that her poems are 'richly textured and sharply focused'. In this, *The Night We Were Dylan Thomas*, her most recent collection, these qualities are much to the fore, as in 'Heron': 'The heron wore/a shawl, in tatters, the fringe like the ends/of a talis, tail feathers dragging…/gathering its majestic weight to fly'. (Notice the proximity of 'talis' and 'tails', this linguistic precision typical of the book as a whole, phrases and lines always carefully considered and crafted.) The line just quoted, 'gathering its majestic weight to fly', is the last line of the book, and reminded me of Wallace Stevens's 'Downward to darkness, on extended wings'—of the need to celebrate life against all the odds. The title of the book is slightly self-mocking, thinking back to the pretensions of youth, but not over-critically. We all, as youngsters, had our heroes, our idols we liked to impersonate. This light, humorous touch is typical of the volume as a whole, where the poet writes of her early days in Long Island, of hitchhiking adventures, visits to ice cream parlours, her student days in England, drinking in pubs, nostalgia for New York, loving vignettes of her mother. Early memories are supplemented by later poems on the problems of ageing, of friends and relatives dying, of a knee operation which incapacitates the author for some months, the degradation and humiliation of operations, anaesthesia, endoscopies, and so on. These are all described in intricate and involved detail, but the poet never loses sight of the humanity, the humour, of the situation. This is from 'It's a Marvellous Day For An Endoscopy':

> The surgeon has a list as long
> as my arm but I'm first in the queue.
> 'You're lucky', he says,
>
> 'you get the clean 'scope!
> I can't say that to everyone.'

(Well, I think we all know that kind of wise-cracking medic, intent on terrifying us to death. And often succeeding.) Bergman can also be very mordant at times. Here is a man cutting up his ex-wife's wedding dress:

> …He scrubbed the rings around the bath and sink,
> made a banner for his daughter's county match, bunting
> for her birthday. Strips, like bandages, scared birds
> from his allotment, and with the final threads he flossed
> his teeth and mended bed sheets. By the time he found the veil
> to strain spaghetti, he barely remembered her face.

Well, that takes some beating! But hold on, he'd already dusted the bookcase, the piano and the lampshades with it, washed the car, cleaned his son's football boots, and washed the kitchen floor. It's all very ingenious—and very, very funny.

There are poems on taking blood-thinners and painkillers, and physiotherapy; on the envy triggered by looking at people who can walk with no pain. But there is also joy at the thought of recovery: '*I can still have happiness despite all this*' she writes, 'Not to take for granted, to

stay in bed/and drink a pot of tea from a china cup, then/take the dogs for a walk as a breeze stirs/the fur on their backs' (from the appropriately titled, 'Happiness'). There are very fine poems on the sea, on the joy of texting her friends, visits to Europe, trips back to the United States, the pleasures of cooking, and so on, but my favourite poem is an elegy for her mother (simply titled 'Mother'):

My mother said, *I'll miss you* as she hovered, longingly,
between the plot of earth beside our father and baby brother

and here, with my sister and me, our faces couldn't be closer
as we pleaded, knowing it wasn't fair

to want her back. *I'll miss the children's smiles*, she said
and in that breath, *I'm sorry I can't take you out to dinner*…

It is unusual today to have family life lauded in verse like this, and I found this poem very moving. The poems in *The Night We Were Dylan Thomas* are all of a high order, and it is certainly a book I will return to again.

Kateryna Bilokur (1900-1961

James Harpur

Mick Evans: *Light Airs* (Cinnamon Press)

Mick Evans's first book, *Burlesque*, featured the traditional trickster Punch as a persona, or mouthpiece and the *Agenda* reviewer, Duncan Sprott, described the poems as 'enigmatic and memorable creations, subtly woven and interwoven with each other, quietly powerful, packing a real – punch'. Evans's second book, *Light Airs*, is more eclectic and multi-voiced, ranging far and wide over folklore, classical myth, Christian history and ritual, making reference to the likes of Circe, Orpheus, the Styx and Colmcille (Columba) and blending this cultural material with present-day quotidian concerns, along with landscapes and nature and personal experiences, including love and loss. The result is a series of mini tapestries woven from many different threads but unified by his delicate lyrical voice.

Perhaps Evans's greatest motive force is an intellectual curiosity that enjoys nosing out stories from the past and making connections with the present. The final piece in the book is a list poem, 'To learn', and this could almost stand as a draft contents to Evans's poetic project: '[To learn] The accurate identification of garden birds / Tide tables … / Star charts and rules of navigation / for traversing the loneliness of crowds / Whether artichokes were successfully cultivated in ancient Egypt … / The true colour of the eyes of the beloved … A seriousness of purpose / The simple line.'

Evans's seriousness of purpose proves to be an excellent bass line for the 'light airs' and 'simple lines' that characterise his verse, whether it is a hare 'lifting / her pale flame through the valleys / nesting in heath grass almost homeless', or a girl arranging bananas, 'stepping up at full stretch / to turn and favour shades / try new angles / find the light'. When his natural questing spirit alights on the right content and finds the appropriate poetic form the results are memorable. Best of all is 'The molluscs on theology', a snail's view of

what God must be like, judged on experience. This might seem an unlikely or forced conceit, but in Evans's verse the poem becomes a compelling devotional narrative as we follow the molluscs' bewilderment:

'we execute delicate trails in secretions of our essence
offering curled poems of praise to you

it seems you do not read them
but place blue pellets that rot us from the inside
until only thought is left

Slowly, out of snail-experience the greater question of the human response to the divine unfolds – the problem of evil, of 'accidents', misfortune, disease and death: 'we die without hope in the absence of any sign / and without forgiveness for sins we do not recognise / in the frosts of the dark season we still our breath / and hope to wake again'. It will be interesting to see how Evans's style develops – whether it will home in on a tighter focus or remain content with the flotsam and jetsam of life; either way, he will bring a beguiling voice dedicated to raising poetic consciousness.

Serhill Mykhailychenko (b1970)

Merryn Williams

Elizabeth Cook: *When I kiss the sky* (Worple Press)
Denise Riley: *Lurex* (Picador Poetry)
Billy Collins: *Whale Day* (Picador Poetry)

Elizabeth Cook was St Edmundsbury's Cathedral first Writer in Residence, and the longest poem in her collection, 'Edmund in Edmundsbury', is a meditation on the history and present-day life of the cathedral. The non-Christian reader, too, can appreciate her work, as in a flawless little poem, 'The Fieldfare', from the sequence 'Thinking of Thomas Hardy':

The fieldfare was all skin and bone:
He held the dead bird in his hand.
His father killed it with a stone.

There are some good unsentimental poems about animals, particularly about the instinct which drives a vixen, swan or red kite to protect their young, and there are several desolating poems about bereavement. The woman in 'Stealth' who has, I assume, been widowed, has had the supply cables of her life snipped off by a black-gloved hand and is 'apparently as before' but in fact 'utterly utterly adrift'. 'Pen' in the poem of that name is a female swan but could also be a human being:

Her cob is dead
and cannot guard
the nest as he used to.

