

Books and Poems discussed at T.S.Eliot Preview on 10 January 2016 at the Southbank Centre.

Mark Doty, *Deep Lane* – poem from ‘Deep Lane’ series on p 53 (about radishes)

Tracey Herd, *Not in this World* – poem ‘Cemetery in Snow’ p. 52

Selima Hill, *Jutland* – extract seven poems pages 47–53 (from ‘Golfer in the Snow’)

Sarah Howe, *Loop of Jade* – poem ‘Having just broken the water pitcher’ p.48-9

Tim Liardet, *The World Before Snow* – poem ‘Self-portrait with Goffstown...’ p. 35

Les Murray, *Waiting for the Past* – poem, ‘Last World Before the Stars’ p. 49

Sean O’Brien, *The Beautiful Librarians* – poem, ‘Daylight Saving’, p. 37

Don Paterson, *40 Sonnets* – poem, ‘Wave’, p. 4

Rebecca Perry, *Beauty/Beauty* – poem, ‘Other Clouds’, p. 12

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* – extract pp. 131-133 (‘On the train...’)

John Greening's mini introductions to the books and poems
as read on 10 January:

MARK DOTY Deep Lane

Mark Doty's name began to be heard after *My Alexandria*, his personal response to the AIDS crisis (which won him the T.S.Eliot Prize exactly 20 years ago). This new collection sees a poet of considerable maturity at work. It's threaded with a series of pieces about home and gardening, each called 'Deep Lane' – perhaps a memory of Eliot's *East Coker*: 'the deep lane insists on the direction', in this case the direction being old age and death. Doty has always been an elegist, but a defiant one. He has a unique way with sentence; an eye for everyday detail. A good few creatures inhabit the book – dogs, fish, goats, sea lions, ticks, *poets* ... and there's a marvellous long piece about a three-legged deer, 'King of Fire Island', sadly too long to read today. He even does a Les Murray – a poem in the voice of a baby mammoth.

Doty is often writing poems about writing poems, or about other kinds of craftsmanship such as cutting hair and he is a thinking poet: those sinuous sentences burrow into the language and into questions about his existence and relationships. In that, he is not a million miles from Edward Thomas – maybe one of the reasons he's been popular in the UK. I was reminded too, in some of his 'apparition' poems, of Thomas's mysterious 'other man' .

There is much wit and whimsy here, some moments of sheer farce even (in 'Spent') but also much tenderness too, as in 'Verge', and in the penultimate 'Deep Lane' piece, ostensibly about picking radishes (p.53) which I have chosen for us to look at.

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There is an obvious erotic charge to this poem, but everything emerges naturally within the description of picking the radishes as a storm approaches. It could be a painting. But it's the syntax again that drives the poem on, the line-breaks full of tension, the poet consciously questioning his own poetic process as he writes. It has a formality, yet there's an intensely musical freedom to the rhythms. Listen for the playful internal rhyme (*pick* and *quick*), the shifts in tempo and density. The exactness of the description of picking, culminating in that jewel image. The build-

up to the storm is masterly as is the final line, where we realise it's a poem about a relationship more than just gardening.

TRACEY HERD *Not in this World*

Tracey Herd is from the east coast of Scotland and this is her third collection. (Her first was shortlisted for a Forward Prize). Her poetry often has a throw-away, take-it-or-leave-it manner – cool, colloquial, in and of the contemporary urban world, with glimpses of sheep, cherry blossom or the sea along the way. She dips in and out of traditional rhyme. There are even villanelles – though I feel a villanelle works best if it's metrical; and there is a lot of padding in the one about Vivien Leigh. Herd is more at ease with verse that can smell freedom.

She's an elegist – like Mark Doty and many of the others on the shortlist. Like Douglas Dunn, in fact, who came to mind once or twice. The collection features a wonderful threnody for Port Talbot, where the steel-workers in the photo become Lotus Eaters caught 'where it will always be afternoon'. There are laments for Buddy Holly, too – and several deeply personal cemetery poems. She puts these, typically, next to several racehorse poems.

Not in this World is full of mirrors, doubles, alter egos, personae. The poet retells the story of Snow White, for example, in the voice of the heroine. Anne Sexton did something similar. But Herd has her tongue in her cheek. In the end, I feel that she is at her best speaking directly, 'laid bare against the world', as she puts it in 'Glass House'.

