

STAND

Stand Magazine Summer 1993

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Tom Pow, Peter Abbs, Judith Kazantzis, John Gower, Karen
Connelly and others... Reviews of Recent Poetry*

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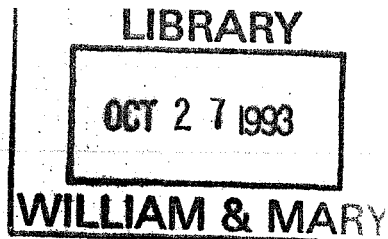
OCT 27 1993

WILLIAM & MARY

STAND MAGAZINE

SUMMER 1993

volume thirty four number three
 £9.95/U.S. \$22.00 a year (student/unwaged £8.50/U.S. \$18.00)
 Cover: Ron Swift



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 New York and USA distributor

In Index of American Periodical Verse, P.O. Box 38, New Brunswick, NJ 08903-0038, USA. Northern Arts supports Stand.
 Payment on publication ©(this selection) Stand Magazine Ltd 1993 Charity Commission No. 513804 VAT 499 664174 UK ISSN 0038-9366
 Only unpublished contributions, including those from literary agents, will be considered and must be accompanied by s.a.e./I.R.Cs

POETRY CHRONICLE II

Rodney Pybus

THE AMERICAN **Richard Hugo**, who died ten years ago at the age of 59, is not well-known here. He was not a major voice, he has no doubt had little influence on other poets, but he is by no means negligible, as his *Collected Poems Making Certain It Goes On* (Norton, £7.95, \$10.95) makes clear. For an art to flourish in any period

there must be good, worthwhile practitioners as well as the occasional figure of enduring importance. Hugo was one of the former, and he presents an appealing persona. Old enough to have caught the tail-end of the 1939-45 war, he has an amusing poem-letter to the now-American poet Charles Simic recalling his incompetence as a bomber over the Belgrade in which the young Simic was living.

He is a conversational poet – his writing packed dense with you's, whether himself, the reader or the addressee – and a little more garrulous than his mentor W.C. Williams. But he is not often a sloppy writer – this kind of writing is the product of care, effort and skill:

Days she looks at floors, a thick degrading cloud
crosses her face for minutes and I think of wheat.
And in what must have been slow days, I see a girl
packing dirt like make-up, preparing herself for years
of shacks and drunks, stale air filling morning
and the fire out, grease a soapy gray in pots.

(‘Indian Girl’)

While this collection of nearly 450 pages shows that he has poems on all sorts of subjects from ‘Morning in Padova’ to ‘Graves in Uig’, he has two real themes – fishing, and the lonely run-down places of the Far West of the United States, typically Washington State, where nature and mankind seldom live for long at ease with each other. On one level his poems are simple and accessible (sometimes, indeed, his confessional strain is a little too accessible), but they are rarely sentimental or simplistic. ‘The Braes’, one of a fine group about the western isles of Scotland, reflects sympathetically on the lack of memorials to the ‘Celtic blood’ shed in the clearances, but closes, pointedly, ‘You have to know / this is where the poor woke up a nation. / Same time, back home, in sand, in snow / where nothing grows / we started Indian

reservations.' The figure that comes through these poems is that of a sociable man who was often alone, often combining celebration with weary sadness, resilience and surrender. He deserves a place in any anthology of American poetry of the last fifty years.

Thinking of Happiness (Peterloo, £5.95) may be a late first collection as the poet nudges towards fifty, but it's clear that **Michael Laskey** has not been wasting his time, since this is by no means apprentice work. In its humanity and amiable tenderness it is as essentially English as Hugo's is American, the weaker poems being weak in the manner of many less than distinguished English poems, such as 'Letters from my Mother' with the glib "shock" ending of 'No hint that she's afraid / it's cancer.' Childhood, school, domesticity, family are the sources and themes of most of Laskey's poems, but what he does with them can be out-of-the-ordinary. In 'Meeting our Father' the poet-as-child recollects going to the airport to see his long-absent father who arrives bearing a budgie in a cage. Pain, disappointment and loss echo between the closing lines:

... we went quiet, seeing how silly
our hopes had been. And he never spoke,
though he'd settle on my head while I did my prep
and lived with us years after Dad had left.