Her body a compact
white knot
against the cold

She's a compassionate, life-enhancing writer.

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Denise Riley (born 1948) has written several poems in the voice of an adopted child whose relationship with her new family is toxic. She paints a grim picture of a house where 'iron pails held sheep's heads being steeped to make Scotch broth', other pails held soiled sanitary towels ('Facts of the 1950s'):

On blackened streets the taint was scoured from doorsteps.
The illegitimate sent off to the infertile,
Their pasts expunged, their names altered.
Their records sealed.

These are lines from from a sequence, '1948', which states, 'The only touches that I got before I reached eighteen were blows. /It never crossed my mind to look for others' kindness'. It's hardly possible for the 'surplus postwar children', who were told that they had 'bad blood', to 'get over' their trauma, and in many poems there is a sense of overwhelming

pain. Yet not all these poems are distressing. She is also a very skilful satirist, as in 'To a Lady, viewed by a Head-Louse', inspired by the famous Burns poem, and itself a protest against what we are doing to other species. Why, she asks, should the human race exist, given its self-importance and its record of damaging the environment:

I with my triumphant bites
Vex useless human parasites.
You world-devourers are for – what?
Useful you yourselves are not.

The whole poem needs to be read for maximum impact. It's cheeky but it's thought-provoking, and I'd like to see more satires of this quality.

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Billy Collins is a former U.S. Poet Laureate and one of the most popular poets in America; his readings draw crowds and it is easy to see why. He isn't one of those poets who claims to have built a monument mightier than marble or to have a mission from God. His persona is that of a regular guy who takes the dog out and goes to the supermarket; he is not at all obscure or intimidating. The introductory poem to his new collection sets the tone:

I woke up early on a Tuesday,
made a pot of coffee for myself,
then drove down to the village,
stopping at the post office…

The point of this piece, 'The Function of Poetry', is to remind himself that there is much more to life than what he is doing on an average day. Read on, and you will find that he is perfectly aware of the big issues, but usually looks at them from an eccentric angle. He is now eighty-one, and is much possessed by death, his own and that of friends; three poems are called 'Life Expectancy', 'Cremation', and 'My Funeral'. In 'Downpour' he tells us how he writes the names of all his friends who have died on the back of his wife's shopping list, and then, when he has finished shopping, remembers that he has not noted one valued name, and has also forgotten to buy bananas and bread. 'On the Deaths of Friends' is a darker poem, in which he sees himself running towards a place 'where, instead of oxygen, there is silence'.

And then there is his take on the big names. Looking at a Bonnard painting, he wonders whether the food and wine will slide off the table leaving the artist's wife to clean up the mess ('The Floors of Bonnard'). Brunelleschi and Christopher Wren are compared to Dagwood, a fictional character who constructed multi-layered sandwiches ('Architecture at 3.30 A.M.'). In 'Prospect' the poet stands on a kitchen chair to get 'a slightly different sense of things from up here' and compares himself to Petrarch, 'grandfather of the sonnet' who is thought to be

the first person in known history

to ascend a mountain
to the very top
just for the sake of the view.

Occasionally, the serious stuff comes in the last lines. 'The Wild Barnacle' begins with a joke about a flying arthropod, then explains that some wild geese are called barnacles, and ends with the shocking executions of Irish rebels in 1916. Even T.S. Eliot is treated without reverence, as in 'A Terrible Beauty' (another Irish joke, this title). In case you ever wondered why 'April is the cruellest month', and whether this famous line actually means anything, the poet imagines all twelve months lining up in a beauty pageant which is won – of course – by February:

There she stood, the only month on stage,
crying a few chilly tears,
a thin smile frozen on her lips.
Then she bent her knees a little
so as to be less tall,
and some official placed on her head
her latest dripping, silvery crown of ice.

There are serious poems, too, in which he looks without irony at his own past ('The Convergence of my Parents', 'My Father's Office, John Street, New York City, 1953'). All are excellent. Billy Collins is one of the most approachable of poets and a master of the unexpected. I loved his latest book.

Pavlo Huzenko (b1977)

Shanta Acharya

***Elemental Natures* by Lance Lee**
Universe, USA. 2021.

Lance Lee's seventh poetry collection, *Elemental Natures*, offers a selection of works that reveal his mastery of language and keen observation of nature, human and elemental. Drawing from over thirty years of writings – selected lyrics, sequences, and artwork from a number of American and British artists, with new poems and the seminal essay 'The American Voice' – he conveys a deep understanding and respect for the welfare of our planet and the complexity of our lives. 'Our lives are bound together', he notes in the 'Preface': 'Poetry is always performing on a tightrope, balancing verbal force and beauty with the urgency that drives a man or woman to speak to others in this manner'. The title reflects these concerns while the poems highlight transformative moments in finding a highly personal yet representative poetic voice.

Lee is also a novelist, a playwright, and author of works on drama and film. A past Creative Writing Fellow of the US National Endowment for the Arts, his *Seasons of Defiance* was a finalist in the 2010 National Best Books Awards. Published widely in journals on both sides of the Atlantic, *Elemental Natures* reinforces his considerable achievement as a poet. Donald Gardner wrote how Lee claims a place in the galaxy of world poetry, 'grafting his work' onto the poetic tradition stretching from poets as diverse as Dante and Auden.

The American tradition Lee places himself in is one where poetry is shaped by 'a mystical experience out of which flows not a renunciation but an engagement with the world', a poetry at once rapturous, visionary, yet direct in language, and taking a common stand within our humanity. We are very much in the Emersonian realm of a transcendent reality, both individual and universal. Like his poetic ancestors, Lee writes 'of permanent things within the upheavals of our present experience' that recall us to what is enduring in ourselves, his lyric 'I' at once 'personal and multipersonal'.

Through this celebration of Life, Lee explores questions relating to nature, fate, destiny, and character. He quotes Thoreau from Walden: 'I wanted to live deep and seek out/ the marrow of life…' 'Know Thyself' he writes: 'That command/ still lives in my blood,' Lee reminds us in 'My Father's Shade At Delphi At The World's Center Amid The Ruins Above The Olive-Swaddled Valleys.' In 'The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket he reaches out to his ancestors – personal, literary, historical, and spiritual – when he speaks of Ahab 'who found the human and inhuman/ lie close in a man's heart'. This fundamental contradiction in being human is realised in language that is lyrical and direct.

Reflecting on life's harsh truths as well as its enduring and redeeming aspects, his poems are awakenings that become luminescent, almost catching fire in the readers' mind. In the opening poem, 'Cliches', woken from our 'lifelong nightmare// we cry out surprised we are alive,/ borne on a surge of power/ out of ourselves to find the world/ pure marvel…' This awakening is Nature's gift, 'for nature is not jaded – / there are only cruel or worn out men.// Clouds of thorns with shining tips/ drive wedges between sky and earth/ and like nails driven

into our flesh/ wake us from lifelong nightmare'. The unexpected image of the crucifixion is transforming.