There is a lot of glass in the book – mirror, crystal ball, chandelier, slipper, window, lens, bottle. .. and there is a good deal of violence beneath the surface, sometimes on the surface. Things crack and shatter – relationships, illusions, particularly those associated with the silver screen.

I was struck by 'The Imaginary Death of Star', a Duffy-esque piece of myth-making set in an ice-rink that reminds us how far we have come since Wordsworth skated across his innocent star.

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But let's look at snow rather than ice: one of those cemetery poems in the Brontë tradition. Snow is risky – whether you're driving or writing poetry; and several of the shortlisted poets write about it. Does Herd get away with it here without being clichéd or sentimental...?

She starts with a big snow-drift of a word, 'Mausoleum', but otherwise it's clear, simple diction with plenty of monosyllables ('Now all I can see is the snow') and curt statements, as if emotion were being held in check – or frozen perhaps. But there are musical touches too, internal rhyme, onomatopoeia and above all – and this is the book's strength – a personality that 'looks you unflinchingly in the eye' – vulnerable, yet icily determined.

SELIMA HILL *Jutland*

Selima Hill's poetry is like no one else's, although 'surrealist' is the usual watchword. She has published a lot, won prizes such as the Arvon and been much praised. Fiona Sampson compares her truth-telling to Plath's. Hill once said 'all poetry is love poetry', which may or may not be true in the case of *Jutland*, where there's a good deal of hating too.

The first section is a revision of *Advice on Wearing Animal Prints* that won her the Michael Marks Pamphlet Award. It's an A-Z sequence a riddling, wild, often funny mosaic-portrait of an outsider (Hill likes portraits – both her parents were painters). Agatha has something of the trickster, the shape-shifter about her. Those animal prints may even represent camouflage.

Hill has a good ear for the colloquial, but really she can make her miniatures do anything. And the longest poem in this book is only ten lines. If they work (and I'll leave that for you to decide) they work together, so I have selected a group from 'Sunday Afternoons at the Gravel-Pits'. This section makes up the bulk of the book... and the bulk of *these* are about a real or imaginary late father, who comes across as sinister, hard to forgive: 'Normal fathers love their little girls' she writes, and 'I'm trying to love him but I don't know how'... , then finally 'it's much too late to have loved him'. She calls him 'God', 'the Pope', suggests he doesn't like children, smiling at his own perfections. She paints him as Francis Bacon might.

Certainly Plath came to mind reading these. So did Ted Hughes, curiously. Yet we can't always be sure whether some of this is just teasing, as when she says 'all I know is this: here's a man/who never taught his daughter to whistle.'

We'll hear the first seven poems, each one of two couplets. Although the sequence darkens later, they give us an idea of the scope and the precision.

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The very first is a brilliant snow- and golf- metaphor for the transfiguring effect of fatherhood. Hill's poems often depend on such striking conceits (like the mention of cocaine in the second one here). The mordantly playful domestic note can be heard in the sugary last line of 'My Father's Traps' (is that title a nod towards Peter Redgrove?) and in one called 'Home'. And there are the usual bewildering explosions of surrealism and fragments of fairy-tale – those snails, that smartly dressed wolf.

SARAH HOWE *Loop of Jade*

In 2010 I was one of the panel who selected an anonymous manuscript, *A Certain Chinese Encyclopedia*, for an Eric Gregory Award. It turned out to be by Sarah Howe (recently made Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year) and it is a great pleasure to see her work here today.

Loop of Jade is one of the most varied of the short-listed collections. It's held together by a preoccupation with Chinese culture. (Sarah has a Chinese mother, who features from the very start and in several key poems). In the opening pages a long piece about revisiting Hong Kong, is followed by something entirely different, 'Start with the Weather' which is punning, playful, surreal. That leads to a lyric about a *Madama Butterfly* musical box and then a rich long-lined meditation on an emperor's tomb. These are in fact the first pieces in a 14 part sequence spread throughout the book. So it's a very cunningly structured collection. The formal virtuosity is impressive: there's a sonnet that actually manages to incorporate a footnote in its final couplet. And she uses a very rich diction – some unusual words. But Howe is always interested in the language, the *way* her mother talks as well as what she says, just as she is constantly keen to try something new in her poetic voices.