What sets Laskey apart from many contemporary practitioners of the reflective-anecdote type of poem is that he's learned the craft of omission; what makes much of this collection enjoyable and rewarding is his growing confidence in this respect, and an agreeable asperity (as in his thumping onslaught for tardiness on earlier editors of the *Poetry Review*) that shades the good nature, rather in the manner of the later Norman Nicholson.

Another first collection, *Threats and Promises* (Iron Press, £3.99), from **Rosemary Norman**, is uneven, but that's a token of ambition and emotional intensity running ahead of craft to a point where the lines sometimes go flat and prosy in the haste to express clearly and energetically. Virtues and vices are present in a strong group about the scapegoating of Jews in 13th century Lincoln for the murder of 'Little St Hugh'. Elsewhere there are affective poems to lovers present and absent; these show that the characteristic note of her successful poems is an intriguingly delicate bluntness. In 'Saline' the first of two stanzas presents an old woman close to death in hospital – 'her gums chew on rough breath' – but in no way prepares us for the second, in which word-play brings a lightness of spirit and sound-patterning to the rhythms of her final epiphany:

And it's him, in the dim
drift of mist, her old
boy, her dear, her darling
coming for her, cock first,
bless him, as ever.
She melts, she runs like summer
butter. It's good, so good, oh
yes. This is heaven.

The title-poem's image of both plant-house and post-war English submarine-of-depressed-state where 'We taste/ Its air of rot and counter-rot,' sets the tone for **Sean O'Brien's** third volume. Continuing but not, I think, developing his grim (and sometimes grimly funny) social anatomisation from *The Frighteners* (1987), *HMS Glasshouse* (OUP, £5.99) is redolent with the decay of nation and dreams both public and personal – 'the serious drinkers' of 'On the Piss', 'The thirty-year men with no surnames', are as much heroes as anyone else in a land so

seedy it seems fit for nothing. Even circumstances that might seem congenial to a writer, such as Dundee University's creative writing fellowship or the Victorian virtues of Newcastle's 'Lit. and Phil.' library, are on the receiving end of some vengeful exasperation.

There is enough craft, talent and social acuity on show here to make one wish that, faced with the everyday evidence of the last decade's decline and despair, O'Brien's prevailing tones were not those of a tart facetiousness (as in 'Hatred of Libraries' or 'In Residence: A Worst Case View') or bitter irony. Calling the alcoholic down-and-outs of 'At the Wellgate' 'boreal flaneurs [who] donate their stains / And thick cirrhotic sherries to the bench / Outside the precinct where they're not allowed' draws rather more attention to the means than the subject: his rhetoric not only begins to distance the poem but is also at odds with some of his material. What one longs for is a less obviously literary, more menacing political anger – for all O'Brien's sharp edges and robust diction there is a sense in too many of these poems of him simultaneously forcing his material and holding back, as in the ambivalent close of 'HMS Glasshouse': 'Let's make our inspection / On tiptoe, and listen for cracks / In case one of us throws the first stone.' It is of course true, as he says earlier in the poem, that in the 'deliberate torpor' in the routine of the 'Unterseeboot of the state' we are all to some extent guilty. I'm not sure, though, that O'Brien needed to have been so uncharacteristically fair and reasonable.

The Collected Poems (ed. J. Stallworthy; OUP, £20) of the late **Henry Reed** puts the lie to the notion that he was a one-poem poet ('Naming of Parts') who also wrote a brilliant parody of T.S. Eliot, 'Chard Whitlow' ('As we get older we do not get any younger...'). He wrote some first-rate drama for BBC radio in the great days of the Third Programme (e.g. *The Streets of Pompeii*, and the

famous *Hilda Tablet* plays). While it is true that he published only one collection during his lifetime, *A Map of Verona* in 1946, it was still being reprinted twenty-five years later.