In a homage to Camus, 'A Wasp In The Subway', a wasp who dreams 'of another life…in brightly lit places' is 'woken/ to poverty, to myself, alone./ That safety I once held,/ a life known, is gone'. Smashing against surfaces it cannot pierce, it is 'surprised by a wave of joy…/ To lose all illusions, even hope,/ and have only my will/ to go on: to make what I can/ of my flight despite/ those crowded here, who raise/ their hands against all/ they fear: what freedom!' This abrupt, unexpected joy in oneself provides a reason to make what we can of our lives. The metaphor of dreaming-waking, darkness-light, illusion-reality appear in several poems. An additional dimension to Lee's dialectic is how we 'all enraptured know for one moment/ that what is real is rare, that our lives are/ entangled, endlessly new and strange' (A Hula Girl Weaves Death And Memory and Life Into Her Dance).

A collision between sensibilities often enhance the overall impact of his poems as they cascade down the page carrying their anguish, disappointment, ecstasy, and the discovery of the self through the other. In 'The Cypresses of Athens', he writes: 'One day a descendant of mine wandering here/ may name some cypress in turn: 'Ah! there's Lance! He always wanted/ to balance passion with reason,/ desire with desire's loss,/ his life with his death in a tense balance// like one of these cypresses/ who thrust out green shoots against their withering,/ defiant to the end'.

As we can see even from these few examples Nature infuses and fuses with personal experience uniquely in Lee's poetry, but never naively. In 'The Willet Soars', he spots a willet that 'leaps/ into the air with staccato thrusts/ of barred wings and skims the shoreward foam to fade, I think,/ into the gray, but instead banks sharply/ over a tall wave and soars in a curve/ that takes my breath away'. Yet in the section of new poems, he writes ironically of 'how far we have come/ from a life lived red/ in tooth and claw' (Red in Tooth And Claw), while in 'Bees' he reminds us 'we are nature's/ cancer' and of how 'the world is dying' as a result of man's propensity to mindless destructiveness.

The knowledge of loneliness and nothingness is also part of being human. The waste in both nature and life is delivered with mastery in 'Waste Fruit' where on observing fruit rotting on the ground Lee writes: 'All is wasted as those lives ruined/ by violence, or by living with one/ indifferent to what each has/ uniquely to give, wasted as those/ with only themselves in their hearts, impenetrable, impoverished./ Tonight I wake from bad dreams/ as fear slips its leash to loom over my bed'. It leads him to the moving and sombre realisation that all he has to offer will be spurned as well, and 'illusion be all I have/ to make life bearable to its end, that the truth is harsh and not my friend,/ our lives too often wounds to endure/ in silent despair as our ripeness/ withers'.

The notion of the poet/ artist as witness runs seamlessly through the collection. Among the 'Roman Poems', in 'River of Flesh', Lee adopts something of the procedure and spirit of Auden's moving and wonderful 'The Shield of Achilles'. The homage to Auden gives us a clue. Auden contrasts the heroic world of Achilles with the brutal and debased world he encountered in mid-20th century Europe. For Lee, the Tiber is the 'river of flesh' where 'all times meet, where striving follows striving,/ thirst thirst, dream dream/ we never waken from, or slake, or gain'. Having made us a witness to the darker aspects of life, Lee also reveals its richness, beauty, and warmth.

In ‘Homecoming’ this fusion of nature, history, and the personal includes treating the urban as part of nature too, shown in lines like ‘caught in the hall of mirrors husband and wife become,/ bound to the urban streetweb where only earthquakes remind us the world is real/ and far beyond disliking does not care about us at all’. This poem turns when he sees a familiar Redtail hawk that ‘whooshes by so close I meet his eye’ as he fuses with its otherness, an experience that Keats referred to as ‘negative capability’. But the poem does not end when he is ‘free of humanity’ and one with the universe, but climaxes when he turns home.

> At home I see my furniture, clothes, paintings, woman’s smile,
> waiting embrace
> with a hawk’s sharp eyes, stunned by her giving despite the
> massive, amoral fact of the world.
> No hawk, not a killer, not guiltless, I let her touch make me a
> man,
> her love make me real.
> Here is my ocean, fog, light; my stone, my earth, my self, my
> flight.

What emerges is an intense realisation of our human condition and our place in the universe simply, factually, with no ‘straining to understand His meaning’. For ‘No one comes from any heaven// we can name: no one speaks to us now. We are alone./ We are what we make’. (Armageddon) To render the ordinary extraordinary makes it memorable.

Lee writes compellingly about love. In ‘To Make Bread’, for example, he writes how a man can become ‘a loaf of astonishment as you understand/ you are food, complete, ready at last/ to come to the hands of another’. He is no more naive about love than nature. In ‘Raven, As Lover’, he mocks overwrought romanticism: ‘I love you so much/ you can even eat my death/ and let me live forever’. He captures with poignancy the ‘cruelty in the heart of things/ mixed with such unexpected kindness’ (Recovery: Evening Star) writing about his daughter recovering from a coma. If love is central, it is not always everything: ‘Stop asking me about love: all I know / is betrayal, injustice, rejection, dreaming’ and ‘Don’t think fame consoles / a love never gained, a love that then / cannot be lost’ (Dante To An Admirer Obsessed With Love And Fame). The truth is we die and love with us.

This blend of realism and passion is marked in the sequence ‘Dante in Los Angeles’, poems of which Lee ‘would like to think these versions give a taste of the poems as they might have been had Dante written them now, in Los Angeles’. These are drawn from Dante’s Pietra poems written to a young, unresponsive woman in his maturity referred to as a stone one way or another. In ‘Sea Stone’, he writes: ‘This woman is a stone, a whitening of grass,/ a day circling into shadow, a cold that burns:// even so/ my hunger stays green in her white hills// whose hardness belies her beauty…’ In ‘Marble’, he wonders: ‘What will happen if she stays as hard/ when mockingbirds come home and sing/ every love song they know all night long,/ dancing in the trees’ dark leaves?/ I’ll hold her in my heart anyway, and turn/ by inches into what I want, as all men do,/ even if that means growing marble-hearted, too’.

Lee knows the redeeming power of love, too. In ‘Ars Poetica’, to be a man means: ‘to give love, and receive, to hold those loved firmly,/ to protect, to respect, to live, to die/ on earth, in earth, of earth.// My hackles rise, and the short hairs on my arms/ as words flow that give each their true name,/ as the poem wells from my throat// speaking me.’ One is reminded of

Philip Larkin's: 'What will survive of us is love' (An Arundel Tomb). The transmutation of life and love is indeed what all art, including poetry, is. In his poem 'Monet', the artist knows that 'While the dead pile up at Lille/ like burst tubes of paint', how we 'go on in our lovers' dreams/ after we have gone…' is how love bears us to an alternative life.

In 'Jesse's Dream' Lee explores the power of love as Jesse returns to his wife after at first resisting the idea that Christ and modern history will flow from him. His wife instinctively understands as she awaits what she knows will be his passion-doomed return that the life that flows from love is irresistible. The poem ends after impassioned love-making with a particularly moving stanza: 'A howl blows downward as she falls towards sleep imagining how she will rise again to his passion in the morning,/ everything for him, whatever empires or churches rise and fall in his kiss:/ how with each child the world is reborn:/ how love dares everything, how everything is from love, how everything is, for love.' Lee's passionate exploration of the world enriches our understanding of it.