We might detect the influence of poets as diverse as John Ashbery and Sir Philip Sidney – both of whom share Howe’s fascination for artifice. Ezra Pound’s Confucius is there... and are those the distant strains of Arthur Waley?

Several poems dwell on aspects of the Chinese language and I thought one of these would be good to explore.

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‘Having just broken the water pitcher’ is the penultimate poem in that broken sequence. A note tells us that ‘*the legendary inventor of Chinese characters was Cangjie, court historian to the Yellow Emperor*’.

It’s typical of Howe in its analytical manner, the direct but not unlyrical tone but also in the way it bestrides the dynasties. It’s about the poet’s own place in history, her own appreciation of Chinese culture, and how layers of meaning in life can be expressed by ambiguities of language; There is ancient mythology, but contemporary politics too. (Incidentally, a ‘koan’ is a riddle with no logical solution).

TIM LIARDET *The World Before Snow*

Tim Liardet has become a notable presence on the poetry scene, particularly for *Priest Skear* – about the Morecambe cockle pickers and *The Storm House*, an elegy for his brother. He is familiar with extremity, and that drives this collection: a pile-driving series of – not love poems exactly –but poems about a tumultuous love affair.

It’s a very Ted Hughesian sequence – something Liardet is evidently aware of – repetition is a key device and he deploys some of Hughes’s favourite words, such as ‘grimace’. There are even parallels in the relationship between a British and an American poet and that famous bite. It’s a meeting, then, of poetical tectonic plates. And I wondered if the extravagant titles might even be a playful nod towards Anglo-American stylistic differences.

Because the cycle progresses headlong, gathering imagery as it goes, and making everything relevant to the love affair, some of the topics and analogies may seem obscure. They're certainly unpredictable: the Turin Shroud, an Arkansas Toothpick, the Wolf Boy, even Ted Hughes's grandfather I'd be interested to know how you think these work within the sequence of love poems. I feel we have to take them in the spirit of the sequence with all its energy and baring of a new self. These are Self-Portraits, after all.

Liardet opens each of his four groups with a poem in tercets titled 'Ommerike': it's a pause for a broader, quieter perspective. There one about the blizzard in which the lovers met – which almost feels like a metaphor for what is going on in the book: entrancing but disorientating too. But one I really like and which seems representative is 'Self-Portrait with Goffstown Deep Black and Sun-Up Intensity'.

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Goffstown is in New Hampshire and is important to the object of Liardet's love, the poet Jennifer Militello. The poem is typical in that, although it's an expression of love, there is also a bleakness, an unshakeable anxiety to it. It is the anxiety of imminent separation. The nagging truth of that drives the many repetitions and the pounding syntax. But it all seems to be under control and the poet is always listening ('burns behind your sternum').

LES MURRAY *Waiting for the Past*

Les Murray is one of the most familiar of the names here. Not only Australia's best known poet but an international figure. He's won the T.S. Eliot Prize before in 1996 for his *Subhuman Redneck Poems* and he's also received the Queen's Gold Medal (and famously dropped it!). He's a poet of extraordinary ambition, of broad canvases – remember those verse novels – *Fredy Neptune* remains one of his greatest achievements – and you'll have seen the vast *Collected* from 2003.

Somehow his own word 'sprawl' encapsulates his work. But this new book is more like a set of miniatures (something he has done before in *Poems the Size of Photographs*). Few of these poems go over the page. But there are representatives of many of the various kinds of Murray poem including his celebrated 'translations

from the natural world', his accounts of farm life, and his commentaries on the latest news story or urban myth.

Those of you familiar with Murray's work will know that he can be a difficult poet at times, a poet you can seldom settle into because he is never going to give you the next line that you expect. Which is really what we want of a poet, isn't it?. For him, the language comes first. But he's also a poet who again and again writes on topics it's unlikely anyone has ever tackled before – race horses on a plane, an elegy for an octopus, the glory and decline of bread...

