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Five Short Reviews

Carolyn Wright

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Carolynne Wright

FIVE SHORT REVIEWS

In the New Hampshire Woods by Chris Agee

Chris Agee is a poet born and educated in the United States and transplanted to Ireland, where he lives and teaches in Belfast. Unlike some other Irish poets who have made the transatlantic crossing in that direction—Brooklyn-born John Montague being the most notable among them—Agee focusses in this collection on an all-encompassing empathy with the natural world, of which he has a coherent and even classical vision. Although he notes in passing the imprints of human history and conflict in the natural surround—what poet could fail to do so in Ireland?—it is the landscape itself with which he feels most at home. The first landscape is that of his native North America, specifically New England—one New World region whose pastoral terrain most closely resembles that of his adopted European isle—where the “unretainable past” is nevertheless preserved, “burnt in the brow of memory.” And he dwells with affection on the green contours of the Irish coastlands, drawing on the Imagists, Japanese haiku, Hopkins, Yeats, and the spirits of the Celtic past for his inspiration.

There are some lovely close inspections of North American flora and fauna—loons, Indian pipes, paper birches—all “bound by the bloodshot ground of our heritage.” And there are sweeping evocations of the “Old World younger than this” in actual geological time: the “evening peet-reek” of Irish turf, of fallow deer (“swift interlopers / on winter pasture”), and the shifting colors of croftlands in the seasonal cycles of the liturgical year. But the poetry doesn’t quite transcend its initial descriptive delights to reach for a deeper connection between the indwelling life of these continents and the human cultures that overlay and inhabit them.

Dedalus Press, 1992. £7.95 ISBN 187379021X (paperbound); £4.95 ISBN 1873790201 (cloth).

You Don't Miss Your Water by Cornelius Eady

This 64-page volume gives the admirer of Eady's expansive-toned poetry a 33-page sequence and nearly as many pages (31) of padding. Besides the regular front material, there are two sections of reviewer praise, acknowledgements broken into several categories and spread across three pages (each with its backing blank page), and a dozen other empty pages interspersed. Moreover, the small dimensions (5" x 7") of this "*Pomes Pennyeach*"-sized volume mean that each page actually printed with poetry runs only two-thirds the number of lines of a regular-sized volume. But the 21 poems that emerge from this packaging gimmickry are gripping, page-turning narratives that echo with all the pathos and irony of the blues.

The sequence is tied by reflection and memory to the dying of a remote, secretive father who has finally been brought within physical—if not emotional—reach by the crippling infirmities of his last days. These prose poems are both fierce and joyous in the poet's unsentimental grief and resentment-transcending compassion for his father and those who bore the brunt of his stinginess and womanizing. In the wake of these domestic injustices that reverberate down the generations, the poems chronicle the dying father's last days and the poet-son's bittersweet recollections as he takes stock.

Some insights cut deep and startle, as when the poet's sister stands up to testify at the funeral service of her "rolling stone" of a daddy: "I'm just like him, but I'm a woman, so I can't get away with it." Or when the poet's mother refuses finally to marry her dying common-law husband in his hospital bed, expressing her resolve with "the voice she had on the day that she finally saw how things were with my father," saying she would rather lose the house and possessions, rather "starve on her anger than feed off his slow regret." Then there is the imagined conversation in which the mistrustful father, more than a year dead and gone, comes back to ask about his son's college teaching job. The poet answers that they're treating him "*Fine, Daddy. They're paying me to write about your life.*" Nice work if you can get it.

Henry Holt, 1995. ISBN 0805036679 (cloth); \$12.00 ISBN 0805036687 (paper).

The Weather That Kills by Patricia Spears Jones

This long-awaited first collection represents a poetic homecoming of sorts for this poet who has travelled and imaginatively entered the lives of others, from rural Arkansas to the Lower East Side, from Memphis to Munich, from Billie Holiday's strung-out "willow in a Harlem breeze" to The Clash with their "splattering rhythm and frantic bad guitar" providing background to street battles with police in Brixton. Despite some first-book unevenness (especially in the more personal poems) and the occasional rhythmic and rhetorical drop-off into prosaic statement, Jones combines the literal with the lyric, street-smart eloquence with heartfelt passion, in unexpected and delightful ways. There is astute and gently iconoclastic humor, as in the "New Blues" the poet hears in a Dorchester club: "Hellhounds chased Robert Johnson / from one end of the Delta to the other. / But this singer's problem is much more local. / He just wants his lover to move out. Property is the new devil."

One of the most subtly modulated poems is "Blumen," a meditation on the painful human history behind a photograph of a bunch of irises taken in Berlin before the Second World War that shattered Europe. For the destitute young photographer, the irises represented "a fortune in bread and butter"; but for the woman he loved, they symbolized dreams of a life of wealth and glamour—dreams destroyed by the war that claimed her life. Half a century later, the aged photographer comes across the print, a futile "gift for a woman dead to all but him," and he realizes the terrible price of this work of art—"everything / he's got: money, heart, ideals." The disturbing complicity between the artist's struggles for survival and the murderous will to power of political leaders is left implicit as someone locates the negative, makes a new print—"crisp and historic"—and "walks away from his crime. Not even a whistle through his teeth." This poet's mature wisdom and facility for startling turns of phrase bespeak a new and genuine voice.