Woven through Lee's work are more strictly autobiographical, revealing poems as in those about the complicated relationship with his father and his mixed gentile and Jewish background. In 'Father Death' he fits words to the surf's rhythms as he considers his father's fading:

> 'Live, there is only living, each star
> lives in its own milky fire; the hottest
> blood burns in the coldest water:
> why, father death lives in our flesh
> to free us from anxious self-knowledge
> when that burden grown too great' –
> but I know these only gloss the unpleasant truth:
> he must fade the way he died, by inches…
>
> There should be more to us when we live.
> There should be more to us when we die
> than a bleaching like a photo left in the sun –

The poem's ending is intensely moving:

> Only now, after so many years listening
> do I know what the waves really say
> as they beat against my anger:
> forgive forget forgive forget forgive.

It comes as no surprise from these examples that Lee grapples with the 'big questions' in this same intimate and transformative manner. Speaking through the persona of 'William James To A Friend In Trinity Church, Boston', he writes of God: 'if He is as things are, we are better off alone'. But the poem ends with something far more affirmative: 'God, if anything, is the life and death we live' namely, our '*hunger, blood, bone, desire: life'*.

In his new poems 'With each step the world is reborn/ and new worlds spin towards infinity/ and love pulses across the universe/ beyond measure…' (Kali Dancing By The Waves), as 'we go on paying for both/ good and evil, willingly, to be' in 'that deeper dance by which we move'. In 'The Red-Tailed Hawk of My Forgetting', his poetic persona says: 'Wherever I go

I name all I see,/ given or new-coined – it is all one to me./ What I record may last while the sun endures,/ past that no one can care./ Name by name I chip away at my forgetting./ Each word I give is a name for my love.' 'The whole of the world is a form for truth'. (Answer to Rumi).

The truth may need continual challenge, often be unflattering, frustrating, tragic, and sometimes humorous, yet it is not just what we have, but if indeed God is 'the life and death we live' then it has a thread of divinity in its grandest and most ordinary aspects too. Lee is not a religious writer, but it is hard to plumb the ultimate more profoundly than that as Lee reasserts the wholeness of the individual's unique experience, the primacy of the seeking soul, and the uniqueness of our own voices.

Iryna Kolesnykova (b1975)

John O'Donoghue

Michael McCarthy, *Like A Tree Cut Back* (Smith|Doorstop, 2021)

Michael McCarthy grew up on a farm in the rural Ireland of the 1950s, went on study for the priesthood at St Patrick's College, Carlow, commencing in September 1963 and culminating in his ordination on 7th June 1969. He served as a curate in several parishes in Yorkshire, becoming a Parish Priest in 1985 in Bradford and going on to work as spiritual director at Ushaw College, the large Catholic seminary in Durham, in 1988. It is in this little interruption, between 1985 and 1988, that McCarthy answered another call, a late vocation if you like, and started down the road of writing poetry.

Like A Tree Cut Back starts with a short memoir of McCarthy's childhood in Rerahanagh, Co. Cork. McCarthy is four years old when he becomes aware of a defining moment in his life:

> Something is after happening above on the road. My brother Ando is running after my mother. I'm running after my sister Nora… I can't keep up with her. Suddenly she's not there.

His brother James has been killed in an accident. McCarthy is far too young to fathom properly what has happened, and the grief that could not be processed then will come back when he is a mature man, a priest, contemplating his move to Ushaw. Before he takes up his appointment, he signs on for a course at The Institute for Spiritual Leadership in Chicago and what has long lain dormant resurfaces.

In a session on 11th March 1988, the thirty-eighth anniversary of his brother's death, with Anne, his spiritual director, he breaks down, and at the same time, breaks through:

> … I hear these deep sobs coming up from the pit of my stomach. Anne invites me to lie on the floor and puts a blanket over me, and for two hours my whole body is engulfed by wave after wave of grief and sobbing.

This turning point marks the deepening of McCarthy's vocation as priest. He begins a journey inwards, facilitated by his apprenticeship as a poet, first at workshops in Durham, not far from Ushaw, then at the Northern Workshop run by Sean O'Brien in Newcastle. When his eight year stint at Ushaw is over, he goes to the University of Alberta in Canada, not as a

student, but as an ‘extern’, and amasses a body of poems which would win the Patrick Kavanagh Award in 1997.

The central panel of the book, ‘A Chink of Light’, showcases some of McCarthy’s poetry. A pamphlet-sized sequence of twenty poems about another Irish priest, John Joseph Terry, ‘The Apostle of Australia’, the nineteenth century Chaplain to the colony, is both moving and instructive. Through a mixture of poems of his own and found poems that draw on the archive in Carlow College’s O’Keefe Library, McCarthy evokes the ministry of this tough, dynamic priest.

‘The Voyage’ portrays the enormity of what Therry was about to undertake: ‘I let [my mother] cry on my shoulder./Her last words: ‘We will not see you again in this life.’’ This is the Quayside Wake, and Therry is taking his leave of everything that was familiar to embrace life on a new continent, and the ways of power in colonial Australia. Once in post, Therry’s voice – courteous but direct – comes through clearly in the found poems, mainly correspondence between him and the colonial authorities. In a letter to Colonial Secretary Alexander McLeay dated 23rd November 1927 Therry upbraids McLeay for his barring from the Hospital by Dr Bowman to attend to his co-religionists:

I am not ignorant of the danger I incur by exposing
This abuse of authority on the part of Dr. Bowman,
Even to the Government, for I have reason to know
That this hostility is seldom without effect.
Your obt. Servant
John Joseph Therry

Contrasted with these are letters to Therry:

Sydney Goal

…

I hope Sir
when You
Resieve this

that you Will
For God Sake
not Delay
Wee do not now
the Hour nor the Moment
our Death Warrants may come

The echo here of Matthew 25:13 ‘Watch ye therefore, because you know not the day nor the hour’ is both poignant and testimony to the place of religion in the lives of those transported to Australia. And that misspelling ‘now’ for ‘know’ also underlines the urgency of this letter/poem. In selecting John Joseph Therry as the subject for ‘A Chink of Light’ I wondered if McCarthy identified with his forebear from Carlow College, looking back on his long years in Yorkshire.

Like A Tree Cut Back ends with ‘My Journey of Conversion’, and documents his movement from provider of solace as cleric to healed soul who finds a more loving, compassionate God in that moment of release from deeply buried grief, and goes on to write poetry.

McCarthy is a modest, plain-spoken poet, perhaps as should befit a priest. But one is aware from the very beginning of this book of the depths from which he articulates a response to a world at once fallen and majestic. He may have been born a Roman Catholic, but he ends I think a Celtic Christian: ‘Inner life is what matters. The God of my life and how God is present in all life.’ *Like A Tree Cut Back* is a remarkable addition to the memoirs of priests, indeed, to the memoirs of poets.