There were several poems I would like to have talked about– 'High Speed Trap Space', for example, where an animal steps into high-speed traffic, or 'Growth' about his grandmother's death – but I picked out an example of the plainer, bleaker Murray.

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'Last World Beyond the Stars' is a poem about Pluto, which tells us a good deal about the planet, but it's mainly Pluto as symbol of life's endgame. It's also a love poem, one of several obliquely directed to Murray's wife (though the collection is, like all of his books, dedicated to 'the Glory of God'). It opens with a simile, surprises us with words like 'bijou' and 'squinch' (an example of Murray commandeering a very new word: as if the sun is posing for a selfie), not to mention that ending where the planet has metamorphosed into someone in a hospice. There's nothing easily lyrical here, yet we have all the requisite elements of poetry.

SEAN O'BRIEN *The Beautiful Librarians*

A former T.S.Eliot prize-winner (in 2007 and shortlisted twice before that), Sean O'Brien is one of the best poetry critics around, and his book *The Deregulated Muse* is well worth seeking out. His work, like the new volume itself, has perhaps become a little more four-square over the years – but there is plenty here that is as fiery as ever among the many embedded literary allusions and in-jokes. There is no ivory tower in sight. What *is* in sight is the North, and a certain kind of Englishness. Of course, the poet does have designs on us in poems such as 'Oysterity', but we've come to expect that. He'll put the frighteners on us, but he can be very funny. He also enjoys

a paradox: 'The morning lasts for ever. It does not.' 'We were due here yesterday. Or never.'

O'Brien began as a fiercely satirical left-leaning poet but he has always had something of the Victorian elegist about him. In fact, I always find myself thinking of Kipling when I read his poems, perhaps because they frequently veer towards that anapaestic metre where he seems most comfortable. He enjoys a barrack room ballad, but (as with several of the poets here) elegy is his natural medium. At times it's a tightrope walk over Nostalgia Canyon, but he (almost) always gets away with it.

Although the new book is full of ambitious longer work, and is quite varied in its themes, some of the most interesting poems in it are towards the end where he finds a more elusive lyrical voice. For example, 'Long Wave'. Nevertheless, I have chosen 'Daylight Saving' (37) because it's typical O'Brien: with closely observed streets and closely observed manners in an unnamed urban setting. He's resigned here, rather than angry. Larkin would recognise the style, but there is also a witty nod to Eliot and *Little Gidding* in the failing light of the opening and in 'world's end'. Through the reference he makes us remember 'History is now and England'. (O'Brien is only sometimes elusive, but he's unfailingly allusive).

DON PATERSON *40 Sonnets*

Don Paterson has in fact won the T.S.Eliot prize twice already and this book has just been announced category winner in the Costas. We get some idea of his eminence from the fact that his publisher actually allowed him to call his book simply *40 Sonnets*. He's fascinated by the form – he edited a fine sonnet anthology and published an idiosyncratic guide to Shakespeare's cycle. Some of the poems here the Elizabethans would recognise and appreciate: Paterson knows how to follow the rules when he needs to and handles a pentameter effortlessly.

He's also a thinker (a naturally aphoristic poet) and an arguer. Anger drives several of the sonnets into satire, one to Dundee City council, another for Tony Blair. Some are what we used to call light verse – his 'Fable of the Open Book'. Some are sheer comedy – such as the self-mocking 'Request', which ends 'go on with your brilliant poem!/Anything but read your poem.'

Of course, a sonneteer needs to rhyme convincingly. Most of the time I think Paterson does, though he stretches it a bit by using 'bliss' twice – on one occasion in something of a homage to both Wordsworth and Tony Harrison, where he rhymes 'water' and 'matter'.

It is quite a literary collection – we meet Yeats, Gottfried Benn, Ovid, Tu Fu – but he can sing both high and low, mixing his cultural references much as he plays with the sonnet form itself: so we get the repetitive pattern of 'A Powercut', the very funny phone dialogue of 'An Incarnation', a sonnet of one-word lines, another using the same rhyme throughout and one that could have been written by Edwin Morgan's computer.

There's also a surprising prose passage, which plays with the idea that poetry is what gets lost in translation. I'll be interested to hear what people think of its inclusion in a book of sonnets.