Reed is part of post-war English poetry for what he wrote in the Forties and Fifties; it's good to have him in print, and to see 'The Changeling', 'The Auction Sale', and all five of the 'Lessons of War'. He wrote less than he should have done, but he is worth saving for his distinctive note of exclusion from and loss of love, paradise, fulfilment. He turned, as so many of his contemporaries did, to the Mediterranean for all it could offer that England couldn't – 'the Italian landscape of mythologised desire'. It is not only the soldier returning home at the end of 'The Changeling' to a lovely garden at dusk and a young wife in bed, but clearly Reed himself, who feels the force of rejection and disillusion at the close: "All this is false. And I / Am an interloper here." (Reed's homosexuality does not entirely account for the strength of his feeling.) This edition reprints his first book, adds about a dozen 'new' poems along with translations (particularly from Leopardi's Italian).

Christopher Reid's latest is a puzzle. Previous collections have shown him adept and agile, but what disables *In the Echoey Tunnel* (Faber, £4.99) is ponderousness. In 'A View of the Playground' the narrator watches a 'rather fat and muscular' boy bursting other children's bubbles: the poem ends

He began by throwing himself about in his wild efforts to
pop
as many fragile monsters as he could.
I hated him at once, and I suppose
others did too, but nobody, I noticed, attempted to
intervene.

Like the awkward-shaped, giant bubbles, these poems cannot support the symbolic value they're given. In the title poem 'the little girl squealing / in the echoey tunnel' suggests by 'echoey' that we shall see whatever its 'echoey gloom' will permit from her point of view. But while 'how fiercely she exults / in her brand-new discovery' may be the intrusive voice of mature "realism" or "dis-illusion", it does nothing for the poem since '... what a cheat, / to be dragged back to day light' is too weak to take the strain. Such misjudgements of tone and technique are allied to an extraordinarily *passé* diction: 'jolly', 'hilarious', 'exquisite', 'knick-knacks', 'heyday', 'peep', 'dressy', 'chit-chat', 'considerable clout' ... and so on. Two more ambitious, long poems don't entirely manage to raise the level: 'Memres [sic] of Alfred Stoker', written in pastiche illiterate style as the recollections of a man born in 1885, is 'quirky' as the blurb tells us – but 'accomplished argot'? It's not really 'argot' except in the sense of 'cant', and the affectation in this exercise is what lets it down since the illiteracy is at odds with the poetic cleverness. By a long way the strongest poem in the book is 'Survival: a Patchwork', which with emotional and technical conviction celebrates the happy recovery from cancer of his patchwork quilt-maker wife:

and who now minds
the touch of asymmetry
Matisse's jaunty drawing
one breast hitched
its nipple wider
for a while...

It is a loving and lovely poem, gentle and unfussed.

Reid's judgement may have been made out of sorts in his own book, but full marks for getting **Harry Smart's Pierrat** into print (Faber, £4.99). It's an assured, achieved,

and ambitious début with a pleasingly atypical lack of insularity (relative to many of his contemporaries). And it's good to find a young poet who is not afraid to *think* in his poems, as in the difficult (in all senses) 'Dante at Birkenau' in which the Italian poet, regarding Auschwitz, remembers 'what I have been told, / That they suffer justly'. Having thus boldly put one of the central figures of European civilisation and his faith on trial, as it were, he leads Dante to a terrifying conclusion:

I will show such love of God to those
Whom Christendom delivered to the pit
As would hurl judging eyes,
As would hurl judgement's tongue
Among the terrified dying, God
Into Jews' vain crushing of themselves
Against those bolted doors.