Marta Pitchuk (b1993): Motanka doll (The Motanka doll was a talisman of protection made with love and care by mothers for their children. Here the inanimate doll of previous centuries steps into the present and merges into one with real life.)

David Cooke

Sean Ó Ríordáin: *Apathy Is Out, Selected Poems*
Apathy is Out / Ni Ceadmhach Neamhshuim, Selected Poems / Rogha Dánta by **Seán Ó Ríordain translated by Greg Delanty. £12.99.** Bloodaxe Books in association with Cló Iar-Chonnacht

Since his death in 1977, the work of Seán Ó Ríordáin has enjoyed an almost legendary status among devotees of Irish-language poetry. However, it has taken a long time for his poetry to be published in a form accessible to monolingual English readers or those whose Irish is not up to reading him in the original without support. Because of rights' issues, Greg Delanty has had to wait since 2007 to publish his English versions in the bilingual edition which is the subject of this review. Meanwhile, in 2014, an earlier bilingual selection was published by Yale University Press. Edited with an introduction by Frank Sewell, the poems in this American edition have been translated by various hands, including, as is so often the case these days, various high profile 'names' such as Paul Muldoon, Ciaran Carson, Peter Sirr and Paddy Bushe. Between them, the two volumes include the bulk of Ó Ríordáin's relatively small output and give all readers an opportunity to assess a body of work that, for many years, was only represented by a small number of frequently anthologised poems.
Towards the end of his life, in the 1970s, Ó Ríordáin obtained a part time teaching post at Cork University, where he taught and was lionised by a new generation of Irish-language poets, the most well known of whom beyond Ireland, is Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. For these young poets, who were attempting to renew and build upon the poetic tradition of their native tongue, Ó Ríordáin was an illustrious antecedent and an obvious hero. However, in his introduction, Delanty suggests that the adulation heaped upon Ó Ríordáin has 'overwhelmed his marvellous achievement and has led to muted disappointment on seeing how small the body of poetry really is.' Moreover, given the rapid evolution of Irish society in recent decades, younger readers who have no real experience of the claustrophobic influence once exercised by the Catholic Church, may find certain aspects of his work difficult to swallow: his uneasy piety and his sense of sin, his sexual frustration. Like his slightly older contemporaries, Austin Clarke and Patrick Kavanagh, his work is rooted in that shadowy interregnum between the high romanticism of Yeats and the more recent achievements of Heaney, Mahon, Longley and that wider efflorescence of poetry associated with the Northern Irish 'Troubles'.

In fact, Ó Ríordáin's sexual frustrations are reminiscent of his near-contemporary, Philip Larkin, in poems such as 'Reasons for Attendance', 'High Windows' or 'Love Again. Here is Ó Ríordáin in 'The Cure':

I was surrounded by a rabble
mindlessly carousing and cursing.
Back home I couldn't relax,
courting the learned tomes,
Behind on the hill a chap courts a young one.
    I lowered myself in the usual way,
    the sole handy remedy for pain.

While Ó Ríordáin's final couplet is not as in your face as Larkin's 'Love Again', the underlying sense is hinted at in the original by a polyglot visual clue: 'Do thomas an fhuil ins an salachar' where the verb 'do thomas' points towards the euphemism 'John Thomas'.

Readers should bear in mind that Ó Ríordáin was a great admirer of Joyce who was adept at such games. One presumes that Delanty's use of 'handy' in his version underscores the same meaning.

A heady blend of sex and religion, albeit in a more light-hearted vein, is also the theme of 'Syllabling', where a pretty nurse sets the pulses of her male patients racing and the poet draws witty parallels between the nurse taking each patient's pulse while he counts syllables and the pious count their beads. However, it is in 'Tulyar', a poem about a stallion bought by De Valera from the Agha Khan, that Ó Ríordáin satirises most uproariously the priest-ridden mores of Ireland in the Sixties:

Did you not think it queer
that an artist of your prowess, stature and fame
of your superpower above all steeds
should come
to practise his art amongst us
in this isle of saints and scholars,
the isle blessed by Patrick himself.

Whilst recognising the frequently oppressive influence of the Catholic Church, it should not be forgotten that Ó Ríordáin was, nonetheless, a man of faith and that some his finest poems are rooted in Catholic pieties. In 'Mount Melleray' he describes a retreat to a Trappist monastery during which the poet's self-questioning is contrasted with the unassuming asceticism of the monks:

A brother dished up food in the refectory,
a serving of gentle silence his balm,
a blessed awkwardness writ all over him,
the natural humility of a good man.

Later in the same poem he evokes the spiritual love that inspired Dante:

He'll never quaff the love of a woman
that, like faith, moves mountains,
that once gave Dante a vision of heaven,
angels alighting in verses.

In another of his finest poems, the six-part sequence, 'An Island and Another Island', he again takes us to a site of pilgrimage: the ruined remains on Saint Finbarr's Island. Here it is the beauty of the site that moves him and a connection with nature that reminds us of the early-Irish hermit poets:

Here in the pen of saints' reflections
a new image leaps to mind:
the song of a bird
showering scorn on life.

The music the bird pours forth
is his own island world: everyone
is granted an island of their own.

Evoking a sense of peace that establishes a link with Yeats' 'The Lake Isle of Inisfree', Ó Ríordáin aspires towards a vision of authenticity, a place where one can simply be true to oneself: 'In the mind's core / there's an island of serenity. / You head to that shore – / it's your true island.'

For much of Ó Ríordáin's adult life he was plagued by ill health, which made it difficult for him to hold down a job, establish relationships with women or to think about marriage, all of which exacerbated his isolation, loneliness and his sense of alienation. This is effectively conveyed in the oppressive atmosphere of poems like 'Fever':

It's a steep climb from the bed.
The sickly sweltering mound
is a long way from the ground.
Miles and miles away
folks sit and stand.

Elsewhere, in 'The Storm' or 'Darkness', it's as if the poet's bedroom is a sanctuary while beyond his door the unrelenting wind and rain represent a hostile world. It is unsurprising, also, that death is never far from his thoughts and is the subject of several poems such as 'Death', 'Cold Snap', 'Dread of the Dead' and 'My Mother's Burial', one of his most frequently anthologised pieces. An extended tour de force, this is one of the poems that established his reputation as a new force in Irish-language poetry and is, to a considerable extent, untranslatable. Consisting of twelve quatrains, it establishes a pattern of alternating assonance that is difficult to replicate in English, as is his bold use of portmanteau words and neologisms. Delanty has made a good stab at conveying some of this:

June sun in the orchard,
the silksusurrus of afternoon,
a damn bee droning,
ululatearing afternoon's gown.

Although 'silksusurrus' does not correspond specifically to one of Ó Ríordáin's portmanteau words, it is based upon them and goes a long way to conveying the sibilance of the original line: 'Is siosarnach i síoda an tráthnóna'. His version of the final line is also striking, although it probably makes more sense if the reader has some understanding of the original: 'Mar screadstracadh ar an nóinbhrat', where 'scread' means a scream' and 'stracadh' is 'tearing'.