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I was tempted to look at the elegy 'Radka Toneff', (a beautiful poem despite a grammatical uneasiness in the last line) or the moving final roundabout sonnet dedicated, presumably, to Paterson's sons.

But I opted in the end for 'Wave', the one that seems to honour Wordsworth, who was equally obsessed with the sonnet. Indeed, he told us not to 'scorn' it, and he knew that a good sonnet about anything is also about the process of writing that sonnet. So here, Paterson's shocking last line enacts what it describes. But note the brilliant 'wheel under the skin' near the start, the subtle momentum given by light alliteration, the crucial line-breaks and that cunningly shortened penultimate line. The diction is pure and simple and the whole thing moves ... well, like a wave.

REBECCA PERRY *Beauty/Beauty*

This is a debut collection – and that is in itself remarkable because it's extraordinarily mature, the most unpredictable, entertaining and multi-faceted of all the books we are considering, and certainly the one that has the strongest sense of something new

going on, of someone who has taken 2015 as it is and made poetry of it, without ditching the rest of history.

We leap from poems about tabs on a laptop and Junk mail to versions of Old Norse or a conversation with Lady Jane Grey. It's a book that seems to bubble with energy and ideas, formally self-conscious (she likes the anaphoric list poem, question and answer, the long broken line of the Anglo-Saxons) always shifting, taking on influences – Denise Levertov, Penelope Shuttle, Anne Carson – and making them new. I thought of Louis MacNeice too, his famous 'drunkenness of things being various'.

Just when you think Rebecca Perry can't surprise you any more you find a litany of pet names, a 'Poem in which the girl has no door on her mouth' or a celebration of 1986. There is a found poem and a dream poem, there are family poems that aren't sentimental and love poems that use the word love with utter conviction. Both are rare.

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So, what to choose from this box of delights?

I opted for 'Other Clouds', perhaps because I have daughters myself, one of whom is Perry's age. It's a poem with a great title, as are so many of hers. It's part dialogue, part litany. It shows Perry's characteristic dry sense of humour (she is a wonderfully droll poet) and the use of space is intriguing. It's also evidence that Perry can be more than just a firework display; she can be rather moving too.

And how do we read it aloud?

CLAUDIA RANKINE *Citizen: An American Lyric*

Citizen is certainly the most satisfying book as physical object. It uses the space of the page. There are illustrations. I also found it – as many have – an utterly compelling read. It begins with a series of prose anecdotes about black experience, the treatment of black people in America, with special attention to Serena Williams. These recur

throughout the book, as does the tennis motif. Then there are commentaries that seem designed to accompany videos. There are essays and dialogues.

But the question is: can more than an impressive handful of the individual sections really be called a *poem*? Didn't Eliot or Pound say that poetry should have the qualities of good prose? Well this is excellent prose. Lucid, sharp as you like. But poetry?

Perhaps we should we be considering the whole book as a poem? A kind of concrete poetry. In which case, other things start becoming poems too (Marshall McLuhan, Rachel Carson) and short story writers, essayists suddenly seem eligible for a poetry prize. *Citizen* is also a book that has palpable designs on us, and – by Keats's standards, anyway – that may be a limitation in terms of its enduring power as poetry. Although its subject matter is of course far more important than any poetry prize. I want to hear views on this in a moment.

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It's a difficult book to extract from, but I decided on something that is typical of the book: it works on its own – and is a manageable length. It's just one of the many anecdotes, told coolly, matter-of-factly, forensically even, with no direct speech, the only metaphors subtly introduced ...'the space next to the man is the pause in the conversation you are suddenly rushing to fill' or 'Where he goes the space follows him'. Line-break doesn't come into it, but paragraphs act more like stanzas. The writer is always holding up our own treacherous language to inspect ('in proximity to, adjacent to, alongside, within'). And themes and motifs established earlier recur. Namelessness, invisibility, erasure, darkness, unvoiced hostility.

CONCLUSION

Poetry prizes can often be contentious. Cyril Connolly said that poets were like 'jackals fighting over an empty well' but John Mullan is surely nearer the mark when he wrote in the *Guardian* 'The poets competing for prizes every year would surely forsake any prize money for the sake of just one timelessly memorable poem to leave behind them.'

Thanks for your contributions and enjoy the event tonight.