Parables and Faxes by Gwyneth Lewis

This urbane, compassionately humorous and consummately human collection is Lewis's debut volume in her second language. If she is capable of such command of form, delightful eccentricity of approach, and nuance of affect in English, one wonders what a singular impact her first-language work must have upon the body of poetry in Welsh. A television producer in her native Cardiff, she is as fascinated with the odd quirks of current events as she is with the halls of academe, the chapels and libraries in which the book lover's imagination dreams back to a traditional refuge. Her unpretentious conversance with cultural references both ancient and contemporary, diction that modulates from Milton to Madonna, and themes and imagery from medieval and monastic Britain interwoven with the jazzy, disjunctive riffs of the modern rat race, is learning lightly worn.

Consider the opening poem, "Pentecost," in which the girl speaker believes herself charged, "as foretold in the faxes and prophecies," to "save great Florida" from its smug and tawdry affluence, so it may prepare its "perpetual Pentecost / of golf course and freeway, shopping mall and car." In the consequent linguistic revelations, "the S in the tail of the crocodile / will make perfect sense to the bibliophile" who will discover in the land "his second Torah." And consider "The Skomer Vole," Lewis's gentle satire upon the nerdly enthusiasms of a "suburban naturalist" who focusses his research upon this most obscure subspecies of rodent dwelling in the fields that surround his subdivision. But even in such insular and overly precious interests, the amateur scientist can shelter, in the depths of his excessive rationalism, a secret "mythic vision: // the Ur-Vole, a Moses, lead[ing] an excursion / across the causeway on a vole crusade" to a sort of parodic rodentine Valhalla of "Skomer and visionary seclusion."

The title sequence is a brilliant and mysterious poetic succession that traces an arc from mythopoesis—evoking and transforming the timeless lore of religious "parable" with an inspired boldness reminis-

Bloodaxe Books, 1995. £6.95 ISBN 1852243198 (paper).

cent of Yeats—to modernism, with its witty mixture of dictions and images from multiple layers of modern culture: all of these transmitted via “fax.” One of the most moving of this sequence is the untitled No. XXI (a twentieth-century “Parable”), which narrates the harrowing attempt, by a World War II fuel tanker in the Coral Sea, to rescue passengers from a hospital ship hit by Japanese and about to sink in flames. Though the tanker could blow up at any minute, the captain “holds the ship near / to its ultimate danger” as nurses and patients are “winched from the burning hulk.” As the tanker crew “burns in anticipation” of the impending blast that fails to come, the poet wonders, “how long can she last / before physical logic remembers the load? / . . . before love and its opposite crash and explode?” This lovely tension between love and logic, between the flights of inspired language and the adherence to form that hones and polishes that language, make Gwyneth Lewis’s first book in English a treasure, a fresh and daring voice among Britain’s much-heralded “New Generation.”

The Human Abstract by Elizabeth Willis

This volume, selected by Ann Lauterbach for the National Poetry Series, derives its title (as the jacket copy states) from William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*—more specifically from the *Songs of Experience* alone. (The parallel and contrasting poem in *The Songs of Innocence* is “The Divine Image.”) The cruelly fallen world of the “human abstract” contains—in Blake’s admittedly crabbed and eccentric view—all that was miserable and benighted about the human condition, particularly in his “deistic” century of Enlightenment rationalism and Newtonian laws of mechanics. The “abstract” universe was a clock wound up and abandoned by God—empty of feeling and void of the immanence of the Divine.

Penguin, 1995. \$12.95 ISBN 0140249354 (paper).

What all this has innately to do with the formal and thematic properties of Willis's collection might best be encapsulated in the first two lines of the title sequence: "Innocence shags experience and I'll never grow. // Experience catches the dove, and I'm lost." Blake's single-minded "mental fight" against his era's prevailing deistic and abstracting view of the fallen world would seem to oppose and undermine much of the experiential diversity (with its correspondingly fragmentary diction) that Willis celebrates. I wonder about the "formal concentration" or the "affinity for song," which the jacket copy asserts—in the manner of the "manifestos" which youthful Parisian artists used to issue early in their practice of painting. There is a heady sense of freedom in this poetry: the freedom of free association, of seeming to put down whatever comes to mind—lists, phrase fragments, sound collages, hovering quotations—letting whatever intrinsic connections there may be among all these either reveal themselves, or remain "gnomic."

The poem I like best in this collection is the first one—heartrending and wonderfully strange in the way of a late twentieth-century lyric imagination pushing against the boundaries of conventional imagery: "When I found your face on a pillow of leaves / you had already erased it." But after that come pages of (mere?) word collages, strange not in the sense of wondrous but of puzzling—poetic raw materials of phrase and phoneme, more like the chromatic daubs on painters' palettes than completed canvasses hanging in a gallery. But perhaps, like abstract expressionism in the visual arts, these poems are more about the enactment of process than the presentation of finished product. Or perhaps they tie in with the latest of scientific findings (against which Blake would certainly rail and fulminate)—chaos theory and fuzzy logic and the mathematical principles of charm and strangeness—all of which terms contain wonderful potentialities for the mystified and delighted post-Blakean poet. In the realm of poetic abstract expressionism, which perhaps finds its most polished realization in John Ashbery's work, this collection may have found its *métier*. Or have I missed the point altogether?