Perhaps of all the poet's obsessions, the one that chimes most with contemporary concerns is his exploration of the theme of identity. This arises in the first place from his decision to write in Irish which, in one poem, he addresses as 'O Language half-mine'. Although his father was a native Irish speaker, his mother spoke English and knew little Irish. He was, therefore, brought up speaking English at home, where he was known as 'Jackie', but subsequently went to an Irish-language school. In spite of the enthusiasm with which his poetry was greeted in some quarters, he was also criticised by the Irish-language poet Máire Mac an tSaoi for his 'non-Gaelic usage'. Unfortunately, for him and his admirers, Ó Ríordáin took her criticism to heart, which probably explains the twelve-year gap between his first collection, *A Robin's Tail/Eireball Spideoige*, published in 1952, and his second, *Kindling/Brosna*, published in 1964.

From the outset, in ‘Apologia’, we sense his modesty: ‘I churned the cream into butter, / Anxious not to waste a drop. // Though I’m no great shakes as a churner …’, while in ‘O Irish in My Pen’ he asks
:
Have you lost your line?
are you a poor bastard
without lineage?

[…]

I lug you everywhere.
Lady Nemesis bugs my ear.
You suck up to that foreign whore.
I slip thoughts to you
that I pilfer from her.

Here ‘the foreign whore’ is of course English and the English poetic tradition and it might seem to many readers that the poet is unduly hard on himself. Why shouldn’t his immersion in and love of two poetic traditions be viewed as a blessing rather than a source of anxiety? And yet, currently there are those who agonise over the notion of ‘cultural appropriation’, seemingly oblivious of the fact that cross-fertilisation is one of the ways by which art develops, whether one is a fan of Jazz or the Shakespearean sonnet.

There is little doubt, then, that Ó Ríordáin was, on several fronts, a tormented soul, constantly questioning the validity of what he wrote, its place in the Gaelic tradition and his own place in the world. In ‘Freedom’, like his great contemporary Máirtin Ó Direáin in poems such as ‘I Will Find Solace’/’Faoiseamh a Gheobhdsa’, he idealises what he imagines to be a simple life amongst the rural Gaelic community, a place where he can find respite from the life of the intellect:

I’ll fetter the pack of snarling thoughts
hounding me
in my aloneness.

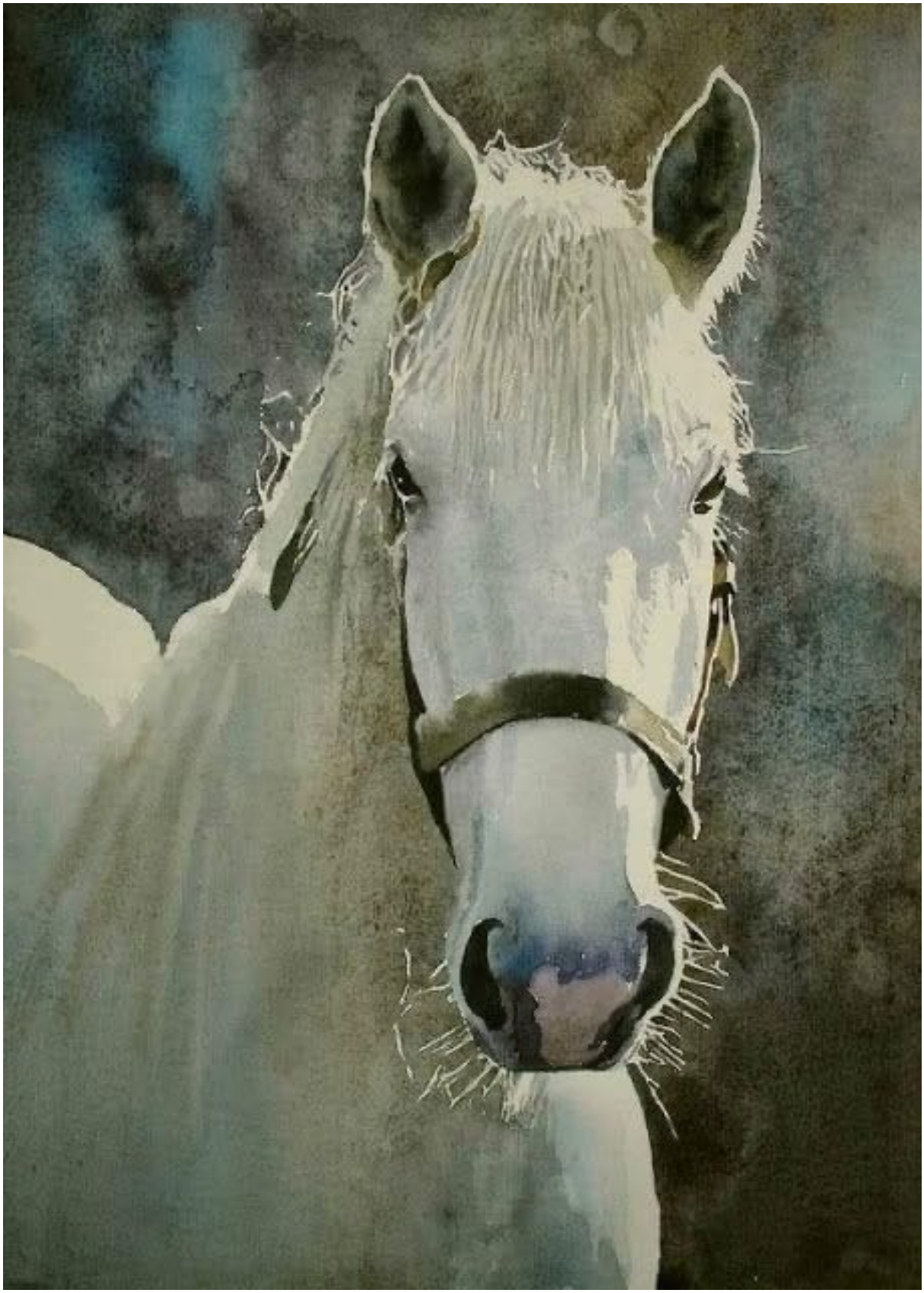
I’ll look for a regular chapel
chock-a-block with people
at a set time.

I’ll seek the company of folk
who never practise freedom,
nor aloness

and listen to their pennythoughts
exchanged
like something freshly coined.

Nevertheless, as Yeats said: ‘We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry’, and Ó Ríordáin, for all his self-doubt and anxiety, gave memorable expression to his in a language that was indeed ‘freshly coined’ and which, moreover, showed the way ahead for many that have followed in his footsteps. Finally, one is

grateful also to Greg Delanty for his diligence and skill in producing these accessible English-language versions and for his perseverance in seeing them through to their eventual publication.



Oleh Kozak (1948-2017): Horse, watercolour

Omar Sabbagh

Mirrors and Carnivals
On Abhay K's
The Alphabets of Latin America (Bloomsbury, 2020)

'…the Amazon and the Ganges
unite and flow together…'
'Cecilia Meireles'

Apart from being an Indian career diplomat, Abhay K is a poet with now eight collections to his name, and an even larger array of edited anthologies; he has translated books too, as well as having published two memoirs. His eighth collection, *The Alphabets of Latin America: A Carnival of Poems* (Bloomsbury, 2020) follows as one might expect the alphabet from A to Z, with varying amounts of poems for each letter, from one to some to very many, instantiating an array of facets or aspects or features of the Latin American continent which, on the evidence of this book, he has experienced widely and deeply.