He is by no means wholly a bleak-visions writer, but even lighter pieces such as 'Florins' have a hard edge. He tends towards the marginal in the sense that his landscapes are viewed from their limits. Smart is drawn to the dangerous 'edginess' of things, and draws the reader into his contemplation of shorelines, harbours, as in 'Stepping' and 'Philosopher at the Beach', or in 'On the Edge of Town' from which he brings a sadly beautiful, provisional sustenance to be found also in a longer poem, 'Morning Walks'; or in 'Yesterday' where the speaker leaves home after an argument and finds the shore attractive but not entirely consoling with its 'muddy grey-blue rush / Of sand in salt water / Thwashing the breakwater', the 'dark overcast', and the 'baked grass in bundles, / Earthbeard.' The poem closes with a line that marvelously echoes Nashe's famous image and moves beyond it by introducing the birds and the Gaelic littoral: 'There is the bright calling of birds from the machair.' His poems, to

judge from this collection, are inquisitive, tough-minded, and musically seductive. It's a class act.

The accident of alphabetical order brings **Landeg White** in at the end, alas. A short but strong recommendation, then, to read *The View from the Stockade*, an excellent collection from an excellent press (Dangaroo, £5.95). A Welshman who has spent time in various parts of Africa and is now in York, he combines a directness of style with an eloquent willingness to tackle difficult, important themes – particularly the violent recent struggles in Africa, where there are many losers and seldom any winners. Their images surface again in England, whether in reading Dante 'in a siding outside Doncaster', or in 'The Archive' that tells of murdered villagers far away, which the narrator is delivering by car past Clifford's Tower in York, scene of a Jewish pogrom in 1190. White gives the details, the scent, the stuff of history being made, but manages also to bring out tenderness as well as violence, love as well as anger. This is not an embattled or didactic view from inside the laager, but a steady look at problematic relations so complex as sometimes to seem insoluble. It is a tempered optimism he shows in the title poem as elsewhere, resilient but grieving. From the stockade the view is of a 'pastoral lost': 'We shall survive // All but the heartsickness, our innocence / Undone. Now there begin / Ledgerbook, usury.'

Denise Levertov was born in England, but has lived in the United States since the 1940s. She came to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s with those poets such as Robert Bly, Galway Kinnell, and Allen Ginsberg who protested against American policies at home and abroad – particularly, of course, against the war in Vietnam. More recently she has moved from what one might call, simplistically, a polemical position to a religious position.

(The fact that she has Russian Jews and Welsh Christians among her forebears may be relevant here).

It is precisely this relationship between the inner and outer worlds, between the political and social commitments and the commitment to art, that makes Levertov an exemplary poet of our times. Professor Audrey T. Rogers subtitles her study *Denise Levertov as The Poetry of Engagement* (Associated University Presses, £32.95) in order to draw attention to this relationship. She rightly points out that it was the 1960s that made Levertov into an overtly political poet, but that it was a change of emphasis rather than an entirely new direction. It has to be said, however, that this book is a grievous disappointment, and not only because of the missed opportunity: it is a survey rather than a critical discussion, packed with other people's opinions and a dogged pursuit of the absolutely obvious ('candles', she tells us, are an important symbol of light in Levertov...), jejune in its value judgements, misguided about the way poetry works, and written with numbing incompetence. 'Succinct' is one of her favourite words, but succinct she is not: she gushes, with a bewildering variety of italics, bold type, and exclamation marks in case we have missed the point. Cliché jostles cliché – 'illustrious ancestor', 'modern giants', 'every budding English poet', etc. She seems to believe that there are 'universally accepted criteria' for judging poetry, and that 'formal qualities' are used to 'enhance a theme'. 'In essence, the Romantics were basically revolutionary...', 'An examination of many of the early volumes are interesting...' and 'As I view the long road of Denise Levertov's voyage...' are not unfair examples of Professor Rogers' ability to write English. If it were not that this book's blundering hagiography might put someone off Levertov, it could safely be ignored.