The poems range in length, from as short as three lines to a few pages in length. They vary in mode: some are third person narrations, some first person narrations, some deeply symbolic, some parabolic, some humorous, some purely descriptive and on the verge of imagistic, some that meld the poet's autobiographical experience with places, historic personages (political, literary or otherwise), and some that are evidences of vicarious experience, imagining himself in famed others' shoes, and others that merely tell and at times try to salvage bits and pieces of Latin American history – whether the history in question is one of denuding, suffering and loss, or one of colorful flourishing. The titles, running as I say from A to Z, vary too: places, of course, modern, contemporary, and premodern in Latin American history – either whole countries, or cities, or famed loci within the same; buildings or other statuesque emblems redolent with histories worthy of record or reimagination; famed literary, political (such as, 'Che Guevara' or 'Simon Bolivar') or more generally 'historic' personages also pepper with real intents much of the collection – and often enough, poems whose titles are famous names open with a guiding epigraph from the writings of those names; socio-economic or topographical features (for instance, 'Favela') also feature; sacral days (for instance, 'Day of the Dead'); mythical creatures worshipped or invoked in pre-modern times, or otherwise iconic animals ('Jaguar', say, or 'King Penguins'); even dance names like 'Samba', and other cultural artefacts such as local beverages, indigenous or modern, contemporary. So, yes, there is much in this litany-like book of the carnivalesque, a fanfare – it's no accident, I surmise, that the title is '*The Alphabets*', in plural rather than singular. However variegated and joyously dispersive the book may be, though, the poems do all evince and with perhaps alternating success at times the imprimatur of one venturesome spirit.

This last unitive observation is part of the reason I think the concept of a 'mirror' as much as a 'carnival' is or might be used as a fruitful reading direction and frame for some hopefully illuminating discussion of this book. A carnival as many know is, etymologically, a 'farewell to the flesh'; which is to say, a celebratory loosening of the bonds and straits of distinguishable identity. A mirror, by turns, both reflects the self, identifying and shoring it up, but also mirrors into at least two other pertinent senses: first, that if a self needs a mirror in order to effect such shoring-up then, in a slightly more abstracted sense, that mirror by that

very token indicates the more unsatiated senses of selfhood; and second, of course, while doing its shoring, securing work, our purported mirror may not be used for the self at all, as in, holding a mirror to the object worlds one sees or hears or touches: lives in or through. In short, I hope to discuss the successes of this collection – as much as the moments when in my view and against the gauge of those forementioned successes, the poems fall slightly short – beneath a very broad rubric alternating joyous dispersal, magical as much as visceral, with the kinds of reflections of the poet's ambient selves as they *reflect* rather than *refract*.

*

Though the opening poem(s), say 'Amazon' or 'Andes' or 'Atacama' open this collection on more plain-speaking notes than later entries, it is significant that they immediately register a history of suffering, loss, denuding. Whether it's the 'Indians' the poet wants to visit 'across the river', finding at the first poem's close that 'there were none', or the note of the 'insatiability' of humanity's rapacious desirousness (much-reprised in the book as a whole) in 'Andes', or then, 'amidst the immensity / of the cold desert', the poet observes the 'Sun shining ever bright / in silence // not a single animal or bird / nothing like Earth' – it does seem important that these more melancholic notes jumpstart a book which is subtitled 'A Carnival of Poems.' Aside from the immediate, seeming committed-ness of these openings (by a *diplomat*-poet, after all), I think what might be an interesting note to make here is that the last, final poem, the single 'Z' entry, 'Zocalo' ends like this:

'does it matter who loses, who wins a war –
a people, a tribe, a nation is destroyed
only to reincarnate in another form.'

I think this quickly-made comparison of the openings and closing of the book indicates something very compelling about the book as a whole. That last 'reincarnate' picks out Abhay K the Indian, and the other 'form' picks him out as a poet. Doing the requisite math, when the poet is indeed in deep or not so deep lamenting mode, he is enacting those views and attitudes, circling around or about loss, to do – as well as mirroring the suffering and privations of much-colonized, brutalized lands, peoples – the habitual *redressing* of poetry, as it recomposes and reinvigorates the 'years of solitude' as it were: rendering them shared now and thereby lit-up in some sort of communion with the reader, or, perhaps (more racy), in some kind of 'carnival.'

There are moments near the beginning of the book where the poems to my mind fall short of later undoubted successes in the book, and these slight failures don't work as well for the reason that they seem too pat and automatic reflections of autobiographical experiences, poems not quite fully mediated into poems, or at least, into the slightly better poems they might have been. If 'Avenida Paulista' feels in its record of the pertaining experience perhaps too pedestrian and prosaic, ending with the poet, 'trying to feel / the heartbeat of Latin America', Abhay K's gift for ending poems begins to pick up pace at the ending of the 'A' poems. 'Ayahuasca', a local indigenous drink, is repeated in the first half of this same-titled poem as a kind of playful liturgy, and in the second half of the poem, as the poet details the making of this drink, he ends with: 'brew it for several hours with water / and serve the sacred drink at the sacred hour.' This is a more musical success and shows more sophistication than other early notes, by the iteration of sacred, because, one assumes, sacral things are iterative and periodic. Once we hit the B's though, we begin to see some quite

beautiful successes, as poems, wholly – not as matt records, however valuable in themselves, of a wide-ranging and venturesome spirit.

While a poem like 'Belmopan' is a touch pedestrian, doing though good recording work, 'Bogotá' has a wonderful moment of encounter, where the poet writes: 'The next day, he looked into the mirror / and saw her face.' This is the entrance of a paramour expressed in lovely informing paradox, and it's from now on, on the whole, that the sights as it were, begin to pick-up steam, giving-off more than sight, but eliciting insight, too.

'Borges' for example is a wonderfully adept piece, if on the surface plain-speaking. After a Borgesian epigraph, the poet registers himself 'Looking for Borges.' He finds 'merely a mirror / and a face staring / at me in disbelief.' Given the final stanza: 'it's hard to believe / everyone told me / Borges lived in Argentina' – when the poet finds a mirror-reflection he is not comparing himself to Borges, so much as enacting, yes, in his own now more-compact verse, a Borgesian conceit. It's not merely the play of self and other, in time or space, because that by itself would be close to banal. It's the kaleidoscopic effects of the use of line-endings in that last stanza, whereby the Borgesian mirror becomes a Borgesian carnival. It could mean at least three different things, simultaneously. That it's hard to believe he was told of Borges being in Argentina (being dead), or, given the lack of punctuation (as throughout much of the book, in fact) it holds the more ironic sense of a humorous ending, as in: it's hard to believe – everyone told me Borges lived in Argentina. Or, in a way conjoining the prosaic and/or the ironic senses, the disbelief might be neither about the uncanny strangeness of Borges's presence, nor the mocking of others, but the celebration of his immortality in the mirrors of his epigones. This compact synchronic effect is indicated by the first sentence of the Borgesian epigraph at the top of the poem: '*I know of one Greek labyrinth which is a single straight line*.' Thus, the poet's only-seeming simplicity bears at times fertile and incisive depths. Indeed, nearby in 'Candangos', naming the people from other parts of Brazil who migrated to construct 'Brasilia', another compact parabolic dexterity, wholly successful, runs the course of a six-line poem:

'People who built an aeroplane
out of nothing
and remembered fondly
with a sculpture
resembling an alien couple
at the central square of the city.'

This may well be mere description of a sight with slight poeticizing context, but even so, it seems in its compact design to say much, much more. 'Carlos Fuentes' is another compact parable, reimagining the 'old man' rising 'from his deathbed / one last time / with good conscience,' but, finding only certain inhumane historic horrors, ends up ten or so lines later, 'Disappointed / he closed his eyes / forever.' This is a small parabolic tale, and a kind of vicariously reimagined experience, and a wholly successful impersonation that touches the reader with real enchanting force. Through the mirror of the poet, and the mirror of his re-created historic figure, much that typifies Latin American history seems to be relayed in condensed, but perhaps also kaleidoscopic form.

And speaking of impersonations (and there are many in the book), the long poem 'Carnival: *Prufrock at the Carnival in Rio*' is a wonderfully sophisticated but also deeply enjoyable poem, picking up on musical inklings and rhythms, phrases and phrasal structures, from the

famed Eliot poem, but also veritably dancing through the reader's mind. It is the longest poem by far in the collection, mixing humor and lightsome banter with some depth-charged lines that mimic but also renew Eliot's nod towards the contingencies (the carnival) of modernity. What's interesting to note though, is that after this lengthy, clever and wholly enjoyable poem (the heart of the book I suspect) a small five-line poem, 'Cartagena' is close to imagistic, opening with: 'An orange flame' as it 'burns the sky', 'the city' at ending 'inhaling its smell.' The image mixes impressionistic description with a kind of magical, if not carnivalesque, disorientation. Other examples of this ilk might be 'Itamaraty' or 'Itiquira Falls'. A poem like 'Honduras', with its epigraph from Christopher Columbus, is nearly just as short, but this time is like a small, compelling epigram: 'Thank God / we have departed from those depths /and after this final voyage / we can rest.' This short poem in English is a slightly elongated translation of the Columbus quote (in Spanish) serving as epigraph and typifies those cleverer moments in Abhay K's book by effecting another carnival out of a mirror. Yes, a near-direct translation from Columbus to the poet's English is a mirror, but a mirror skewed by the renewed and renewing intents of the poet. In this momentary mirroring, Columbus gets refracted in the light of the intervening passages of history – as well as reflected.

'Cesar Vallejo' is another wholly brilliant parable, and much like 'Carlos Fuentes', involves the revolving of the past in the mirror of the present as much as vice versa:

'The corpse
who was already dead
died again this Thursday
in Paris
all men, women, and children
on the earth
could not save him
from dying again,
he wished to get up slowly
at least once
to embrace the last human
before dying again.'

That's the poem in toto, and it works in its ironic revolutions not only as '*After Mass*' which we find beneath the title, but in *even more* 'symbolic' senses. The poem 'Frida Kahlo' is as colorful and surreal as the mythos of that woman painter or her paintings, and 'Gabriel Garcia Marquez' opens with 'For a hundred years / I have been / walking on water,' continues with this impersonated persona seeing the 'golden fish', the racing 'butterflies', and finishes with the 'trains / full of gypsies / recounting / bizarre tales.' Here, again, a more sophisticated or complex poet shows his colors. All the meaningful work of this short poem is inadvertent, not direct, making it fully mediated as a reflection of a historic figure. The way it means is not unidirectional or uniform, despite or indeed in part because of the surface seriality of its mildly mysterious telling.

'Machu Picchu' (famously, a title of a Neruda poem, as well) is a nice short singsong of a poem, showing by this token, again, the sheer modal variety of Abhay K's poems in this collection. 'Lorca and I in New York', a walking-together through the past and the present is a lovely reimagined piece ending on Lorca whispering in the poet's ears: '"I might have tried / arranged-marriage myself / had they not killed me in cold blood."' This tragic ending

though, given the mild humor of the sentiment is warmer than cold. 'Papal Bull', by turns, is plain funny, if still making a serious point:

'A papal bull is not a bull
but it walks in public squares

with or without a pope
with its two heads

looking left and right
through its leaden seal.'

As already indicated, the whole collection is riddled with politicized comment, and a certain pacific, not brash, committed-ness. As with some of the opening poems, as with some of the reimagined parables where historic personages, literary or political, lament at history with pointed force, 'Panama Canal' ends with the 'diplomatic upheavals' at the 'birth of a new country,' and with 'silver and gold rolls / still unmixed' as, at the end of this short poem, they 'float in the canal water / telling tales of humanity's dark days.' This recollects some of the opening images and concerns to do with a history of deep and ill-fated privations.

The book is dedicated to former diplomat-poets, or poet-diplomats: such as, famously, 'Pablo Neruda', but also, 'Octavio Paz' – mirrors in this sense with Abhay K's own mix of profession and vocation. In the poem of the same name, 'Octavio Paz' is made to speak in the first person, yet another ventriloquizing feat of Abhay K's; and while the texture of real, complex historical experience is registered by Paz saying he was called *both* 'traitor' *and* 'son' by Neruda, the final two couplets after a period above end on a slightly disjunctive note that is all the more successful aesthetically for being so:

'Meeting Buddha in India
on the footpath, I ask –

"what is Self?" Buddha smiles
and turns into a pile of stones.'

This mysterious yet deeply poignant ending is not in *wholly* rational pursuit of the rest of the poem preceding. And yet, while possessing the needed note of what Wallace Stevens called 'the irrational', that element of surprise that makes a good poem great, this disjointed ending, by its discrete link to the foregoing poem, by its mildly elliptical open-endedness (real poetic fruits beyond the 'stones'), can mean many different, but still apposite things to the riveted, intelligent reader.

If this book, which is exciting to read, may seem in only some parts prosaic, the majority of the work here is better than and beyond didactic. Readers familiar with Latin America and those less familiar, like myself perhaps (barring a few iconic authors long-enjoyed), will most definitely benefit in both an imaginative and an informative sense from reading these poems. There is of course a conviviality that pervades the book. One man, poet, diplomat, finds himself by losing himself in the crowding, crowded histories, and in the teeming presences of Latin America, both mirrored and at carnival. But there is also a familiarity between the poet and his subjects, objects, readied for re-presentation. So, in the end, whether we choose the notion of a carnival or of a hall of mirrors as guiding lights for how to read these poems, one

thing is certain: times and places distant for most of us emerge into our vicinity with much color and insight; and this, whether the book's quite urgent concerns are playfully expressed, or whether they're executed with a more pressing serious-mindedness.

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